

COVID-19 Remote Working Strategies and Best Practices

With COVID-19 spreading, managers should be preparing for the possibility that your teams - or at the very minimum members of your teams - may have to work from home. We would like to offer some strategies and best practices to help team members continue to collaborate effectively and continue business as usual, in the times of the unusual.

Spell Out Goals and Roles

Teams that suddenly change work patterns — particularly moving from co-located to remote — need to rethink how to accomplish their tasks and ensure that everyone understands his or her role.

Clarify and re-clarify goals and roles. The move to home-based working is a great opportunity for a team to revisit the basics in order to ensure everyone understands the team objectives, their individual roles, and how each person contributes to the team's ultimate success or failure. Clarifying roles among the team helps people understand when they can turn to peers instead of the leader, which prevents the leader from becoming a bottleneck. This increased communication throughout the group also helps peripheral members stay engaged.

Leaders need to continually clarify goals at the team and individual level to stay focused on key priorities. Watch out for an ever-expanding list of tasks. And when you do re-prioritize goals, think carefully about who gets the assignment and make sure the changing goals are communicated to the entire team.

Map skills and capacity. Most of us at OneDigital work on multiple projects at once, oftentimes with multiple cross-functional teams. In times of change, it is highly likely that a project that involves some of your team members will face an unexpected shock, which could affect your group's projects and other groups downstream. Consider what may happen if a member of your team contracts COVID-19 and is unable to work (or at diminished capacity) for up to 3 weeks. To minimize the impact, think now about where you have skills redundancy built into your team or how to access capacity from outside. Because of the number of new tasks that arise during a crisis, many of your team members are likely to be pulled in multiple directions. Don't add even more stress to your workers by expecting them to handle these situations on their own. Make it clear that they can count on you or others on the team to help manage the load for the time they are recovering. Unfortunately, onboarding a new team member while everyone, or a large portion of the team is working from home can make it difficult to build team cohesion and trust. Invest the time to formally introduce new team members, focusing on both the personal and professional.

Emphasize Personal Interactions

People suddenly working from home are likely to feel disconnected and isolated, which lowers productivity and engagement. As a leader, especially if you are not used to managing a virtual team, you may feel stressed about keeping the team on track. Under these circumstances it is tempting to become exclusively task-focused. To address these challenges, making time for personal interaction is more important than ever.

Keep everyone in mind. Inevitably, you may have go-to team members — those people that we are more likely to turn to in times of stress. As a result, some of our teammates may tend to unintentionally be “out of sight, out of mind.” To combat this tendency, make a list of the current core and extended team members and keep it in front of you while you’re working each day to help you make more conscious decisions about allocating responsibilities and information.

Schedule regular meetings. Set times for the team to come together virtually; it is easier to cancel if the meeting isn’t needed than it is to pull together a last-minute conversation without creating additional disruption. If you only meet on an ad hoc basis, you risk excluding some people who are either too busy to join or are out of sight, out of mind.

Create the virtual “water cooler.” Set aside time on the agenda for personal updates, the kind of small talk you might start an in-person meeting with. This preserves the sense of camaraderie on your team. In addition, set norms that people should regularly call one another as needed rather than wait for scheduled meetings.

Humanize communication. Instead of relying exclusively on e-mail, which tends to limit collaboration and interactive conversations, switch to real-time media such as FaceTime, Zoom web conferences, Teams chats, or even phone calls. These forms of communication are more personal, allow team members to read one another’s emotions, and help to boost morale in times of isolation. They also improve decision making by more fruitfully bringing alternative voices into the conversation and allowing people to debate ideas more effectively and completely.

Normalize New Work Environments

Working from home creates new distractions and the potential for misunderstandings. The more the members of your team know about each other’s environment, the better they will be able to make sense of one another’s behavior. Teams often ignore the advice to orient each other, because the idea seems hokey or a waste of time. But the practice has a strong basis in social psychology and cognitive bias: Fundamental attribution error is the tendency to explain another person’s behavior as a personality trait while discounting the impact of situational factors (“He never speaks up, he’s uncommitted” instead of “He’s trying to stay on mute to avoid the background noise at home.”)

Take a virtual tour. Encourage your teams to take a few minutes share some personal context. What are the possible distractions — like barking dogs, noisy passing trucks/trains, or kids being from school due to school closures? The aim is to help colleagues develop an understanding of each person’s work context so they can be more sensitive to each other’s constraints. Let your teammates know you appreciate their challenge and are open to discussing alternatives like flexing work hours so that

calls/meetings can happen when it's quieter or more convenient. The ambiguity inherent in having team members working from home can lead to biased assumptions about focus and commitment to work, encourage your teams to keep those assumptions in check.

COVID-19 is likely to create some disruption to your business and to your teams. However, by using strategies like these to respond effectively, layout expectations and hold each other accountable, we can continue to deliver against our business objectives with continuity.