

# MANAGING REMOTE STAFF

Capitalize on  
Work-from-Home Productivity



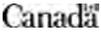
Lin Gensing-Pophal

Self-Counsel Press  
*(a division of)*  
International Self-Counsel Press Ltd.  
Canada USA

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Self-Counsel Press acknowledges the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund (CBF) for our publishing activities. 

Printed in Canada.

First edition: 2020

### **Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Title: Managing remote staff : capitalize on work-from-home productivity / Lin Gensing-Pophal.

Names: Gensing-Pophal, Lin, 1959- author.

Series: Self-Counsel business series.

Description: Series statement: Business series

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 2020035664X | Canadiana (ebook) 20200356690 | ISBN 9781770403314 (softcover) | ISBN 9781770405141 (EPUB) | ISBN 9781770405158 (Kindle)

Subjects: LCSH: Supervision of employees. | LCSH: Home-based businesses—Management. | LCSH: Labor productivity.

Classification: LCC HF5549.12 .G74 2020 | DDC 658.3/02—dc23

### **Self-Counsel Press**

*(a division of)*

International Self-Counsel Press Ltd.

North Vancouver, BC  
Canada

Bellingham, WA  
USA



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# INTRODUCTION

On March 13, 2020, President Trump declared a national emergency in the US as those infected with coronavirus around the world neared 100,000. On March 15, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommended gatherings of no more than 50 people in the United States, according to *The New York Times*.

Around this time, in quick succession, a number of heretofore inconceivable events occurred:

- Major League Baseball announced the delay of opening season on March 12; the PGA Tour announced its shutdown the same day.
- Walt Disney World closed on Sunday night, March 15.
- US state/territory stay-at-home orders start on March 15 with Puerto Rico being the first to shut down, followed by California on March 19; by April 3, at least 46 states and Washington, D.C., had ordered nonessential businesses to close.
- By March 17, nearly every state had shut down schools for the remainder of the 2019–2020 school season.

- From childcare centers to institutions of advanced education, students suddenly found themselves working remotely and many parents of K-12 students found themselves stepping into roles as teachers' assistants.
- South by Southwest (SXSW) had taken action even earlier, cancelling its extremely popular and highly attended annual cultural, arts, and music gathering, which was expected to attract more than 400,000 people on March 6.

Suddenly, the world as we knew it had changed dramatically. As businesses of all types and sizes scrambled to serve customers and clients in any way possible, many sent employees home to work.

Even the many stalwart businesses that had long declared that working from home just wasn't an option or couldn't work, found themselves scrambling to find ways to make it work in an environment where the only other alternative was not to operate at all.

It's not an ideal situation, of course, and the virus itself creates or adds to an environment that is not entirely reflective of the positive potential for boosted productivity to the stress and anxiety that is widespread. A Society for Human Management (SHRM) survey exploring the impact of the pandemic on mental health found that 41% of workers said they felt burnout during the pandemic. Nearly one in four, or 23%, felt down, depressed, or hopeless "often." In addition, the research found that certain workers were more at risk of mental health impacts than others — women, younger workers, and those living with a vulnerable person felt these impacts most strongly.

Despite being thrust into a new normal, many businesses and their displaced staff members quickly acclimated to the new normal of remote work. Necessity is, as they say, the mother of invention. It has been fascinating and instructive to watch as various types of organizations have adjusted or totally overhauled their business models to remain viable.

Ashley Sterling, director of operations at The Loop Marketing, in Chicago, says that the biggest adjustment for her has been "the challenge to create a consistent schedule with personal and work life." It's easy, she says, to fall into a "I'll just answer a few emails" rhythm, which can quickly and unexpectedly lead to a work week that spans 50 hours or more. Sterling says that, even after the pandemic, her company will still offer the ability to work remotely and

perhaps more than they did before the quarantine. Still, she says, “we all recognize the importance of meeting face-to-face to ensure proper communication.”

Two industries that were significantly impacted were education and healthcare. With both K-12 and higher education institutions suddenly closed and having to connect with students, instructors, and parents, the remote instruction options that some had already dabbled with suddenly became mainstream proving that, yes, students can be educated remotely. The situation was similar in healthcare. Telemedicine has been available for some time and many organizations had been offering telehealth services in some form — most notable in behavioral health where demand is high (and getting higher) and providers are in short supply.

The delivery of remote services, of course, requires remote workers. As a long-time advocate of remote work — otherwise known as telecommuting — I’ve watched with interest as many businesses and business owners who said it couldn’t be done have discovered that it could, and must, if they wish to remain viable.

Amid the uncertainty CNBC predicted a number of changes that could become the norm as the country recovers from the coronavirus pandemic. Among them:

- Working in an office could become a status symbol.
- Most meetings could be replaced by email and instant messaging (IM).
- It could be the end of business travel as we know it.
- Office buildings could become “elaborate conference centers.”
- Standard “9-to-5” office hours could become a thing of the past.
- Home-office stipends could become a common perk.

Already, many media outlets are predicting that remote work will continue even after the coronavirus abates. A Gartner CFO survey, for instance, indicates that 74% of those surveyed will shift some employees to remote work permanently. By May, 2020, some large tech firms, such as Twitter and Facebook, had already informed their employees that they could “work from home forever.”

In May a SmartBrief Workforce reader poll asked this question: “If your employer allowed you to request to work from home (full time or part time), would you?” An astonishing 85% said “yes.” When asked if they would be able to continue working from home once their companies reopen, they said:

- Yes, we can continue working remotely full time, if we choose (34.86%).
- Yes, but with limits (32.37%).
- No, the nature of my work requires me to be on site (14.52%).
- No, my employer feels people work better when they’re in an office (18.25%).

It’s a new normal with businesses, employers, managers, and employees finding that not only is remote work possible, in many, but not all cases, it’s preferable.

In the following chapters we’ll explore the history of remote work, previously and commonly referred to as telecommuting, and its pros, cons, possibilities, and potential pitfalls. I will offer advice and best practice examples on how to capitalize on the benefits and minimize the potential drawbacks of managing a remote workforce.



## Chapter 1

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF REMOTE WORK

Even before COVID-19, in the work environment of the twenty-first century, work is being defined differently than it has ever been defined in the past. The “typical” 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday-to-Friday work week is a thing of the past. Instead, as jobs have become less structured, work has become less structured in terms of how, when, and where it gets done.

In a global, 24/7 world, the notion that all employees of an organization can work the same rigid schedule is obviously far outdated. Punching a time clock is, in fact, an artifact of the industrial revolution and no longer pertinent for what has largely become a service economy. In addition, today’s workers value flexibility more than ever, requiring employers that wish to attract and retain the best and the brightest to come up with flexible solutions to meet their needs.

As long ago as the nineteenth century, people were telecommuting. While the term wasn’t coined until almost 100 years later, the first person on record who performed work that had previously been done at one business location at a remote location was a

Boston bank president who had a phone line strung from his office to his home in 1877!

## 1. From the Nineteenth Century to Today

Even as early as the 1950s, location was becoming less and less important to the concept of work. Telephone communications were widely established. And as the make-up of work changed to a more information-based economy following World War II, staff could work more independently, without need of constant supervision.

You've heard of the internet, haven't you? Well, in 1963, a programmer working on the Arpanet Project (the forerunner to today's internet) withdrew from the project to stay home with his wife, who was going through a difficult pregnancy. Another programmer suggested he install an additional phone line in his home so he could program from there. The practice of working from home still didn't have a name, but people were starting to experiment with it.

In 1973, Jack Nilles, a scientist working on NASA satellite communications projects in Los Angeles, coined the term for telecommuting. Now, Nilles is internationally known as the father of telecommuting. He originally used the term to denote "a geographically dispersed office where workers can work at home on a computer and transmit data and documents to a central office via telephone lines." In 1982, Nilles incorporated JALA International, Inc. ([www.jala.com](http://www.jala.com)). An international group of management consultants, JALA's mission is "to help organizations make effective use of information technology 'telecommunications and computers' and to better cope with the accelerating rate of change in the business environment."

By the time Nilles had come up with a word for the concept of working from locations other than the traditional office, companies were already beginning to experiment with the practice.

In 1978, Blue Cross/Blue Shield of South Carolina had started a cottage-keyer project recognizing that employees could easily perform a number of keyboarding activities at home. In the first year of the project they demonstrated a 26% increase in productivity. In 1980, Mountain Bell started a telecommuting project for its managers. That same year, the US Army launched a telecommuting pilot.

By the mid-1980s, telecommuting was becoming an increasingly popular option. It seemed to address a number of issues, including

gridlock, pollution, employee retention, savings on office space, and even increases in productivity.

In 1989, AT&T started a pilot telecommuting program in Los Angeles; the program was expanded to Phoenix in 1990. Employees tried working at home several days per month. AT&T's move in this direction was a voluntary response to Title I of the 1990 Clean Air Act.

In 1992, AT&T introduced a formal telework policy and started its Virtual Workplace training programs. By 1999, more than half of AT&T's managers teleworked at least one day a month; 25% of their managers teleworked one day or more per week and 10% teleworked 100% of the time.

Telecommuting was given a boost in 1990 when amendments to the Clean Air Act mandated employer trip-reduction programs. While telecommuting wasn't a requirement under the Act, it was a recommended way to meet trip-reduction goals and a number of organizations began experimenting with this option. The bill was changed in 1995, and reductions in car-commuter trips are no longer mandatory. However, regional or state rules are still in effect, and telecommuting remains one good way to get cars off the road.

There have been some major changes in telecommuting since its early beginnings. These changes have been driven both by demand and by technology; the internet, email, and cell phones now make it easier than ever to work from virtually any place, at any time.

In the 1990s, there were an estimated 3.7 million workers telecommuting in the United States. In 2000, that number had increased to 6 million. It is also estimated that, by the end of 2009, 14 million people were telecommuting. The rise in these numbers has been driven both by individual and environmental needs.

The entry of Generation Y into the workforce, a demographic that desires flexibility and independence more than those before them, has helped many businesses consider flexible work arrangements as a solution to those desires. Growing concern for the environment has also spurred an increase in telecommuting as a solution for reducing carbon emissions. The increase in technology options that make it easy, if not seamless, for employees to stay connected regardless of physical location has also had a positive impact.

Technology has had a dramatic influence on the workplace and on the ways in which tasks are accomplished. Email, voice mail, and

internet technology mean that employees can literally be in touch with their employers 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The 24/7 culture is changing the way that employees and employers interact; it is changing the very nature of work. Under the old system, employees were tied to the workplace. Tools did not exist to allow contact from remote locations. Today, technology is providing both employers and employees with freedom and flexibility that they would never have imagined even ten short years ago.

Technology is allowing employees to question the status quo and challenge the old ways of doing business. “Why do I need to come to the office to work on a report when I can do it at home on my computer?” “Why can’t I access voice mail and email from home?” “Why do I have to be physically located in a phone center to answer customer calls? Why can’t I be set up from home to do this?”

And because employers are faced with a shrinking labor market and a growing gap between job seekers’ skills and employer needs, more and more are responding to these questions with, “Why not?”

According to Global Workplace Analytics, in 2018, 5 million employees (3.6% of the US workforce) were working at home at least half-time. Working at home has grown 173% since 2005. While the numbers, at least prior to COVID-19 were still relatively low, their research reveals that 56% of employees have jobs that could be done, at least to some degree, remotely.

What does all this mean? It means that businesses must become more flexible and creative in both the recruitment and retention of employees. It means that the traditional brick-and-mortar workplace will soon give way — in fact, has given way, in many places — to a virtual workplace. It means that neither employees nor employers will be hampered by geographic constraints: An employee can live in Florida and work for a company in Georgia, Wisconsin, California, Ontario, Milan, Hong Kong, or literally any of thousands of locations around the globe.

It means that whether they are telecommuting, or simply working in another location as part of a global organization, branch office or “virtual company,” the ability to effectively manage off-site staff is no longer a luxury; it has become a necessity for companies that want to compete effectively in this new millennium.

Many already knew this long before 2020 sent shock waves around the globe as companies of all types and in all locations moved quickly to remain open and accessible during the COVID-19 pandemic. That pandemic will likely significantly increase the adoption and widespread acceptance of remote work in a variety of configurations.

Companies large and small, in rural and urban settings, are learning to manage off-site staff relationships effectively. For many, these relationships are simply part of “how we work.” For others, they are generated through individual requests. Regardless of the way the need arises, success depends on careful planning and well-established guidelines as well as appropriate selection of both the positions and the people who will work in off-site locations.

Decisions about these arrangements should be made for the right reasons. You should not institute a telecommuting program, for instance, simply because an employee has requested the option or because it seems to be a current trend. Like any other business decision you make, the decision to allow employees to work in nontraditional locations should be based on legitimate and demonstrable business benefits. We explore a number of these in Chapter 2.

## 2. The Coronavirus Impact on Remote Work

The coronavirus has had a dramatic, immediate, and in most cases unanticipated impact on the work-from-home experience. While the forced experiment has taught some companies and their staff members that remote work has more positive potential than they might have imagined, mandatory work-from-home situations may be negatively impacting productivity according to a study by Digital.com, an independent review website for small business online tools, products, and services, in partnership with YouGov, an authority on public opinion data. Its survey of 2,909 American employees working from home highlighted decreased productivity as a major challenge for employees during the coronavirus.

The key negative impacts identified were lack of prior work-from-home experience and anxiety about the disease. More than half — 54% — of employees said they were working remotely for the first time. Of the 1 in 3 employees who said they had difficulty maintaining efficiency, almost 30% indicated it was primarily due to COVID-19 concerns. Other distractions included having their children or spouse at home with them, and TV or media streaming.

Dealing with the sudden and unexpected need to work from home during a worldwide pandemic is not ideal and, not surprisingly, the experience has taken a toll.

According to research from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) the psychological costs of COVID-19 may be high — 41% of the workers surveyed indicated that they feel burned out; another 23% report feeling depressed. The survey explored the impact of the lockdown on the mental health of US workers. The impacts — negative emotions, concentration issues, and lack of motivation were higher among women, younger workers, and those living with a vulnerable person.

Concerns about the potential impact of the pandemic on their jobs represented a key concern. More than 20% reported that COVID-19 had “threatened the tangible parts of their jobs to a great extent or to a very great extent, including personal opportunities, job security, safe working conditions, and benefits and pay.”

But despite the unique pressures felt by employees and their managers during COVID-19, many still feel positive about the long-term potential for working from home as a viable option.

LinkedIn’s Workforce Confidence Index poll of 5,447 LinkedIn members from April 27 to May 3, took a look at workers’ perspectives on remote work as millions suddenly found themselves displaced to home settings during COVID-19. They asked the question, “Can your industry WFH [work from home] effectively?” By and large respondents answered “yes.” This was particularly true in certain industries such as software and IT (82%), finance (82%), and media and communications (76%). Even those in industries that rely heavily on face-to-face contact acknowledged that remote work could have some applications, and we’ve seen plenty of examples during the coronavirus pandemic — entertainment (44%), recreation and travel (37%), retail (29%).

In June, data released based on a survey commissioned by PGI and conducted by The Harris Poll confirmed that working from home is likely to continue to be a common option in the future. Results indicate that a majority of employed Americans working from home are more productive and are hopeful they will be able to continue to work from home in the future. Video conferencing, respondents said, allows them to collaborate just as well as when participating in face-to-face

meetings. Survey respondents included 61% of employed Americans working from home. Of these, 70% say they can get more work done now, primarily because they don't have as many in-person meetings, 63% said they can accomplish more during a video conference meeting than in an in-person meeting; and 41% said working from home has had a very or somewhat positive impact on work/life balance (however, there are mixed results here: 34% said it's had a very or somewhat negative impact). Also, 54% say they would not be comfortable attending large work-related conferences or events.

The coronavirus has provided a forced experiment into how well remote work can serve the needs of businesses of all kinds. For the most part, business owners, managers, and employees have come to believe that remote work can and should be a viable option, now and in the future.

Dawn Michell, VP of human resources at Appian, a low-code automation company based in northern Virginia says: "While I don't want to undermine the stress many of us are under with such limited space between work and personal life, it has caused us to be creative about how we address work and, in some areas, improved it." At Appian, she says, "we've learned how change can prompt creativity and improve areas of our work we didn't expect it to. It's easy for leaders to get stuck in a rut in terms of how they manage and same for employees in terms of how they work."

There will be lessons for employers to learn from the sudden experiment in working from home that the coronavirus prompted.

As leaders, says Andrew Meadows, senior vice president at Ubiquity Retirement + Savings in San Francisco, "we must listen to our employees in terms of what situations provide us with getting the best work from our employees. We don't have to be hovering over them."

Meadows says leaders need to be curious. They need to ask what engages employees; what is the level of engagement; what are the issues; what can be improved; and what can be handled through technology? Maybe, he says, some companies ultimately won't bring their employees back to work physically.

As employers return to whatever awaits them, he cautions employers from being disconnected from whatever the new normal

post-pandemic may be. Despite whatever the economy may bring, retention is still extremely important, he says, adding that companies will struggle if they don't listen to their employees.

"Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we were very much an in-office company," says Patricia Elias, chief legal and people officer with ServiceSource. But, she says, "we're proud of how quickly we mobilized our over 3,000 employees worldwide and got everyone set up at home within five days in mid-March, enabling us to keep our employees safe and continue uninterrupted client service." The company has also been pleasantly surprised by the boost in productivity and engagement scores they've seen since moving to a work-from-home model. The company has decided to stay with their 100% work-from-home model through at least the end of 2020, she says. "As we look to 2021, we will definitely be expanding our work-from-home model to allow our employees the flexibility that allows them to more seamlessly integrate their work and home lives."

Randstad US, a global staffing company, quickly deployed its 38,000-person global workforce to remote work within just two weeks when the virus hit, says CHRO Jim Link. They've also surveyed employees to see how the shift has been working and, based on the results and on hearing that some employees were ready to get back to the office while others preferred to continue working remotely, have decided to follow a blended and phased approach to reopening, feeling that flexibility is key. They've created three return-to-work models for employees to consider — reopening completely, requiring everyone back onsite, staying fully remote, or a blended approach that has some teams onsite while others work from home.

The ability to work remotely opens up opportunities for employers to staff from a broader pool of candidates, both those who prefer, or must, work from home and those who are located in other geographic settings. Consider, for instance, the challenges that IT companies have long faced in finding technical staff. Removing the local barriers that served to artificially restrict the candidate pool can lead to new opportunities with benefits for both employees and employers.

Even in tight economic times — particularly in tight economic times — business owners want to attract and retain qualified, productive staff members. While rising unemployment rates, fueled by the impacts of the virus, mean that the availability of workers is

greater than it was just a few months ago, the availability of highly skilled and highly motivated workers is always at a premium.

And, of course, as the economy improves and aging baby boomers continue to leave the workforce in droves, it will become harder to find talented and qualified employees. The impact on organizations, large and small, will be considerable. Think of your own workforce and the number of employees who will be eligible for retirement in the near future. Think of the key positions that must remain filled with capable and competent staff in order to ensure quality products and services for your customers.

Most employers will agree that the ability to retain employees, regardless of the economy, is always a critical need. To do this, many are looking for creative ways to meet employee needs. Flexibility is one critical area of demand. For many companies, flexibility means providing the opportunity for employees to work remotely.

### 3. Lessons from the Trenches

Mary Hjorth is executive vice president and CHRO with Kestra Financial, with headquarters in Austin, Texas, and offices in 30 cities. A major lesson that she believes companies have learned during the pandemic: “We can work from home and be productive.” At Kestra Financial, she says, “we were more than surprised at how well it worked.” Kestra had traditionally maintained a structure of working from the office because of collaboration and its culture for getting work done, she says. But, now, she says, “Working from home can work as well. Our employees are resilient during a crisis.”

Although the company operates from 30 locations, she says, “getting aligned was not as difficult as we assumed because our tech team was prepared. Because we’re a financial services company, we had to be prepared for any situation. We had a continuity plan and had tested the plan, and our virtual network and our phones.”

Now, Hjorth says, the company is crafting policies for long-term working from home situations and for post-COVID. There will be situations in which employees work remotely every day; some will work remotely two or three days a week; some perhaps one day a week. “We need to be thoughtful about space and maintaining space between employees when they are in the office. We also need to build what-if scenarios into our policies.”

For instance, she says, “If we find that 25% want to be in the office and 25% want to work from home, we no longer need our current office space, for example. How will we assign space? Will we use hoteling areas for people who need to come in the office periodically? Will we assign flex space?”

Another positive benefit from this experience: “We’ve learned that a WFH policy will allow us to open the talent pool. We can draw employees from anywhere,” she said.

“So far, we’ve gotten great feedback from our employees, which showed they do care about their jobs and their productivity.”

Hjorth also says it’s been gratifying to watch leadership in action. “It’s amazing to watch our President and CEO James Poer. It was amazing in how he conducted his role and the funds he made available for ensuring we could deploy our employees to work from home when the pandemic hit. He didn’t put up barriers.

“Although there were a lot of unknowns, he made wise decisions. Now, he creates a weekly video from his backyard to help maintain our culture.”

That’s another lesson of the pandemic, Hjorth says. “You learn a lot about your leadership. In a time of crisis, you learn quickly that there can be a new way of doing business. It’s gratifying to experience true leadership during a crisis.”

Kestra announced recently to employees that certain positions could work from home on a more permanent basis. They’re also preparing to move more teams into remote work situations.

“Our focus now is to training our managers on how to manage remotely. The concept of constant communications can’t be ignored,” Hjorth says. “We have regular check-ins, but they aren’t just about productivity. They need to cover wellness, safety, how to manage home life while working.”

A pulse survey shows that employees are happy with the way the company has handled the transition to remote teams. Still, opinions are split into two camps: those who love it and those who prefer to work in the office. A full survey will be conducted as usual later in the year of the firm’s 550 employees.

Hjorth's advice to other employers considering a long-term move to WFH:

- Take a survey to ensure you understand your employees' needs.
- Understand what your leaders expect from remote employees.
- Make sure it's not an HR-driven policy.
- Assess the types of employees who are going to be most successful working from home. It's likely that nearly every group could work from home. For example, perhaps your mail room and cashier groups need to work from the office. Do others?
- Assess any legal ramifications such as data security, employee privacy and productivity.
- Add policies to your employee handbook. Consider how to approach whether employees will need to sign a document acknowledging WFH policies.

"We have witnessed change for our employees," she said. "They have proven to us that we were wrong to assume they needed to be in the office. It's a new world."