



## How Ready Are You for the Work-from-Anywhere Era?

**Advice from academics and practitioners who are well-versed in the remote working paradigm.**

**This article is part of a series entitled “The Future of Management”, about how changes in culture and technology are reshaping what managers do. INSEAD professors Pushan Dutt and Phanish Puranam serve as academic advisors for this series.**

The Covid-19 pandemic has hurled life and work as we once knew it into a state of near-paralysing uncertainty. So much has changed about our world so quickly that our first instinct may understandably be to find some small patch of solid-seeming ground and plant ourselves there for as long as we can, to await the resumption of normality. But the longer the virus lingers, the clearer it becomes that *any* form of normal – new or old – will be slow to materialise.

The good news is that we are not without reliable guides in this era of change. The dubious advice of “instant experts” can be safely ignored, as many of the most daunting issues and implications of working during a pandemic have been the subject of rigorous academic research and practitioner experimentation for years (in some cases, decades). Often working on the fringes of their professions and research areas, this select group’s unique insights have taken on unexpected relevance due to Covid-19.

Recently, the think tank **Organisational Design Community** (ODC) took the unusual step of

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gathering these insights into a single, freely available public resource. The “**Making Remote Work**” podcast series[1] hosted by psychologist **Iulia Istrate** spanned 20 episodes from April to August, each exploring a distinct topic related to the remote working paradigm and featuring guests with well-established expertise. Speakers included INSEAD professors **Mark Mortensen**, **Sujin Jang** and **Roderick Swaab**. The series also featured psychologists who study teams working in **extreme isolation conditions**, the **evolutionary roots of our desire for social interaction**, as well as with **an astronaut**.

The podcasts offered more valuable takeaways than can be encapsulated here. The series is an amazing resource for managers, students, researchers and teachers – a **detailed segment-by-segment index can be found here**. But according to Istrate, it had a few recurring themes that stand out as essential for managing the transition to remote work. Managers can perhaps treat these as starting points in the complex process of preparing themselves for more continuous unpredictability.

### **Trust as the prerequisite**

To be effective remotely, leaders need to let go of the temptation to micromanage. They must be willing to trust that employees are working competently, even though only the work output will

be visible. Yet many managers have a hard time letting go; the physical absence of employees to support and scrutinise makes them feel uncomfortably superfluous.

Fortunately, managers can relax their direct supervision with confidence, if they are willing to adopt remote-friendly team practices. As **Ravi Gajendran** of Florida International University said during his episode, “Leaders need to restructure deliverables on a day-to-day basis, at least for the short term. That could sound like micromanagement. But in reality, you’re giving people something to focus on. You’re not telling them when to do it and how to do it. If you’re breaking it down into bite-sized chunks, it establishes mutual trust. Small wins can cascade down to bigger wins.”

Doling out duties to employees on a more frequent and granular basis means managers have to toggle their awareness more carefully between short-term and long-term goals. Working this way also entails increased forethought about how employees will get work done, and with whom. The price of trust is that managers of remote teams can no longer afford to be concerned only with solutions; the practical hassles encountered along the way must be in their field of vision too.

Mortensen discussed how essential dependable routines are to trust-building. “One of the best sources of trust is predictability. We trust in things when we know what to expect. Repetition and regularity build trust, and not having a meeting only when something’s on fire,” he said. Without routines, people feel perpetually on edge – a state of mind inimical to trust. It doesn’t matter so much *what* the routine is. A weekly check-in suffices for many teams – for others, a quick catch-up every morning would be useful. The important thing is to find a habitual rhythm and stick to it. Whatever frequency you choose, Mortensen suggested you make room for people to share what’s on their minds more generally, rather than talking only about the task at hand. “Part of it is to promote informal interaction. Especially when people are looking for things to hold onto, this really helps”, he said.

This can create a virtuous cycle, as reliable routines and psychological safety encourage employees to help one another, thus strengthening bonds (and lessening the load of interpersonal work on managers).

### **A single source of truth**

A trusting work environment fosters team cohesion that can withstand physical distance. Cohesive teams have a high degree of *tacit coordination*, a point that **Kannan Srikanth** of Ohio State University

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especially stressed as central to success in remote working. Tacit coordination is based on shared knowledge, “where you know you can rely on me and vice versa”, Srikanth said. When teams are clear that everyone is on the same page, it grants more autonomy to each employee and significantly reduces coordination costs.

There are many ways for teams to develop capacities for tacit coordination. “You could do it through training, following well-understood processes, or staffing projects with people who work well with each other or have worked together for a long time”, suggested Srikanth. Leveraging a shared organisational history or culture can also help build common reference points.

Without strategic management on the organisational level, however, tacit coordination within teams and departments can generate cultural silos that are difficult to bridge – especially in remote contexts. **Darren Murph**, Head of Remote for **pioneering all-remote firm GitLab**, emphasised the importance of having “a single source of truth” that is transparently accessible to the entire organisation: “If there’s no single source of truth, you have everyone doing it a different way, which creates massive inefficiencies and dysfunction and confusion. Transparency serves as a hedge against dysfunction.”

GitLab’s bible is its **7,000-page employee handbook**, which contains extensive guidelines on nearly every conceivable matter, from Zoom meeting etiquette to techniques for conducting job interviews. It even instructs GitLab staffers on how the handbook itself should be updated. When an internal process changes at GitLab, employees are expected to register it in the handbook first. The public record exists prior to reality. This flies in the face of reflexive habit, as Murph explained. “The human instinct is to make the change as quick as you can and then spray it out as widely as possible via Slack. And then maybe you update the handbook, but what if you don’t? You have two sources of truth. The old way and the new way. That starts to create dysfunction.”

What if a company wants to go all-remote, but does not yet have such an exhaustive manual and a good way to enforce adherence to it? Murph provided this advice: “If you can’t get there, halt until you can. Start with the handbook and communication plan.”

### **Benefits and pitfalls of asynchronous working**

Murph’s relentless war on ambiguity is perhaps necessitated by the global nature of GitLab’s 1,300-strong workforce. Firms that are both all-remote and geographically dispersed – adopters of the **work-from-anywhere trend** accelerated by

Covid-19 – must work across two dimensions of distance: physical and chronological. There may be little or no overlap between employees’ various work schedules.

If it were truly collaborative, a time-staggered workforce could theoretically be more productive than a collocated one. Spreading work across time zones would simply mean more active hours in the day. Yet most firms are **vastly more comfortable** with synchronous tools for collaboration (such as Zoom, which obviously requires that colleagues be signed on simultaneously) than asynchronous ones (e.g. Google Docs, or shared repositories of knowledge such as GitLab’s handbook or **values statement**).

However, **Liam Martin**, co-founder of remote-team management platform **TimeDoctor**, said organisations should be able to chart their own path based on their sector, culture, etc. “Developers need blocks of time not to be bothered, whereas someone like me who’s on the marketing side, I really am excited by communication and collaboration. We need to understand how corporate works remotely, as opposed to tech...It’s a different animal.”

**Mark Frein**, Chief People Officer of online coding bootcamp Lambda School, spoke of the potential psychological pitfalls that arise when work is being done on your project while you sleep. He likened catching up with the changes and requests that pile up overnight to starting your day with a “work debt”. “Create some norms; don’t just create a wave of work for people as soon as they wake up”, Frein urged. “Be cognisant of the backlog you create.”

### The future of remote?

It remains to be seen whether the current wave of remote working will roll back after the pandemic or will surge ahead until all-remote becomes the default for most white-collar roles. Pressed for predictions, Istrate’s podcast guests were split on the question.

**Sumita Raghuram** of San Jose State University, who has closely studied the 25-year evolution of remote working, said, “I’ve always seen it gaining momentum at points of disasters, e.g. an earthquake or 9/11. People at organisations have either continued or gone back. It is almost like one step back, two steps forward. Some orgs that have passed the stress test will accelerate and continue to offer this in some way.”

According to Raghuram, organisations that have seen long-term success with remote working have a) made it mandatory; and b) proactively assisted employees in dealing with the myriad practical

challenges of the paradigm: Finding adequate childcare, setting up a home office, arranging post-office boxes so that employees can keep their home addresses private, etc. “Frequently, voluntary is on the fly and organisations are not geared up for supporting employees”, Raghuram said.

Now that “Making Remote Work” has concluded, Istrate and the ODC organisers are preparing to launch a follow-up podcast series on organisational resilience in November. For more information and updates, **follow ODC on LinkedIn**.

Do you have suggestions for topics we should cover? Have you come across cool research that is helping us understand the future of management? Please send suggestions to **Benjamin Kessler**, or leave a comment below.

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[1] **Marco Minervini** (INSEAD), **Jay Narayanan** (NUS) and Phanish Puranam (INSEAD) were academic advisors for the “Making Remote Work” podcast series.

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