



COVID-19: POOR SOCIAL CONNECTION THREATENS PRODUCTIVITY

Experiment with ways to improve social connectivity

1. COVID-19 presents a range of complex challenges, among them social connectivity in a suddenly much more virtual workplace. Consequently, the approach needed to address the challenge ought to be suited to complex contexts. An experimental approach is ideal in this context!
2. Three principles will support your experimentation. First, look for a variety of solutions at the same time, not just 'the one'. Second, while experiments ought to involve a bit of informed risk-taking, ensure they're survivable. Finally, seek feedback and learn from your mistake as you go along.
3. Design and run a series of small experiments, rather than waiting a longer time before attempting a more ambitious experiment. Ideally, run your experiments with time frames of a few days or a couple of weeks at most.
4. Do some planning, but don't become so bogged down in planning that you delay the testing phase. That's where the rubber hits the road, where you'll quickly learn if your current hypothesis is valid, or could be improved, in a next round experiment.
5. In the case of virtual social connectivity, why not invite everyone to be part of the experimental effort? That's a great way to promote connection!

New research highlights business value of social connection

A study by BCG, published days after our own recent report on 'Working from Home in a COVID Context', reveals a range of useful, confirmatory findings about working virtually. BCG surveyed 12,000 people in the USA, Germany and India – three quite different geographies and business cultures. UGM's small study was largely Australia-based. The business outcomes of remote working, it seems, have been pretty similar in many parts of the world.

UGM found that most respondents identify 'informal social connection' as the major challenge of working virtually in the current context. Working collaboratively, was identified as the mindset/skillset most needed (61%), with connecting informally a close second (58%).

Looking at the topic slightly differently, the BCG study determined that 'social connectivity' is the most important factor, when productivity of collaborative tasks is assessed. In cases where people were not satisfied with social connectivity, between 20% and 27% of respondents felt productivity was the same or better than pre-COVID times. On the other hand, the group satisfied with social connectivity reported many more instances (50% - 63%) of maintained or improved productivity in the COVID context.

In summary, BCG acknowledges a "most surprising...outsize impact" of social connectivity on collaborative outcomes. "Social connectivity, it turns out, is what enables us to be collaboratively productive". This is likely why respondents in UGM's survey listed collaborating virtually as the area most in need of a mindset/skills boost.

Productivity gains during working virtually

The BCG research usefully nuanced its examination of productivity. In addition to looking at working collaboratively, the study also probed productivity in relation to individual tasks, as well as looking specifically at managerial work. Those findings further support the efficacy of working virtually.

A quite astounding finding in relation to individual task productivity is that those transitioning from 'on site' to 'virtual' reported almost identical productivity outcomes as those who stayed on site or who were already virtual. From a productivity perspective, people adapted very, very well to going virtual. Around three quarters in all scenarios said productivity was the same or improved compared with pre-COVID, with 25% saying it was worse.

Turning to managerial tasks, it is clear why managers are seen as dragging their heels on virtual. Just as their people sensed that virtual will deliver a

range of benefits, managers have been less enthusiastic, believing it will make their life more difficult. As it turns out, just over a third of managers who remained on site (36%) or continued virtually (34%) reported a drop in managerial task productivity as a result of the COVID context. However, moving from on site to virtual wasn't a whole lot worse (40% reported a productivity drop). So, while managerial tasks do currently seem a bit more of a challenge than individual tasks, reducing the downside of working virtually, while retaining all/most of the upside, is surely achievable.

Transformer or traditionalist?

And so it is that the very notion of working virtually, which has saved many businesses during this pandemic, becomes front and centre. The surge in working from home was forced by the pandemic, but it's worthwhile remembering that a growing number within the workforce have been pressing for that opportunity for years. Even without the pandemic, those calls would have become louder, stronger and more frequent. Some commenters suggest a decade's worth of progress on working virtually has occurred within months.

The big question now is will you and your business be more traditionalist, hankering after the 'old normal'? Or, will you pivot, in an agile way, using the pandemic as a platform for transformation of the way many people work?

Of course, the biggest COVID challenge is medical: find a vaccine or learn how to live with the virus. But for business, a challenge is also to capture the benefits (business and personal) of more work being done virtually. Imagine if business put even a fraction of the effort expended on medical outcomes for the novel corona virus into finding better ways to work virtually. While working virtually has been around for a while, doing so at scale is quite novel.

What is the current focus of your business? From press releases and stories, it seems as if an overwhelming amount of effort is being allocated to 'getting people safely back to the office' i.e. as close to the old normal as possible! So what then of the opportunity to make working virtually better? How much investment, in contrast, is being allocated to achieving that transformational outcome?

Social connectivity is a key virtual challenge

One of the most pressing challenges for business is how to improve virtual connectivity, both formal and informal. Technology to make this straightforward will undoubtedly catch up. But, in the meanwhile, plenty of 'workarounds', using existing capabilities, are waiting to be discovered. Whether or not they are, will depend largely on the extent to which organisations are transformational or traditionalist.