

# The Remote Working Employee

## Introduction

Remote work and working from home (WFH) have become a day-to-day reality for many, not only in South Africa, but across the globe- not only being a feasible but becoming the mainstream way of work for almost a full year now.

The concept of the 'remote employee' is no longer the mystery that it may have once been, the tough part now being, how do managers and entire organisations begin to manage their remote employees? Furthermore, how do these stakeholders ensure that their employees remain engaged even when there is little to no face-to-face interaction in their daily routines?

The rise of remote work brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic has spurred faster adoption of employee monitoring and subsequently such software by companies who want to boost productivity — and keep an eye on WFH employees. These are some of the constructs that we will delve deeper into in this paper, as well as considerations such as employee engagement for the remote workforce and encouraging a work-life balance.

## Working from Home 101

Mastering remote work is all about finding the right tools to stay productive and connected. Even before COVID-19 coronavirus disrupted the planet, remote work had gone from that rare unicorn of workforce arrangements to a standard component of many people's workweek.

According to a recent Gallup poll, 43% of employed Americans log at least some out-of-office, on-the-clock time (Nichols, 2020). A full 31% of those who work remotely at least some of the time spend four or five days a week out of the office. What explains the change? Some of it has to do with the rise of the freelance employee. Nearly 50% of millennials are freelancers, and employers are limited in how and when they require contract employees to be on-site. And, of course, there are other pressures forcing companies to re-evaluate their stance on remote work, such as the 2020 global epidemic.

In the latter case, companies may have initially found themselves scrambling to solve urgent security, data, and collaboration issues related to remote work without much preparation, leaving them vulnerable to security risks and introducing unnecessary inefficiencies into their workflows (which we hope is no longer the case). However, many employers are also allowing or even encouraging their traditional employees to work remotely, and for good reason. While the battle rages on between

proponents of out-of-office time on one hand, and the *serendipity* of workplace encounters on the other, it turns out there are some compelling benefits to remote work arrangements that shouldn't be overlooked.

## **What Are the Greatest Benefits of a Remote Workforce?**

For employers, those benefits come in the form of a larger potential labour pool. What this means is when an employee pool is not geographically restricted, the likelihood of finding the right employee rises as recruiters are able to cast a much wider net when looking for individuals who fit their ideal candidate profile- skills and experience may be the only or main factor that is considered as opposed to region. Out of area employees can also be cheaper in many cases, saving employees money. There is of course the added benefit of organisations not paying a rental or other utility and running costs such as Wi-Fi and electric bills.

There is also evidence that remote employees are more productive. According to a recent Global Workplace Analytics survey, a full 53% of remote employees reported they were likely to work overtime. That is in comparison to the 28% of in-office employees (Nichols, 2020).

Furthermore, remote employees spared a hellish commute also report feeling less stressed. In one study, Swedish researchers found that couples that have at least one partner commuting longer than 45 minutes per day experience shocking rates of divorce 40% higher than those with shorter commutes (Nichols, 2020).

The aforementioned coronavirus also highlights a critical advantage of remote work: whereby it could help keep employees online and healthy in situations where going into the office puts team members at risk.

Perhaps the best argument for remote work is that many of the longstanding barriers to having distributed workforces have now been toppled by technology. Here are some of the best tools to help your remote team collaborate productively, creatively, and of course seamlessly.

## **The Future of Remote Working**

As we now know, the entire globe bore witness to an historic shift in the 2020 job market due to novel the Covid-19 pandemic. While some companies used to offer the ability to work from home as a perk, it has now become the norm for most businesses. As a result, it is estimated that by 2025, 70% of the workforce will be working remotely at least five days a month (Castrillon, 2021). While 2020 may be considered the year of remote work, it is just the beginning as we see the trend continuing in 2021 and beyond.

According to Chavez-Deyfuss (2020), the percentage of employees permanently working from home is expected to double in 2021 as tracking on productivity metrics is showing that remote work is leading to positive results. There is a general expectation toward an increase in permanent remote work. Another recent Gartner (2020) survey revealed that over two-thirds (74%) plan to permanently shift employees to remote work after the Covid-19 crisis ends. As expected, it's the 'Big Tech' companies that are paving the way. For instance, Twitter, based in San Francisco, told employees in May that they could work from home indefinitely (Castrillon, 2021). Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg told employees in late May that many would work remotely indefinitely and there are plans to keep staff remote beyond 2020.

## **Remote work means less office space**

As previously mentioned, studies suggest that predictions show that the need for large physical office spaces will gradually become a thing of the past. In fact, completely remote companies with no headquarters will continue to form as other organisations decide to reduce their office space for hybrid teams or forgo one altogether to save on costs (Castrillon, 2021). Many companies are already taking steps to make remote working an engrained, supported, and normalised model" for employees-and are also planning a new combination of remote and on-site working, giving rise to a hybrid work model. In-person meetings might be reserved for brainstorming sessions, introducing new projects, or team-building exercises, while remote days would be for work that can be performed individually. The office could be redesigned and reorganised by getting rid of cubicles and creating more collaborative meeting spaces (Castrillon, 2021).

## **A Guide to Managing Remote Employees**

Now that much of the workforce is based remotely, managing, and measuring their engagement is essential. With this having been a tough feat for most organisations in a traditional working environment, one can only imagine the challenge that they now face with not having constant contact or simply the ability to physically observe employees in the workplace. So, how does one begin to manage the remote-working employee's engagement?

### **Keeping Employees Engaged**

In previous research, we had considered Brofenbrenner's (1992) structure of the environment which was adapted to the working environment by Paquette & Ryan, (2001). The basis suggests that there are five (5) basic ecosystems wherein one exists. These ecosystems are:

(1) **The microsystem**- this is the layers closest to the employee and contains structures with which the individual has direct contact, encompassing the relationships and

interactions that the employee has with their immediate and direct surroundings (this will therefore include where they sit, who sits around them/ next to them, the conversations they hear or are a part of, and even aspects such as the equipment and technology that they make use of daily).

(2) **The mesosystem**- this layer provides connections between the numerous relationships that occur between the structures which that exist in the individual's microsystem (for example the relationship between an employee's work and family life).

(3) **The exosystem**- this layer defines the larger social system in which the individual does not function directly (These structures may include for example, regulatory bodies within the industry, legislation, the labour department, the human rights commission, economic factors, and professional competitors);

(4) **The macrosystem**- this may be considered the outermost layer of the environment, which is not a specific framework, though it is comprised of phenomena such as, politics, mass media, and cultural ideologies.

(5) **The chronosystem**- this system has been added to the ecological model in recognition that for certain interactions to be effective, they need to occur regularly over extended periods (From this, we may further deduce that if for instance, an employee was to engage in only one health and wellness program session for the year, it is likely to be less effective than if said employee were to engage in the programme maybe once every quarter. Further suggesting that the creation of a healthy work environment would be more effective than attempting to remedy an unhealthy working context with the use of well-being interventions).

However, now that these ecosystems have shifted from the traditional workplace to the perceived workplace which the individual has created in their remote working environment- previously known as 'home', the factors impacting upon the employee in their respective workspaces now shifts and can no longer be controlled, manipulated, and adapted by the employer, but rather rests on what the employee makes of it for themselves.

For instance, if one is working in their dining room alongside their partner, has the kids running around and needs to take breaks to make lunch for the family in the middle of the workday, the factors impacting on said individual's engagement will be affected. In fact, not only are these factors impacted or changed on a daily basis depending on the routine required for that particular day, the respective factors for each remote working employee are naturally also different. As such, how employees are engaged would likely also need to be adapted from one to the next.

Take a look at our [Focusing of EX in Times of Calamity](#) research paper for additional information

## **Remote Work Requires More Engagement**

In an office setting, a positive attitude and strong relationships open the doors to advancement. One of the disadvantages of working remotely is that it's more difficult to highlight professional achievements (Castrillon, 2021). In 2021 employees will likely be expected to put extra effort into amplifying their engagement virtually to ensure they have access to new opportunities. In a remote setting where employees collaborate mostly via email or services such as MS Teams and even Whatsapp, engagement is much harder for employees to convey and for employers to identify. By participating in virtual events, being active in online meetings, and keeping enthusiasm high, employees will be able to stand out as leaders while working from home.

It is however, also up to the employer to offer these opportunities for engagement- be it introducing a 'games hour', offering non-compulsory training sessions for individuals to attend and engage with their colleagues, create a book club for the novel enthusiasts in the organisation to engage and discuss their favourite books, or even simply have virtual 'coffee breaks' with colleagues to build relationships and discuss topics other than existing or upcoming projects.

## **Measuring Employee Productivity**

In the midst of a pandemic that has led to unprecedented levels of remote working, digital tools to monitor employees in real time are gaining popularity among companies looking for new ways to track employee productivity (Finnegan, 2020). At the same time, the trend raises concerns about employee privacy and how far companies should be allowed to go when it comes to 'keeping tabs' on their employees.

There are a number of applications which have been developed which have tracking capabilities which include real-time activity tracking, can take screenshots of employees' computers at regular intervals, do keystroke logging, and record screens (Finnegan, 2020). In some instances, the tracking tools can be installed without the knowledge of employees. Companies often suggest that they are focused on transparency and productivity, but privacy groups denounce stringent "Big Brother" moves made possible by technology (Finnegan, 2020).

## **Employee Monitoring: How we got here**

Employee monitoring to improve efficiency is not new, with controversies having stemmed over what should be prioritised: the rights of employers to see what their workforce is doing or an employee's right to privacy and autonomy.

To put it lightly, keeping an eye on employees' pre-dates the information age; companies have long gravitated toward efforts to boost economic efficiency through employee productivity, a key tenet being the close monitoring of employees to hone and fine-tune work processes (Finnegan, 2020).

As we are aware, in recent decades, as work shifted from the industrial to the information age, techniques to track employees evolved with the introduction of new technologies. The trend has been evident in jobs that require physical work, such as in manufacturing and warehouses. While white-collar jobs are monitored as well; the recording of internet history, email messages and location have been done for many years. A 2007 survey by the American Management Association showed that 66% of employers monitored internet connections (Finnegan, 2020); 45% tracked keystrokes; content and time spent at the computer; 43% stored and reviewed computer files; and 10% even monitored employee social media accounts (Finnegan, 2020).

Researcher Phoebe Moore, an Associate Professor of Political Economy and Technology at Leicester University has suggested that, "Every single industry has some form of identification of employees' activity," furthermore, "The difference now is maybe you could ask the question of which industries are using [it] more, and which industries are under the spotlight. Whereas once upon a time a manager stood with a clipboard and kept track of what people were doing on the shop floor, now you're seeing this in the office space, where every time you use a digital platform there's data that's being gathered about you." (Finnegan, 2020).

More advanced software now allows companies to build a picture of the internal workforce faster and in more detail. A 2018 Gartner survey of 239 large corporations found that more than 50% were using some type of "non-traditional monitoring techniques" such as email monitoring and location analysis, up from 30% that did so in 2015. The expectation at the time was that that figure would reach 80% by 2020 (Finnegan, 2020).

Despite concerns around privacy, digital employee monitoring has largely become an accepted practice in measuring not only performance at work but also the level of employee engagement – one may liken it to the way in which the use of fitness trackers to monitor training or daily step counts has become so common.

For Human Resources departments, analytics applications can provide performance insights across an organisation's workforce, help identify talent, and offer insights on where employees may need more development or support (be it professional, personal, or in terms of general mental health and wellbeing).

## **Remote Work Affects Performance Management**

Remote work has changed performance management considerably. Organisations will increasingly focus on work done instead of hours worked, thus making tools and apps to help manage remote employee performance more essential, as mentioned.

To maximize employee efficiency, employers will need visibility over what employees are doing.

At some point, it may even be necessary to create a new job position, like '*Director of Remote Work*', to oversee production and collaboration and ensure operational efficiencies. Some companies are also making performance reviews ongoing rather than annual (Castrillon, 2021). Continuous feedback will become essential as managers strive to help employees navigate their job responsibilities and meet performance expectations, and even try to understand what training needs the employee may have as a result of the remote environment- this may include soft skills training for better communication and navigation of their day-to-day duties, or perhaps some assistance with time management. Rethinking how goals are set and identifying key performance metrics will be critical to managing remote employees in the new normal (Castrillon, 2021).

Furthermore, it becomes essential for organisations to implement a "Work from Home" policy as well as standards of working which they can leverage against in order to guide teams and managers when it comes to measuring productivity (HiveDesk, 2020):

### **1. Create a policy for measuring work-from-home and remote employee productivity**

At the most basic level, productivity is a measure of output per unit of time. You can add more business-oriented measures like customer satisfaction level, increase in sales, or increase in website visitors to your productivity measure.

So, the first step in measuring productivity is to create a policy that clearly lays out how you will do it and what it is that you will be looking for in order to label an employee's output as 'productive' for a particular period. It will help you put in place right tools and process.

The employees will know exactly how you will measure them. This transparency will build trust with employees and help them prioritize their work.

### **2. Define key performance indicators (KPIs) for each role in your remote team**

One problem with measuring productivity is that different jobs have different metrics. Of course, you will need to establish different KPIs for the relevant roles within your organisation.

### **3. Create milestones for each task you assign to an employee**

It's easy to track progress when a task has clear milestones.

Employees can mark the progress correctly and you can be sure about their progress. With clear milestones, employees can report progress every day (for instance) instead of waiting till the end.

Milestone reporting gives you visibility. You can see if an employee is making required progress to complete the task on time and determine where the anticipated time required to complete a task may have been under or over estimated.

Breaking down a long task into milestones helps you collect important data for planning future projects. You can track time taken to reach each milestone so you can create a better project plan in the future.

#### **4. Use a task or project management software to track work and create visibility**

As previously discussed in this paper, it makes good business sense to keep everyone on the same page by using a cloud-based project management software. Create a team-wise Trello board or Asana project that shows what everyone is working on.

Consider using different project tracking systems for teams doing different things like marketing and software development. JIRA is an excellent tool for tracking software development project while Trello is more suited for marketing projects.

Finding the software tools and solutions that works for your team is key.

#### **5. Implement a robust reporting structure**

Depending on the nature of your business as well as the general turnaround or expected completion time for tasks, timely reports help you stay on top of the work, identify potential problems, and take early action.

The reporting structure you implement depends on your and your organisations' preferences.

Many people like to get an end-of-day report that lists day's progress. Others are happier with a weekly update. Keep the report formats short and to the point.

A bullet list of tasks completed is good enough for the daily report. The weekly report could include tasks completed, plans for the next week, and any roadblocks/risks, for instance.

Monthly reports should focus more on progress towards goals.

You can get some of these reports directly from the project and time tracking tools.

## How to Be Productive at Home

With all the modern comforts of home beckoning for our attention, it would be understandable if employers saw a dip in productivity, yet the opposite is true. According to the Airtasker study, remote workers worked 1.4 more days every month, or 16.8 more days every year than people who worked in an office (Caramela, 2020).

However, researchers have also found that working from home can be more stressful than working at the office. Approximately 29% of remote working respondents said they had a hard time maintaining a healthy work-life balance (Caramela, 2020). Just 23% of office employees reported the same struggle.

In addition, 54% of remote employees and 49% of office employees said they felt "overly stressed during the workday," 45% of remote employees and 42% of office employees "experienced high levels of anxiety during the workday," and 37% of remote employees and 35% of office employees said they "procrastinated on a task until its deadline."

To help your team stay focused and efficient during this work-from-home phase while combating stress and maintaining work-life balance, here are some tips to help you out (Caramela, 2020):

### 1. Take breaks.

The most effective way for remote employees to stay productive, according to the studies, was to take breaks (37%). The research found that office employees took shorter breaks than remote employees, though longer breaks have been shown to increase productivity.

Encourage your team to get up every so often during the workday, especially when they are particularly drained or distracted, to grab a healthy snack, walk around their home, call a friend, meditate, or do whatever it is they need to in order to rest the mind and body.

Many people find success using the 'Pomodoro Technique', which follows this method (Ostlund, 2012):

1. Choose a task.
2. Work on it for 25 minutes.
3. Put a check mark on a sheet of paper after the 25 minutes are up.
4. Take a five-minute break. (This marks the completion of one "Pomodoro" sprint.)
5. After every four Pomodoro sprints, take a longer break.
6. Continue this throughout the day until your workday is over.

This technique can help your employees decompress and come back more focused.

## **2. Follow a schedule.**

The second most popular way employees stay productive at home is having set work hours (33%). Encourage employees to maintain the same schedule they did when they went into the office. Following a routine will help your employees feel more structured and efficient, and it will help keep their attention focused.

## **3. Keep a to-do list.**

Research has also revealed that 30% of remote employees reported that keeping a to-do list helped their productivity. Encourage employees to write down what they wish to accomplish each day, so they are not jumping from assignment to assignment. Now that you and your team are working remotely, communication is critical. Set daily or weekly meetings where you and your team discuss and prioritise projects, including deadlines, so you can stay on track.

## **4. Eliminate distractions.**

Researchers found that, along with spending more time doing work, remote employees lost 27 minutes per day on distractions, as opposed to the 37 minutes distracted office employees lost. Finding further suggest that just 8% of remote employees and 6% of office employees reported finding it hard to focus on their tasks.

Text messages, phone calls, social media – all are forms of distractions. At home especially, employees will experience many disturbances throughout the day. Steps that your employees can take to stay focused include silencing their phones, working in an office-like space rather than a bed or couch, and staying away from areas of their home that could otherwise tempt them to direct their attention elsewhere.

## **Encouraging a Balanced Work/Life Dynamic**

With the current and obvious socio-economic position that we find ourselves in, the WFH option has given many the opportunity to remain in the comfort of their homes while continuing to churn out their typical day-to-day output, and in most cases, much more.

The research that has stemmed from looking into individual's newly establish routines speaks highly to the fact that many people are in fact struggling with finding that work-life balance. In fact, it appears as though the basic idea of work-life balance, which was already a tough ask in the 'normal' working world, has now left many wondering such a thing even exists or has completely *gone out the window*.

Many organisation's workforce finds themselves working on their living rooms, kitchens, lounges, and in some cases even in what was once their sanctuary- the bedroom. What's more is that most are sitting in the same room for hours on end- usually by

themselves, following the same routine day after day... after day- certainly, it becomes fairly easy to lose track not only of time, but also of one's sense of self.

As such, employers need to ensure that they are stepping in and encouraging their staff to establish and maintain a work-life balance in order to maintain their sanity, sense of control, and mental health- particularly in such times where the happenings in the greater world around us is so out of our control.

Here are some tips for you and your employees to begin to establish that very necessary **Work-Life Balance** (InsideN26, 2020; Sanfilippo, 2020):

### **1. Create and maintain your specific workspace**

As much as you can, try to build your little private desk or office. May it be only laying your necessary items on your table kitchen during the day or switching up your furniture to have a designated working corner. Try to create a ritual spot where you get your work done. Once your workday is over, leave this spot or put back your items just as you would leave the office.

### **2. Learn to “switch off” your business**

As mentioned previously, once you are done with your workday, make sure to properly call it a day. Turn off your laptop completely, put work items back in a drawer or where they belong. If you have a work dedicated space, leave it completely. Turn off your work notifications (even uninstall the apps for the weekend if necessary).

### **3. Wear the role**

It's tempting to work in your PJ's all day. Getting dressed differently, still comfortably, can help you with mentally switching from work time to personal time. Anything that helps you feel like you are actually getting up and working or specifically not working is welcome.

### **4. Drop the shame and embarrassment of interruptions**

Don't worry about your family members or pets showing up in your calls as uninvited guests. It's one less thing to stress about, additionally it's fun for others to watch! Remember, whilst you are working from home, so are many, many others who understand the ever-changing dynamics and unpredictability of the remote workspace.

### **5. Block out your time and maintain your schedule**

With your environment and days looking the same, it is harder to keep a schedule and sequence your tasks. Try to set yourself time blockers on your calendar, during which

you dedicate time on these specific tasks, no matter what. By sequencing your attention and productivity in specific bursts, you will find moving forward easier.

And as mentioned, take regular breaks as well as work with a plan and a to-do-list - prioritisation is key.

## **6. Accept that there is no 'perfect' work-life balance.**

When you hear "work-life balance", you probably imagine having an extremely productive day at work and leaving early to spend the other half of the day with friends and family. While this may seem ideal, it is not always possible.

Don't strive for the perfect schedule; strive for a realistic one. Some days, you might focus more on work, while other days you might have more time and energy to pursue your hobbies or spend time with your loved ones. Balance is achieved over time, not necessarily each day.

## **7. Prioritise your health.**

Your overall physical, emotional, and mental health should be your main concern. If you struggle with anxiety or depression and think therapy would benefit you, fit those sessions into your schedule, even if you need to leave work early or ditch your evening spin class. If you are battling a chronic illness for instance, don't be afraid to call in sick on rough days. Overworking yourself prevents you from getting better, possibly causing you to take more days off in the future.

Prioritising your health makes for a better employee as they miss less work and tend to be happier and more productive.

Prioritising health doesn't have to consist of radical or extreme activities. It can be as simple as daily meditation or exercise.

Self-care is a MUST.

## **8. Don't be Afraid to Unplug.**

Cutting ties with the outside world from time to time allows us to recover from weekly stress and gives us space for other thoughts and ideas to emerge. Unplugging can mean something simple like reading a blog for fun, instead of checking work emails.

## **Conclusion**

Working from home has become a pivotal part of the way in which organisations are operating today. Many are finding that the WFH environment has been more beneficial to companies than ever expected.

However, that being said, research has found that while the remote employee may be more productive, in most instances, the work force is taking some strain when it comes to drawing a line between home life and work life. Furthermore, organisations have now found the necessity in adopting software and other tools which not only helps them measure remote employee's productivity but also assists their employees in managing their time and projects more effectively.

Beyond the essentials surrounding employees working from home, lies the crucial need for employees to establish that seemingly mythical 'work-life' balance as their 'taking one's work home' has become less of an option now that workspaces are mere metres away from their very bedrooms or where they sit down to have dinner with their families. Thus, really making the effort to establish and maintain that balance much needed- especially when it comes to the physical and mental well being of the individual.

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