

Beyond the Right Hardware

Supporting & Engaging Remote Workers During COVID-19



The COVID-19 crisis has forced entire companies to transition to remote work. No easy feat, and the sudden move has strained HR and IT teams alike. Still, as employees settle into their new home offices, talent leaders must now shift their focus to a new challenge: new strategies to engage – and build loyalty – with their newly distributed teams.

Working remotely is a challenge, but also a tremendous opportunity. COVID-19 and the mandate to work remotely could be the catalyst to help your workforce learn new skills that will prepare them for similar situations – or, ideally, working from home productively should that become the new business-as-usual for your company. Here, we will explore the mechanisms through which remote work will impact teams and their productivity.

Mastering working remotely during COVID-19 will benefit companies long after this crisis is over.

Every company needs to understand how its workers are affected, how they feel, what they are missing. It's the basis for targeted and efficient intervention. The context here is important to the questions we've recommended, but if you're just looking for those, head to the end of the document.

Remote work has two inter-related implications: people are working from their homes, and they are not together (collocated) in the office. While those sound like – and are – two sides to the same coin, each has its own distinct set of effects on the employee. Let's study the effects of working from home more closely, along with questions you can ask to address each category of remote work stressors. These will help identify which of your employees need help making the successful transition to remote work – and how you can lean in.



Work-Family Conflict And The Remote Worker

For many of your employees, being in the same location with their family will amplify the effects of Work-Family Conflict. Work-Family Conflict is a role conflict (Byron, 2005). Your kids expect you to make them lunch (your role as a caretaker) while your employer expects you to make progress (your role as an employee). Your spouse may interpret your presence as being off work (which was true in the past) at the same time your employer expects you to be available. Work-Family Conflict always exists to some degree, whether a person is working remotely or not. But working remotely exacerbates its effects.

Lucky for us, research in Industrial/Organizational Psychology has explored Work-Family Conflict and can offer [concrete guidelines on how to prevent it](#) (Kossek et al., 2011). You can use the questions below to measure the two implications of remote work, then leverage those guidelines to take action.

Remote Work Implication #1: Working From Home

Stress on the Employee

Work-Family Conflict can be a severe stressor in employees' lives. It can harm productivity and severely impact quality of life of the employee and their family (Carlson et al., 2019). If not addressed, work-family conflict can be a primary driver behind an employee's eventual departure from the company.

Keeping an eye on your employee's stress response to this new work situation may be the single-most important thing to do during the crisis.

We recommend asking employees to rate their response to these questions:

- *Working from home during this crisis causes strain on me and my family.*
- *Working from home during this crisis is more stressful compared to work before this crisis.*

Manager Support

Manager support can be emotional support or instrumental support. Emotional support can be as simple as expressing empathy for the hardships that employees are experiencing. Instrumental support could mean, for example, offering flexibility in hours, allowing employees to skip a meeting, or moving a deadline. Managers have a lot of influence on how people will experience the crisis and having an empathetic manager, who at the very least is understanding of the hardship, can help lower the stress caused by work-family conflict.

We recommend asking:

- *My manager cares for me and my well-being.*
- *My manager shows empathy and support for the challenges of working from home.*
- *My manager provides flexible solutions to help me work around the challenges of working from home.*



Perceived Organizational Support

Employees harbor an internal belief about whether their employer values them as people, and cares about their well-being. Like manager support, their companies can demonstrate emotional support (expressing concern, showing empathy) and instrumental support (schedule flexibility, time off).

Especially in this crisis, when employees are being asked to be flexible, they will ask themselves if their employer is being equally as flexible and supportive.

We recommend asking:

- *My company cares for me and my well-being.*
- *The leaders of my company show empathy and support for the challenges of working from home.*
- *My company provides flexible solutions to help me with the challenges of working from home.*

Peer Support

Employees also develop a belief about whether their colleagues are supportive. In most organizations, work does not move along hierarchical reporting lines, but laterally across departments, teams, and functions. Experiencing your internal partners as flexible and supportive is another mitigating factor to address work-family conflict.

We recommend asking:

- *In my company, teams/departments reach out to help and support each other.*
- *My coworkers help me deal with the challenges of working from home.*



Remote Work Implication #2: Not Working In The Office

While being at home during work hours can be difficult, *not being in the office, collocated with coworkers* has its own set of challenges. Most work processes in modern organizations consist of interdependent tasks, requiring the collaboration of many individuals. Many of these work relationships are organized around informal networks which rely on physical collocation (Balkundi et al., 2007; Burt, 2000).

Process Alignment

When switching to remote work, companies tend to hang on to communication, planning, and coordination processes that were effective in a face-to-face work environment. However, many of these procedures may not work remotely. Round hole, meet square peg.

If companies want to stay productive, they need to understand whether their remote workers are adapting their communication and collaboration.

We recommend asking:

- I can reach my manager quickly and easily during work hours.
- I can reach my coworkers easily to get from them what I need to do my work.



Technology Alignment

Our offices often provide the most suitable work environment. Working from home may require changes to technology and rooms. Especially in families with kids, the kitchen table has to double as workstation and place to eat. Even if an employer cannot make changes to a work environment (i.e., the employee's home), it is important to understand if this poses an obstacle to productive work.

We recommend asking:

- *I have a space at home where I can work productively during normal office hours.*
- *I have the technology and resources I need to work productively from home.*



Maintaining Relationships

Finally, an important purpose a traditional office serves is an opportunity to meet employees' social needs (Martins et al., 2004). Even if they don't spend time together outside of work hours, many employees enjoy the presence of their coworkers. Companies should be aware if personal social needs are not being met.

We recommend asking:

- I have enough opportunities to create and maintain my personal relationships with my colleagues.

Increased Communication Needs

Remote teams often require a new form of communication. An informal chat across the cubicle wall needs to be replaced with equally efficient communication methods.

We recommend asking:

- In my team, there is enough communication to ensure that everybody is in the loop.
- My team uses effective communication method (e.g., email, phone conference, Slack, Teams).

Returning to Work

Depending on region and policy, some businesses will have the option to return to their physical location. Whereas moving into remote work settings has its challenges, moving back into a co-located office will not be without its own challenges as well. Employees may be concerned about safety and may still be affected by lack of childcare.

We recommend asking:

- I feel it is safe to return to the office.
- I have enough support at home to return to my normal schedule in the office.
- My company has a clear plan to safely return to work.

Using This Survey

We recommend sending these 20 survey questions in addition to your standard engagement survey. However, you can also send these questions as a standalone survey. Rhabit users can simply add them to their engagement questions.

The responses to the above questions will help you focus on next steps and timely action. For example, a technology focused training can help improve Increased Communication Needs, and a message from your CEO or senior leaders can improve Perceived Organizational Support.

Adapting to the crisis-specific needs of your employees, and knowing what to prioritize first, will be a challenge. Rhabit can help you provide appropriate responses and will be on your side to help keep your company productive during these trying times.

*To schedule a **free consulting session** with an IO, or set up a **free COVID-19 pulse survey and engagement suite**, visit our site at rhabitanalytics.com.*

Survey Questions

1. Working from home during this crisis causes strain on me and my family.
2. Work from home during this crisis is more stressful compared to work before this crisis.
3. My manager cares for me and my well-being.
4. My manager shows empathy and support for the challenges of working from home.
5. My manager provides flexible solutions to help me work around the challenges of working from home.
6. My company cares for me and my well-being.
7. The leaders of my company show empathy and support for the challenges for working from home.
8. My company provides flexible solutions to help me with the challenges of working from home.
9. In my company, teams/departments reach out to help and support each other.
10. My coworkers help me deal with the challenges of working from home.
11. I can reach my manager quickly and easily during work hours.
12. I can reach my coworkers easily to get from them what I need to do my work.
13. I have a space at home where I can work productively during normal office hours.
14. I have the technology and resources I need to work productively from home.
15. I have enough opportunities to create and maintain my personal relationships with my colleagues.
16. In my team there is enough communication to ensure that everybody is in the loop.
17. My team uses effective communication method (e.g. email, phone conference, Slack, Teams).
18. I feel it is safe to return to the office.
19. I have enough support at home to return to my normal schedule in the office.
20. My company has a clear plan to safely return to work.

References

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