



Distributed Work

Team Number: #12

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Making WORK Work

“A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” – Paul Romer

The mandatory quarantines and lockdowns of the last few months have proven that working-from-home can work. Organizations have been pleasantly surprised to discover a high degree of cohesion and effectiveness within and across teams and functions. Although U.S. states are “reopening,” most workplaces will function differently until a vaccine or treatment is found. The question now is what comes next.

With the productivity of remote work now a given, managers’ old prohibitions no longer fly. Whether the task at hand requires concentration or collaboration, digital tools have proven up to the task. Social norms have been relaxed; workers are free to choose a place that suits their needs. Even weekly check-ins and workshops can be done well remotely. The onus is on employers to prove “the office” is the most effective place for doing work. Employees are busy imagining how their workdays might change when they return — if ever.

Workspaces: What Are They Good For?

Organizations have an unprecedented opportunity to rethink their form and functions once lockdowns ease — new hybrid digital/physical workflows best-suited to whatever needs doing. But impediments remain. No amount of bandwidth can match being face-to-face, and sometimes the office can be a respite from home. How will organizations maintain their culture and sense of purpose in a workforce that’s dispersed? What tools, processes, and rituals will we need? How do we change our mindsets from “remote work” to global “cloud work,” regardless of being home or away? What metrics will we need to determine success? And how do we ensure these new arrangements will empower employees, rather than be used to control them?

At the same time, what should be the role of the office going forward? If physical workspaces are excused from having to perform every role, all of the time, which ones should they play, and how can they best be used to create connections and collaboration — even during social distancing?

Left to their own devices (literally), employees will seek a mix of physical presence and remote concentration, prizing flexibility and convenience, with the office as a locus for collaboration. To make this shift work, employers and employees will need to work together.

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What Companies Should Do

The first step for companies is acknowledging they have a problem — their employees are burning out from unprecedented confinement and won't settle for business-as-usual. The time to rethink your corporate culture is now. Start by prioritizing the "life" in work-life balance through supporting parents, nurturing younger workers, and emphasizing mental health and wellbeing. Also, seize this opportunity to integrate environmental sustainability into the core of the company's real estate, travel, and supply chain decision-making. Cloudwork policies should also strive to shorten commutes and lighten carbon footprints.

Next, companies must learn from the technological free-for-all of the last few months to realign facilities management and IT to meet the needs of emancipated employees. Any savings from reduced real estate costs should be re-invested in stipends for home offices or coworking, video conferencing equipment, and software for seamlessly blending physical and digital meetings.

Re-training and cross-training workers to make the most of this new normal will be necessary. This could mean everything from teaching every employee how to Slack, to designing entirely new metrics to measure performance — and its implications for career advancement.

Employee feedback will be critical to this iterative process, and companies would be wise to develop multiple avenues of communication, both formal (e.g. surveys) and informal (e.g. private griping on Slack), along with a clear commitment to incorporating recommendations back into company practices.

What Managers and Employees Should Do

"The telecommuter is dead; meet the cloudworker," the author and provocateur Venkatesh Rao proclaimed more than a decade ago. Rejecting the language of "remote work" or "working from home," global cloudworkers are more focused on *what they do* than *where they are*. The original cloudworkers were free agents in co-working spaces, working together alone with coffee and WiFi. But we are all cloudworkers now, and adapting this style to teams will require clear lines of communication, commonly-understood metrics, and goal-setting.

Managers should demonstrate their support for cloudworkers by setting clear boundaries over when (and where) work takes place, including which meetings require face-to-face participation. They might consider borrowing agile practices to support high-performance solo work, and set regular 1:1's to touch base and reduce fears on both sides. Good managers will over-communicate to ensure their teams are in sync; the best will push their reports to learn from peers and others outside the organization whose work styles can be a model going forward.



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For their part, employees must commit to cloudwork fully, creating suitable spaces at home or wherever they choose to work, along with the corresponding independence and discipline. They must agree with managers to communicate frequently through regular channels, and promise to support team dynamics, business objectives, and company culture, lest they drift off into personal orbit.

Both sides are betting that cloudwork will be a win-win. We know that companies with robust distributed work policies had the easiest transition to quarantine, and we can surmise that organizations that move quickly to maximize the potential of cloudworkers will be more resilient to future shocks and more attractive to talent once the broader economy recovers.

What Institutions Should Do

Words matter. “Telecommuting,” “remote work,” and “working from home” all obliquely reinforce the supremacy of the office. To successfully transition to cloudwork, we will need new language, new norms, and new roles for institutions.

Consider the community manager. Arguably the most important innovation to arise from coworking, this combination of host and concierge does not exist inside typical organizations. How might community managers be retrofitted to support cloudworking teams — whether in an informal community of practice or as part of a formal position designed to smooth this transition?

Thinking more broadly, enabling cloudworkers will require the total restructuring of traditional support functions such as IT, facilities management, and human resources to better empower, provision, and equip them. This will in turn entail turning these roles inside-out to be external, rather than internal facing. This new function — call it “cloudwork enablement” — will become the interface layer to public and private institutions beyond the organization.

One critical area in this regard will be K-12 education, to cultivate the mix of hard- and soft skills in Generation Z necessary to master a new work regime which prizes self-starters as much as team players. Another will be robotics and automation, which is poised to transform critical sectors of the economy hit hard by the pandemic, and will be a defining skill going forward.



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Enabling An Effective Shift

How have the ideal modes and proximity of activities shifted through the constraints of COVID-19? These changes are here to stay:

1. Mindshift & Language

- You can be collaborative, connected, and creative even apart from your team
- Death to “telecommute,” “remote,” “hoteling,” and “hot-desking.” Work is about *what* you do and *how* best to do it; not *where* it’s done

2. Data-Driven

- Driven by defensible data and a deep understanding of employee and team needs
- Develop metrics to identify and quantify the effectiveness of teams in-person and apart

3. Clear Objectives for Both Employers and Employees

- How cloudwork fits with team objectives and the company’s mission
- Measuring the value to both individuals and the organization

4. Acknowledge and Support Employee Behaviors

- Provide engagement and communication to support the transition
- Think beyond Day One, this is an ongoing cultural shift
- Provide training and resources; reinforce on a regular cadence

5. Build a Comprehensive Case

- Leaders must support and champion the initiative, including advocacy and modelling
- Demonstration of new work styles by all levels of leadership builds trust

6. Partner Internally Across the Organization

- Teams and support staff must ensure infrastructure and policies are in place to clearly articulate expectations, manage, and accommodate employee needs
- This will not become a cultural or behavioral norm overnight