

# Communicating with remote teams



## ➔ Introduction

The Coronavirus outbreak has been described as a massive work-from-home experiment with many organisations instigating remote working policies for the first time. If your company is introducing remote working, then you need to think carefully about how you communicate with your people.



Some will have experience of working from home, others won't and may find it challenging. By setting out some clear guidance, early on, the process can be made pain-free for everyone.

**Manage expectations:** if people are fit and well, and working from home as a precaution following Government guidelines, then it's reasonable to expect them to work at their normal capacity. However, if and when the schools and nurseries shut, it might be a different situation for parents looking after children. Reassure parents with young children that although they might be fit and well, you appreciate that they won't be working at their full capacity and spread the workload accordingly.

Likewise, individuals self-isolating because they have mild symptoms may feel that they want to do some work whereas those with more serious symptoms won't be able to.

Treat each person in your team individually. Make sure they aren't overloaded with work and be clear about what's expected of them. The situation will continually change so be prepared to be fluid and have succession plans in place if people do fall seriously ill.

**Over-communicate:** There's no such thing as too much communication when you're remote working. Because people can no longer talk over a desk to a colleague or chat to them by the coffee machine, communication can become more difficult. Nuances are lost and people can misinterpret what they should be doing. Schedule 1-2-1 check-ins with the team every day and make sure they're doing the same with their direct reports to discuss daily tasks and long-term goals and to talk about how they're feeling during this unusual period. Many virtual teams organise daily virtual 'huddles' where everyone gets together using tools such as GoToMeeting to talk about their tasks for the day, share challenges and connect with one another. It's a good opportunity to catch up on what was completed the day before, what the team is working on today, and any issues which need to be addressed. Good facilitation of these sessions is essential. Make sure you listen more than you talk. This is a challenging time and people may need to vent their frustrations and concerns. Always be clear and transparent with any directions. Ambiguity is the enemy of remote working.

**Invest in good technology:** Strong, reliable Wi-Fi is the holy grail of the remote worker. It allows for regular video-conferencing, which helps people to feel connected to colleagues and clients, while also providing access to servers, download files and emails. Many people will already have a good connection, but support those who don't access a better service.

While many people are accustomed to working on a laptop for short periods, they'll typically drop in to a docking station with a screen, second screen, keyboard and wireless mouse when they're in an office. Making sure that everyone has access to this type of technology at home is an important consideration for successful remote working. Many homeworkers also swear by noise-cancelling headphones, especially if the rest of the household is self-isolating.

Collaborative tools like Slack, Basecamp, Microsoft Teams and Google Docs are brilliant ways for people to work together seamlessly when remote working. But also consider informal communication tools like WhatsApp groups or Messenger which can temporarily replace the chat across the desk and make people feel connected. However, this is not the time to introduce new communication tools – stick to what people know and have experienced.

**55%**  
**of UK employees surveyed  
have little or no experience  
working from home**

SOURCE: LEESMAN



Within teams, small morale-boosting exercises such as asking people for their best remote working tip, their favourite film or box-set or a good Spotify playlist can be a fun way of encouraging people to share ideas and kick-start some discussions.

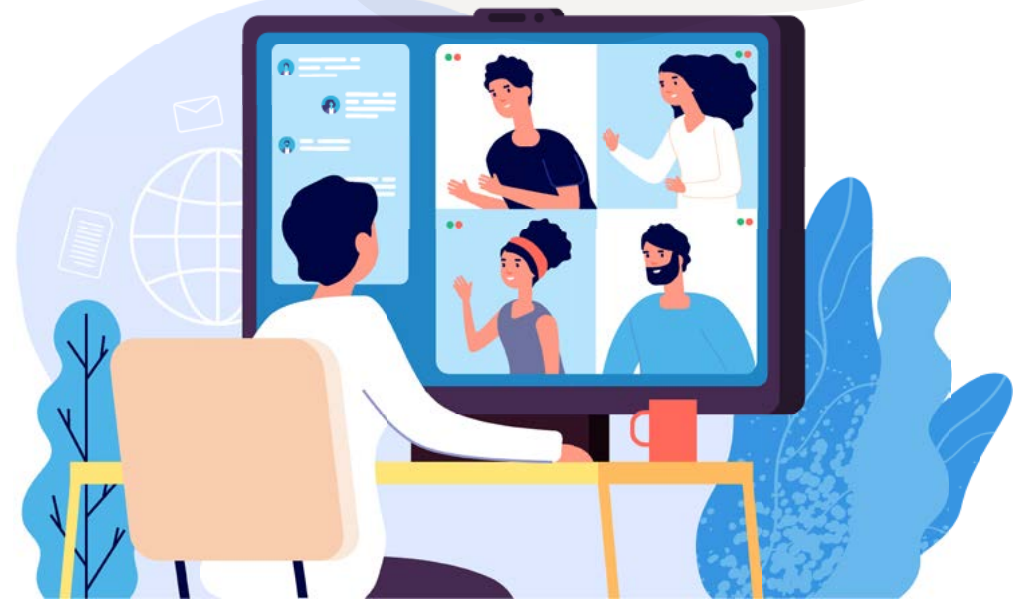
**Are you sitting comfortably?** The employer's Duty of Care remains even when people are working at home. While it may not be practical, or even desirable in the current situation, to conduct face-to-face workstation assessments, consider providing employees with a guide to setting up their home workstation and making sure they're working in an ergonomically-sound way. Most people won't have a formal home office and will be working from a kitchen table or similar. Give them top tips on how to avoid back and eye strain to keep them healthy and productive. These tips will also help for future home-working.

**Insist on video calls:** Make sure that people use their cameras for Skype, Zoom, WebEx or GoToMeeting calls rather than just audio. Seeing people helps to reduce a sense of isolation and improves communication. It also allows people to receive visual feedback. Some people swear by working with their webcam on permanently, essentially livestreaming between locations, so fellow remote workers can chat informally, 'see' each other and feel connected. It also reduces the temptation to be distracted. Keeping in touch with what's going on in people's lives helps to build cohesion and closeness – even if you're all experiencing similar emotions.

**Use a calendar:** Encourage people to share their diaries and keep them updated. It's hard to keep up with a people's work schedule when you don't see each other every day. Teams spread across different geographies will also be working in different time zones. Knowing in advance when your colleagues have calls or virtual meetings can save frustration and help you plan in advance. It's particularly important for people to diarise if they're not able to work because of caring commitments or illness.

**Stick to a routine:** Anyone who's ever worked from home understands the power of distraction. Whether it's laundry, cooking, daytime TV or the latest Coronavirus chatter on social media, it's easy to become side-tracked when remote working. Support your people to remain productive and focused by suggesting they adopt similar routines as they would in the office. An official

SEEING PEOPLE  
HELPS TO REDUCE A  
SENSE OF ISOLATION  
AND IMPROVES  
COMMUNICATION.



**41%**  
of companies don't  
have remote working  
policies in place

SOURCE: 8X8

start and end time to the working day avoids work slipping into evening hours which can be demoralising. Agree times that people will be available to be contacted and how quickly they need to respond to requests.

Encourage the use of Do Not Disturb features when people are focused on specific tasks to avoid interruptions from calls and emails. Using apps like Trello or Trello to set targets for the day can help focus minds. Other apps like Forest are great at reducing unnecessary online surfing when you feel your fingertips wandering.

It's also important to develop new routines and rhythms to support remote working. There may need to be more rigour around file-sharing and updating in progress documents, for example.

**Take a break:** Without colleagues to talk to, it's easy for people to forget to take their usual coffee break, especially when back-to-back conference calls or deadlines are looming. Consider instigating a virtual coffee break for your team or company. By getting everyone together on camera with a cup of coffee and a slice of cake at a set time once or twice a day, you break the monotony of the 9-5 and boost morale as people share experiences of remote working. It's also a chance for people to discuss both what they're working on and how they feel.

Likewise, encourage your team to take a proper lunch break, ideally with some exercise even if it's a walk round the block or in the local park, or just a potter in the garden. Sitting on a balcony and getting some fresh air can reduce a sense of cabin fever and improve people's mental health. Facetiming a friend or elderly relative keeps people connected. But make sure people stick to normal meals – succumbing to a midday takeaway can result in a leisure rather than work mindset, not to mention a carb slump in the afternoon.

**Understand that everyone is different:** Just as we all work differently in the office, people will have different remote working styles. Some may start early, others will work into the evening. Extroverts may like office banter, introverts may prefer a quieter environment. Some people like a lot of direction, others prefer to be left to it. Making sure that you understand the different communication and management needs of your team when they're remote working is crucial to its success.

CONSIDER INSTIGATING  
A VIRTUAL COFFEE  
BREAK FOR YOUR TEAM  
OR COMPANY



1.54m  
people in the UK  
work from home for  
their main job  
(in 2018)

SOURCE: ONS

TAKE SOME  
EXERCISE EVEN  
IF IT'S A WALK  
ROUND THE  
BLOCK OR IN THE  
LOCAL PARK



**Recognise and reward:** Saying 'thank you' across a desk is much easier than bringing it up in a virtual forum. It's easy for great work to go unnoticed when teams are working remotely. That can start to foster disquiet and dissatisfaction. By overtly celebrating successes and rewarding people for their performance in a public way, morale is maintained and people feel recognised for the work they're doing.

**Create a safe psychological environment:** Remote working can be challenging. The lack of face-to-face interaction can cause mistrust and misunderstanding. Encouraging everyone to input in group discussions, respecting people's differences and opinions and watching out for signs that people are withholding and not contributing is key. If people feel comfortable, then they will contribute and the team – and the wider business – will be more successful as a result.

**Encourage self-care:** While self-isolating is a good way to support people's physical health, it can be a challenging time for their mental health. Following some of the tips above will help, but also consider being more explicit through a self-care guide. This could include exercise ideas that people can do at home; advice on good nutrition and avoiding snacks; and tips for a good night's sleep.

**Keep people updated:** This is a fast-moving situation and Government advice will change. Keep people informed of any changes to the company policy but acknowledge that you don't have all the answers – nobody does.

**86%**  
**of workers feel that working at home allows them to hit maximum productivity**

SOURCE: SUREPAYROLL

**Expenses claims:** Many people may be concerned about taking on increased expenses if they're remote working for a long period. Increased phone bills and heating costs could be a worry for some. For those who are used to free, or subsidised refreshments at work, suddenly removing that benefit by long-term home working, can be an unexpected financial burden. Consider revising your expenses policy and offer to pay employees a contribution towards their phone, WiFi, heating, lighting and other expenses which they'll incur while remote working. That will reduce any anxiety around these expenses, and keep morale and productivity high.



## ➤ Do you need comms support?

**For almost 10 years, Magenta has been the communication expert in the built environment, designing and delivering bespoke internal communication strategies. During this unprecedented period, we are here to advise and support organisations of all sizes through the remote working and internal comms minefield.**

Many organisations have in-house built environment and comms teams who can manage most aspects of workplace communications and just need some extra support at either a strategic or operational level. Others require more comprehensive support. Whether you need a bespoke communications strategy or support in creating engaging material to deliver a strategy you've already produced, we can help.

With teams in London and Toronto, together with partners around the world, we can seamlessly support your organisation. Get in touch at [www.magentaassociates.co](http://www.magentaassociates.co) or email [info@magentaassociates.co](mailto:info@magentaassociates.co)

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