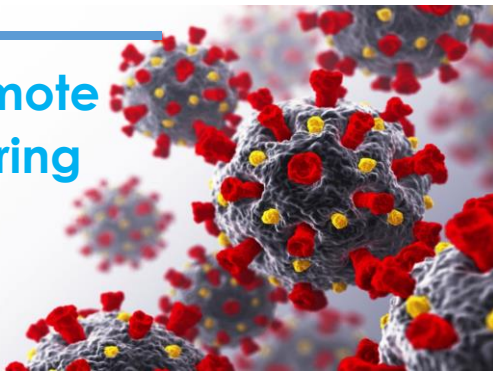# Leading a remote workforce during COVID-19

The streets are quiet, there are more people wearing masks in public than during the bushfire crisis and internet usage has skyrocketed as many workplaces close down and staff work from home. It would be hard to find a single Australian who isn't at least a little concerned about COVID-19 and what's going to happen.

We are seeing across many of our client organisations an "ecological hangover" with employee confidence in the job market already dropping before the bush-fires and COVID-19 pandemic. Many staff returned to work from the Christmas break less refreshed than when they left with resilience levels already depleted. Anxiety about this global pandemic is being layered on top of existing fears about the state of the world – it's not a good combination.

Whispers of imminent recessions are prompting significant levels of employee anxiety and psychological distress. Workers are left wondering: is my job safe? What if I'm quarantined or my child's school closes? Or my parent(s) need to be taken out of care? Will I need to draw down leave entitlements? What if I'm stood down? If I can't work, will I be paid?

Now is the time for leadership. HP have identified the following areas that organisations and leaders need to think about and enact a plan to manage:

Many managers don't know how to manage remotely

Most organisations don't teach their leaders how to manage staff virtually. It is easy for remote workers to feel isolated, neglected and de-motivated. Written communication is open to confusion and mis-interpretation. And none of us have a playbook on how to lead during the pandemic.

Basic needs and technology use

- **Working from home essentials** - to be productive, remote workers need:
    - A computer
    - A good internet connection
    - Chat and conferencing applications
    - A dedicated workspace (preferred)
    - Optionally, a phone
    - Self-motivation and discipline
    - A routine

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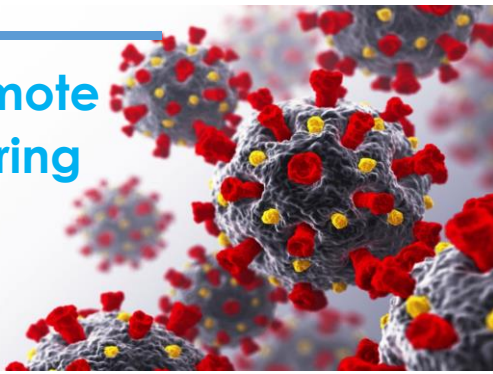
- **Audit** - ask employees to audit their own home environment for vulnerabilities, before connecting work devices. There are continual disclosures regarding vulnerable internet devices, and this is an excellent time for employees to take action on securing them with strong passwords and updating their firmware/software to the latest versions.
- **Cybersecurity awareness training** - offer a refresher to help avoid the human element that cybercriminals attempt to exploit. Consider running a campaign and training requirement before the employee begins working remotely.
- **Create a virtual meeting survival kit** (see below)
- **Design rituals around virtual tools** - There are heaps of tools to facilitate remote collaboration - video conferencing, brainstorming tools, task-management software - but more important than the specific tool are the processes teams put in place around them. A tool is only as good as its ability to deliver on what the team needs.
- **OHS&W @ home** – see Konekt's checklist on the HP website.
- **Liability –** check coverage for the company assets while in the employee's possession.
- **Tech support –** distribute contact details so people know how to get help when needed.

Virtual meeting survival kit - IDEO a virtual workshop survival kit, complete with "sleeping bags" for cell phones, mini-whiteboards for people to prototype ideas, and physical takeaways to help the presentation resonate off-screen.

Communication

Communicate often, succinctly, transparently and with compassion and empathy. Share openly and often what the real impact of the crisis is on your business, and normalise what to expect. If you don't, employees will simply turn to the distributed network of information — websites, social media, etc. — to fill the vacuum.

- **Team calls** - onsider having team calls once per day, brief people on the status, and give everyone the opportunity to share experiences and issues.
- **Responsiveness** – establish guidelines of how quickly a remote worker is expected to respond to a request depending on the communication type, email, Slack, calendar invites, etc.
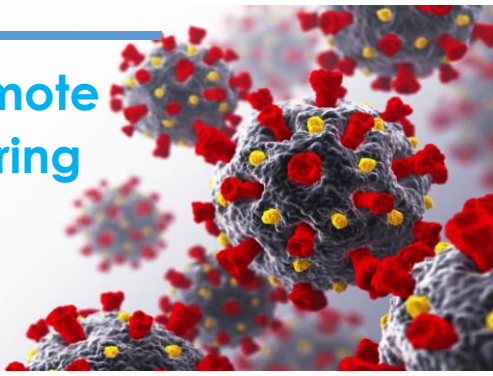
- **Reporting** –implement procedures that allow managers to work out whether remote staff are getting the job done: mandatory group meetings, team collaboration, daily/weekly/monthly reports.
- **Work schedule** – agree a method of clocking on and off, even if it's as simple as a team group chat and members saying good morning when they start their day.
- **Socialisation** – bring remote workers together, particularly virtually. Social interaction is an important part of motivation and wellbeing. Consider a buddy scheme so that every employee is paired and can problem solve, vent, share or socialise virtually.
- **Accessibility** – Establish a virtual open-door management policy, just as there is in the office. Make sure people are accessible and can be easily engaged.

Remote working leader conversations

With many team members working from home, this an opportunity to exhibit empathic listening and questioning skills.   We need to be asking questions now that go beyond just tasks. Here are some ideas:

Seeking feedback
- What do I need to do more of/less of?
- What else do I need to do to help you do your job while working at home?
- What communication practices work best for you and why?

Wellbeing
- What practices do you have in place to look after your wellbeing?
- How have you stayed connected with your colleagues?
- What have you liked about working remotely?
- What have you not liked so much?
- What have you missed?

Learning
- What have you learnt about yourself over the past few weeks?
- What have you learnt about your work?
- What else have you learnt?

Continuous Improvement
- What's one way that you could improve your own working efficiencies?
- What's one we can improve our team's operations?
- What ideas have you had that we could adopt once we are back in the office?
- What we can we do better to support you?

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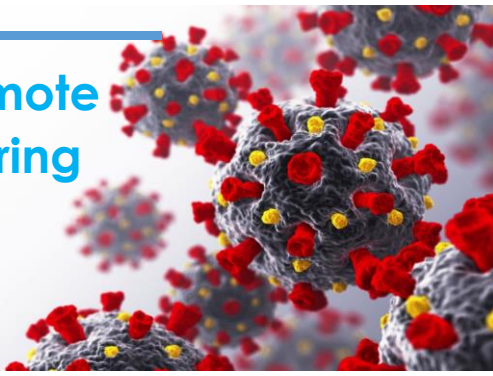
Change benchmarks and engagement strategies

Revisit what is realistically possible from employees during these challenging times:

- Are current performance goals still appropriate?
- Redirect peoples' efforts to high value activities.
- Use a lens that values quality over quantity.
- Accept that people's ability to remain focussed will be compromised. They will be concerned about themselves, their families and communities as well.
- Capacity for discretionary effort will be compromised for most. People will be distracted and distressed to a greater or lesser degree. Think about how you can help your team to feel connected to the purpose of their work and strategies for them to remain engaged and productive. When scared, people can act out of character.
- Be crystal clear about priorities and recognise efforts. Fear in the present can lead to hopelessness about the future.
- Training – how can you provide your teams with opportunities to learn new skills and protect wellbeing? When you can't do, learn.

Mental Health

Psychological distress will be a prominent emotion in workplaces across the world, and it's not something most managers know how to address. It will manifest in ways we haven't seen before.

Around 80% of the causes of mental health issues at work are either directly related to problems at work or a combination of work and other issues, and 43% of employees would be uncomfortable with disclosing mental health issues to their manager. Furthermore, 34% of managers say they would have difficulty identifying mental health challenges among staff their staff and 30% would not know how to act if a direct report came forward with mental health issues or concerns.

Isolation is likely to cause mental health challenges for most people, particularly when combined with COVID-19 associated concerns. Research conducted during the SARS epidemic found people quarantined at home experienced a significant increase in trauma and depression-related symptoms.

THE HUMAN BRAIN IS WIRED FOR CONNECTION, BUT TRAUMA REWIRES THE BRAIN FOR PROTECTION.

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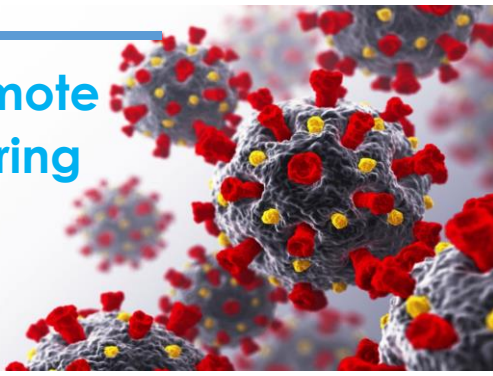
Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. How you respond to the outbreak can depend on your background, the things that make you unique and different from other people, and the community in which you live.

The Human Psychology website has a range of resources to support mental health.

Silver linings

The decisions employers make now could have detrimental effects in the future. Ethical questions include "If we don't have to legally pay people if they're not at work, should we?" and "Can we afford to pay people without jeopardising the company?". Under the Fair Work Act you might not be obligated to pay somebody above and beyond their leave entitlements. There will be plenty of people who are forced to utilise their annual leave to care for relatives or home school children, at a time where they'd much prefer to hold onto those entitlements.

We are now operating in an age of radical transparency. How businesses act and the decisions they make during these times will have significant potential consequences. Try to find the opportunity in a crisis. Not because we should be looking to profit out of adversity, but because when things are bad we can still be a force for good. When things go back to normal, it's not going to be the normal that we were used to before.

How HP can help

The HP team are dedicated to supporting people's mental health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 outbreak. We can provide digital resilience, wellbeing and mental health support for managers and employees.

Please email syoung@humanpsychology.com.au or call 1300 277 924 to find out more.