



## The Three Main Challenges of Remote Working



By [Mark Mortensen](#) , INSEAD

**Even for long-established teams, moving from physical to virtual is a game-changer.**

COVID-19 has forced us to adopt large-scale remote working with far less preparatory time than any of us would expect or want.

The good news is that we have learned a lot over the years, the tools and technologies supporting us have improved dramatically, and all of us are more familiar and comfortable with interacting online. There are three overarching challenges we face with this situation, requiring distinct solutions:

- While many of us have experience working remotely, not everyone has the same amount of experience, comfort or access. To address this, we need to **level the playing field**.

- Even among those with this experience, it has typically been either by choice or design. The new realities demand coping strategies for how to **structure our work** as well as manage our own needs and expectations.
- While many of our organisations have created policies and practices to support virtual work, they do not meet the scale, scope and speed we are now facing. We need to **think holistically** about what we need from our social networks.

Let's dig a bit deeper into each.

## **Levelling the playing field**

### *Even out experience*

Remember that there is a “language” of remote work and gaining fluency in it is neither easy nor quick. In this way, your team may face a new-found power imbalance between those who feel comfortable and skilled at working virtually and those who do not.

If this is the way you normally work, try to remember what it was like when you first started. What were your common mistakes (Did you forget you were on mute? Did you leave your microphone on when you went to the WC? Did you forget to send the access code to your meeting participants?)? If this is not the way you normally work, be conscious you may feel out of your depth or a bit insecure. Start your meeting with a check-in on what challenges people are having and let the members of the group share recommendations or best practices. This will address specific issues and strengthen the team's bond.

### *Temper technology*

Remember, as well, that not everyone has a technologically advanced setup at home – and that's ok. Contrary to popular belief, the latest and greatest technology is not what will make or break your virtual collaboration.

What is a necessity is that everyone is aware of the technical capabilities, limitations and comfort level of their teammates. One of the most common frustrations of remote work comes from the misattribution of technical issues as personal ones. We have all been on a call or videoconference with someone with spotty connectivity and, let's be honest, it's not long before our annoyance with the situation starts to spill over to frustration with our

colleague for making us repeat ourselves or reconnect.

With that in mind, approach your technology in three steps:

Step 1: Get as reliable a source of audio as possible. Remember, poor audio will always cause more issues and frustration than choppy video. If you don't have a stable connection or bandwidth is limited, always sacrifice video for audio – remember, audio only is also called a phone call, and something we should all be familiar with.

Step 2: If you have more resources, add video for a richer and more socially connected experience.

Step 3: A shared virtual workspace and collaborative file-sharing are always helpful. For many, these are obvious and no big deal, but for others new to remote working it may not be the case.

## **Structuring your work**

### *Establish boundaries*

Working from home is a challenge, not least because you must actively manage the boundary between home and work. Boundaries are psychologically important as they help us compartmentalise and avoid overload. One important way to address this is to decide where within your home you will make your workspace (you can have a few – that's one of the benefits). Similarly, decide when you will work. Think in terms of setting up daily rituals and routines. Rituals provide temporal boundaries for when you are in work mode and when you are not (e.g. starting your day with a round of exercise, always taking lunch at the same time, scheduling in time to check in with friends, or checking emails at fixed intervals).

### *Build mutual understanding*

While creating a separation between working and not working is an important step, you won't get it totally right. Let's all recognise that at some point home life comes barging in, like those gate-crashing children **interrupting their dad's BBC interview**. Rather than getting caught off-guard by such hiccoughs – recognise and expect them. One great technique is to give a virtual tour of your environment. Turn the camera around, show your home office and share any likely interruptions such as rambunctious

children, curious pets or joint spousal workspaces. This is often a good way to bond with your co-workers who are wrestling with the very same challenges.

Your ability to take the perspective of others is a critical ability in remote work – and a lot harder, given that you don't have all the other information (e.g. shared spaces and experiences) you normally do. Make the effort to anticipate how others might see you, including your remote workspace – that's what I call becoming **“virtual to yourself”**.

### *Set the ground rules*

Having studied teams – both virtual and co-located – for years, I can tell you there is no one-size-fits-all template to build a winning combination every time. This is why team launches are so critical. Teams that take the time to engage up front to decide *how* they want to work remotely start their collaboration with a massive leg up. Don't let the fact that your team has worked together for the past five years stop you, because that work was a very different animal.

So have a (re-)launch in which you discuss and agree on key design criteria such as frequency and duration of synchronous interactions, preferred media for different tasks (e.g. email for documentation, video calls for complex discussions and message boards for building social connections), and any changes to roles, responsibilities and group behavioural norms. There are many templates available online from various sources (e.g. **MIT**) that can guide you. You might even use this as an opportunity to improve on the way you have been doing things.

### *Keep communication open and regular*

As the coronavirus crisis continues to evolve, there will be new challenges ahead. As is usually the case, the simplest solution tends to be the best one: Talk. Remember that one of the most critical elements for any team is trust, and one of the best ways to establish trust (particularly in virtual environments) is regularity.

## **Thinking holistically**

Covid-19 is changing work in a more profound way than typical virtual work. For some, it means being cut off from the daily work routine; for others, it may mean even more severe social isolation from not only work but from

their community under stay-at-home mandates. While it is easy to only focus on your ability to efficiently accomplish tasks, remember that **informal water-cooler conversations**, chats over coffee and cubicle prairie-dogging serve multiple important purposes. They provide sources of informal information that are the oil critical to keeping the machinery of your organisation going. In addition, they form a critically important link to social connections, friendships and support networks.

I am a firm believer (and research shows) that virtual interaction is a weak substitute for face-to-face. In fact, we are fooled into believing we have more and stronger social connections in the online world, but they don't trigger all the positive biological responses that real social engagement brings. My colleague **Connie Hadley** and I have been studying the effects of work design on psychological well-being; the current situation is a recipe for feelings of isolation and loneliness. So, when setting up your remote work routines, give some thought to the social side. Think how you can promote connection, not just on tasks, but as people. Setting aside some time to check in and connect is neither an inefficient nor inappropriate use of your team's time. In fact, you will find it produces a bigger return on investment than almost everything else in this post put together.

#### Find article at

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#### About the author(s)

**Mark Mortensen** is an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. For more than 20 years he has helped leaders understand and adapt to how work is changing -- currently with a focus on remote and hybrid work and the changing employee value proposition. At INSEAD he directs numerous company-specific executive education programmes, including **Emerging Leaders in a Digital Age**, and teaches the OB core in the MBA and EMBA.

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#### About the series

##### Covid-19

The consequences of Covid-19 for public health, the global economy and the future of work cannot be overestimated. No one knows where exactly we will go from here, but INSEAD's thought leaders — both faculty and their close collaborators in the practitioner and entrepreneurship communities — possess informed perspectives that will help us not just weather the crisis, but hopefully emerge from

it stronger than ever.

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