



## WHY REMOTE WORKING'S TIME HAS COME

### Questions to ask about remote working

Ask yourself, and your team, the following questions. This is especially useful if people have had the 'opportunity' of working from home, even if unexpected and at short notice.

1. What are the obvious benefits of working in the office? Be sure to outline the benefits clearly and be able to back them up with evidence.
2. Can you assign a value to the benefits? This will certainly vary according to context and is likely to make for an illuminating team discussion.
3. What are the obvious drawbacks of working from home? Again, take some time to clarify the drawbacks and seek evidence to support your perceptions.
4. Are there any other benefits or drawbacks you may have missed? Do a quick internet search to learn about the experience of others and see if any of those factors apply in your case but have been missed.
5. What might be possible if management and their teams were provided with support to work remotely more often?
6. How difficult would it be to support managers and their teams to work remotely? What's the cost-benefit analysis of those possibilities?

#### *Social distancing is a strategic pivot for the way we work*

Conventional wisdom suggests that collaboration is best achieved when people work in close proximity. Historically, it's likely so in the vast majority of cases. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has fast-tracked the convergence of two important forces that determine whether collaborating in future will be different from the past. Dr Matt Clancy of Iowa State University believes it will. "Technological and social changes have reached a tipping point", he argues, "and remote work will become more and more common going forward".

First, information and communications technology has been expanding communications capabilities and possibilities exponentially, for the past few decades. However, having technology available hasn't seen it being adopted for every purpose it may serve.

A key reason for slow progress in some areas is the invisible force of being comfortable with things as they are. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" That's the case with remote or telework until recently. Despite the capability for huge portions of many sectors to work from home (or not in the office) most didn't work that way. That is, until they did!

At very short notice, social distancing requirements of the pandemic turned vast swathes of the population into teleworkers. In fact, with schools also closed for an extended period, a still bigger number of people became tele-learners! Remarkably, with little preparation and training, people demonstrated they were able to get on with work, school and life more generally, thanks to telecoms and their own grit.

Even more praiseworthy is the way in which parents juggled work and being the primary educators of their children. Even better work outcomes can be expected when a huge portion of the workforce is again free to focus completely on making the most of their new teleworking environment.

#### *Do people feel there are benefits of working from home?*

Since workplaces shifted to working from home, where possible, for personal safety reasons, it's worth briefly considering benefits that individuals have listed to date. Research during the pandemic, conducted by i4cp (Institute for Corporate Productivity), acknowledges that responses to working from home are varied. Some don't like it! However, the vast majority report unexpected benefits from their unanticipated experience.

Major benefits include a sense that working remotely has been good for mental health, personal (and business) productivity and family. Many noted how commuting time (1.5 to 2.5hrs daily) has become available for other things – oftentimes family. People

also report a sense of improved work-life balance, with time for walks, more family time and eating more healthily at home. One challenge was having children not at school, but that has now returned to "school almost as usual" for most. Another plus was the opportunity for informal or virtual learning.

People also noted some powerful business benefits. They felt more focused, freed from open office spaces and unwanted 'colleague drive-bys'. Add to this a belief that changed circumstances have resulted in faster, less bureaucratic decision making and greater responsiveness. Relationships also seemed to be enhanced via more personal connections to colleagues, as well as greater trust (from greater authenticity, honesty humanity etc.).

Having too many tele-meetings was a problem for quite a number of people. But, it's understandable that a crisis and a new way of working might result in a few missteps around how best to work from home. Many people confirmed that, despite a few teething problems, the technology and the new ways of working have resulted in increased collaboration. Not only were people able to be more included, but this came with far less politics. It's not possible now for people just to show up, to be seen! Merit has a greater chance of being acknowledged because the work must be delivered and that's often in video-based meetings.

#### *Can any downside be managed?*

Working from home (for those whose work allows it) is not perfect. But, nor is working at the office, despite having done this for more than a century. From a management perspective, there's a need not only to adapt to the new technology, but also to 'manage' in a changed context. Of course, many organisations have already walked that path, often though with the added challenges of different time zones and different geographies. One would imagine that just as managers have been able to improve skills over the past century, they'd be able to do the same with respect to a workforce that is not collocated. Technology, to ensure continuity of service at home, could also be made available at a fraction of the cost of space in an expensive office park.

But, what of the evidence that innovation and creativity is boosted through 'serendipitous' meetings, for example, those chance meetings at the water cooler? There seems to be a case for creating online opportunities to meet 'randomly' in similar ways. This would mean even greater opportunity for anyone in the business to meet, regardless of their physical location. It's even more inclusive.

Finally, holding in-person get togethers would allow for some physical presence while making those events particularly special.