
Solving the Problem of Remote Work



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A framework to help leaders approach the topic more holistically and effectively.

The discussion around remote work — which has dominated news headlines, Slack conversations and water-cooler chats since countries relaxed their Covid-19 guidelines — is only getting more contentious. Many workers wish to continue working remotely in some capacity, while insisting that leaders’ productivity concerns are unfounded.

However, some high-profile executives have been vocal about their opposition. Morgan Stanley CEO James Gorman declared that working remotely “**is not an employee choice**”. And Elon Musk denounced remote work as “**morally wrong**”. He further suggested that those working from home are merely “**phoning it in**” and mandated a return-to-office (RTO) at Tesla, SpaceX and X (formerly Twitter).

One consistent aspect of the arguments for and against remote work is how strong and entrenched these stances are. And although conflicting perspectives on the topic are nothing new, tensions seem to be escalating.

Amazon workers conducted a walkout to protest their company's RTO policies, Google recently began tracking employees' in-office attendance and Farmers Insurance workers have threatened to unionise or quit over the CEO's reversal of the company's remote work policy. What's more, stories of employees being terminated for failing to comply with RTO mandates continue to proliferate.

Amid increasing polarisation, it becomes even more difficult for employers and employees to reach a consensus on the best way forward. As I wrote in [a recent article](#) for *Harvard Business Review*, leaders and employees should actively collaborate to devise [a balanced approach](#) to the issue and arrive at a mutually beneficial solution — one that recognises and validates the needs and concerns of both sides.

Bridging the gap

Why are we having such difficulty agreeing on how to approach remote work? Based on my research and consulting over the past 20-plus years, I believe a major reason is that we are assessing cost-benefit trade-offs without agreeing on the 5 W's: who, what, where, when and why.

Why do we need the 5 W's? It's not new, but this classic tool — which was developed by journalists to make sure all the relevant information is included — works really well here to allow for a [more complete perspective](#). This can help employers foster dialogue with their employees that is balanced (understands the needs of both sides), respectful (validates those needs) and ongoing (adjusted over time as needs change). Employers and employees should approach these conversations with the objective of finding the most mutually optimal solution — [not winning](#).

The starting point for any productive discussion is aligning on “why” flexible work is (or is not) a topic of discussion in the first place. For some, it may be about increasing or preserving productivity. For others, it could be about attracting and retaining talent, fostering relationships or strengthening social ties.

It's then important to establish clarity on “what” by defining these driving factors. For example, performance is widely heralded as both the benefit and cost of remote work. That's because we rarely agree on its definition in the first place — whether that's efficiency, quality or the amount of work generated.

Next, consider the “where” — as in where in the organisation are you evaluating remote work. All organisations are different, meaning that there are myriad paths to achieving various kinds of work. Those packing products into boxes are relatively constrained in terms of where they can work from, while those answering customer service enquiries are not. Considering the types of work being done sets the boundaries for discussions around policies.

Leaders and employees often struggle to think effectively across time — the “when”. Certain benefits provided to employees may produce short-term benefits but have long-term costs. For instance, giving workers an additional day of flexibility may reap the short-term benefit of eliminating a commute but lead to the long-term consequence of a loss of mentorship when schedules no longer align.

The root of most of these disagreements, in my experience, is the “who”. Work policies affect people differently, and it is important to account for both individual and collective effects. A policy that allows staff to work from home (WFH) at-will can benefit individuals’ work-life schedule coordination but come at the expense of a collective sense of culture.

Establishing clarity on the 5 W’s can help leaders better think about whose interests or outcomes they are prioritising when devising remote work policies. However, keep in mind that the 5 W’s are a tool to help ensure organisations get all the information on the table for a fruitful discussion — they are not entirely independent elements. Take decisions around what work is suited for increased flexibility. Although this is a conversation about “where” and is contingent on “what” leaders define as key outcomes, it also has a major impact on who receives the benefits, with consequences for employees’ sense of fairness and equity.

Creating constructive dialogue

To design effective work policies and practices, everyone’s voices must be heard. Leaders who institute policies without involving their employees are often seen as out of touch, while employees who make demands about how they work are frequently perceived as entitled. Only by engaging both sides can we start making progress.

Rather than being treated as a one-off, this needs to be an ongoing conversation. Preferences, needs, technologies and market demands are constantly evolving, as are individuals’ perceptions of how best to operate

within that changing context.

So, how should leaders facilitate this ongoing dialogue? After comprehensively considering the 5 W's, the critical step is to maintain that clarity by ensuring you and your employees evaluate them via a structured, objective process by using the following framework.

1. Own the issue

Leaders and employees have a vested interest in getting work policies right, and everyone has experiences and opinions that provide valuable data. It's important that all this information is brought forward, and all perspectives included.

The current exchange in which both sides are trying to “win” makes collaborative dialogue extremely unlikely to occur. Dialogue cannot be successful unless both sides accept joint ownership of the issue, including taking responsibility for any missteps that may have happened along the way. The purpose of the conversation is to learn and attain a better outcome, which may require clearing the air.

Leaders must also recognise that the playing field isn't exactly even. The power of collective action (strikes, walkouts, etc.) notwithstanding, managers possess greater agency and control over the policies in question. In my work with companies, I stress to leaders that this is not the time to be proud. Showing your own vulnerability by acknowledging that everyone is doing their best to chart a course through unfamiliar territory is a **powerful first step**.

2. Establish expectations and ground rules

Psychology offers two powerful tools that can dramatically improve the results of your discussions and account for the needs of all involved: **psychological safety** and a growth mindset. Employees need to know they won't be met with reprisal for voicing their needs and constraints. Similarly, leaders need to be able to speak honestly about the pressures they face on an organisation level. This allows everyone involved to work together towards a more optimal solution. Both sides will hold back if they don't feel safe doing so.

It's also key to recognise that companies operate in a constantly evolving environment. As employees' and organisations' requirements change,

policies should be revisited to ensure they remain relevant. Policy changes should not be seen as failures, but as important steps in a learning process — the fundamental core of a growth mindset.

Make sure everyone involved agrees to this collaborative process as ongoing, adaptive and governed by these central principles, and obtain that commitment at the start. Doing so can lead to far better outcomes for all involved.

3. Eliminate black-and-white language

Overly simplistic, black-and-white language can impede productive conversations about work arrangements. While the 5 W's show that this is an incredibly complex, multidimensional topic, reductive blanket statements abound.

I encourage leaders to be explicit and call out the risk of blanket declarations like “WFH is unavoidable” or “remote work kills creativity”. There may be some truth in both sentiments, but these statements further entrench positions and don't advance dialogue.

As an example, in one executive committee I worked with, members could throw yellow and red cards when they witnessed blanket statements being made. By levelling the playing field and injecting a dose of levity, the group was empowered to have more healthy and nuanced discussions. While you don't need to introduce a card system, consider how to ensure that everyone (leadership included) is held accountable for counterproductive language.

4. Talk

Space and time are necessary to have meaningful discussions. But as simple as it is (and as silly as it may seem to mention it), setting aside time may be the hardest step in the process. Formalising these discussions to give them legitimacy and carving out time in individuals' schedules to conduct them is crucial. While you don't need to allocate hours each week to this, ensure that the time you do set aside is regular, as predictability builds trust.

Opinions remain fiercely divided on the WFH/RTO debate. To make matters worse, these divergent positions align with the divide between leaders and employees, who both have strong vested interests in the outcome.

Despite plentiful and increasing data on the subject, there is no simple fix. The only productive way forward is for leaders to engage employees and work together to develop the most mutually beneficial solution possible for their organisation.

This is an adaptation of [an article](#) published in Harvard Business Review.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/solving-problem-remote-work>

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.