

Skills for the Workplace

Module Assignment Submission

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Module No:	BMSK4008
Module Title:	Academic and Research Skills

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Managing Remotely: Is it the Way Forward?

Part 1

1.1 Introduction

This report will investigate how effective the management of remote workers is, to ascertain the viability and sustainability to answer the question. Is managing remotely the way forward? Working from home is nothing new, however, due to recent events caused by the Coronavirus pandemic GOV.UK. (2020) the demand to work from home has accelerated exponentially. The following report will examine the opportunities and obstacles that are synonymous with remote working.

1.2 Research and Findings

There are certain occupations where remote working is not possible, usually occupations that demand higher qualifications and experience can carry out most work from home. Whereas skilled trades and manual workers cannot. Cameron (2020). (Appendix 1, Fig. 1)

An article by Neely (2020) discussing remote working suggests that due to the Coronavirus pandemic many organizations have been inherently impacted, thus changing the way they conduct future business. Irwin (2021) explains that with so many businesses and staff operating remotely it has been reported that between the months of February 2021 and March 2021 there was an increase of phishing emails by more than 600%. It appears that scammers are exploiting the vulnerability of the remote business. The article further explains how to control the risk and the responsibilities of the business and its employees. Where a remote employee is having to use their own device for work purposes this should be replaced with a corporate equivalent, this will ensure the device is installed with up-to-date software and should allow the companies IT department remote access to monitor potential threats and extirpate dangerous viruses.

Airtasker Blog (2020) wanted to find out if remote workers are more productive than office-based staff, they conducted a survey on 1,004 employees with approximately half of those working remotely. The findings indicate that although remote workers are generally more productive, have more leisure time and reduced fuel costs, that 29% experienced a poor work-life balance whereas when compared with their office-based colleagues only 23% felt the same. Furthermore, Owen (2020) states “working from home is not a temporary shift: it is a paradigm shift” and although working from home can be difficult for employees, with the correct support and management in place it is possible. However, although there may be challenges associated with home working, this is a benefit to managers as they are having to re-assess their management approach and skills, this in turn benefits the whole team.

Conversely, an article written by Boscia, S. (2021) presenting the viewpoint of Rishi Sunak, says, remote working will not continue to the same extent once the population has been vaccinated. Cities will return to normal and as humans we seek out other humans for interaction. People will want to return to the office for interaction with colleagues and will want to return to the social aspects that come with this, such as a restaurant after work. In addition, the return to offices is needed to support the economy.

However, where remote working continues consideration should also be given to employee's mental well-being, Garner (2020) details the three main reasons why remote workers may experience a decline in mental health. Firstly, Isolation, being away from the workplace and colleagues can leave employees feeling isolated, cut off or forgotten. When working remotely employees may experience anxiety or depression as side effects. Secondly, adjusting from the office to home can be overwhelming, it can take a while to become accustomed to home working many employees feel the need to work more hours to compensate. Finally, meetings in an office setting are naturally scheduled to allow time between each one. Now that many meetings are being conducted remotely it is possible to overload and schedule meetings back-to-back.

In addition, a report by Holzwarth (2021) carefully considers all aspects of home working and concludes positive outcomes are flexibility, more leisure time, and more productivity. Potential negatives include, a sedentary lifestyle, isolation, lack of team knowledge. The report suggests an alternative outcome; is there another way to achieve the best of both worlds? Hybrid working allows employees to experience the benefits of home working such as more flexibility, money and time saved by omitting the daily commute but also mitigates the isolation many feel which could negatively impact upon mental health. By dividing their time between home and the office.

Furthermore, evidence shows that there is a direct correlation between self-isolation and an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, loneliness and poor mental health. Although more research is needed to determine the implications for morbidity and mortality. It is clear that preventative measures need to be addressed to mitigate these factors. This research suggests remote working can contribute to burn out leading to poor mental health Leigh-Hunt et al. (2017).

Additionally, an article by Ratcliffe, R. (2013) details how management is about managing processes, managing the day to day running of the department or company to ensure it is operating effectively and that the organisation remains financially viable. However, leadership is about people and how you interact with them. A leader has passion, when a leader shares a vision people buy in to the idea and want to follow them. A leader is able to effectively communicate ideas which motivate and inspires the people around them. This is key information to consider when managing remotely.

A recent survey conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2021) asked 1,200 employees, if after the pandemic their manager allowed home working, how many days per week would they prefer? The results indicate that the majority of employees would like to work from home for some or all the working week, only 8% of the surveyed group did not want to work from home at all. (Appendix 1, Fig. 1).

With such a large proportion of employees wanting to continue working from home after the pandemic GOV.UK. (2020), consideration must be given to the continuation of a remote team.

1.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, remote working appears to be here to stay Marsh, S. (2021). However, it is not for everyone, to ensure the success of remote working an employee will need to be self-motivated and enjoy their own company BBC (2020). Furthermore, an article by Bouquet, C. (2020) reports on the outcome of a study into employees' productivity whilst working from home, the study found that 48% of staff would work harder at home than compared to office-based employees at 35%. However, managers will need to consider which of their employees are likely to exhibit these traits and which employees lack motivation therefore requiring more supervision.

According to an article written by Thomas, D. (2021) there may be another solution, hybrid working. This would allow staff to spend some of the working week in the office and the rest at home. Many large well-known companies have already considered this approach and have used the pandemic to trial remote working, they have concluded that flexible working will be a part of their future. It is suggested within this article that if everyone worked from home footfall in the cities would be permanently reduced likely causing the collapse of some businesses.

Additionally, Sneader, K. and Sternfels, B. (2020) writes that to ensure the survival of business, many companies will have to reinvent the way they operate. Organizations will need to adapt to the changing climate and perhaps re-focus their goals to retain their competitive advantage. The article details how well-established companies have reacted to the fall in business due to the imposed restrictions. Some have adapted well by using their corporate experience to effectively start again, but with their focus aimed at online revenue, thus negating the need for a physical building as their customers can access them just as easily online.

Finally, organizations have recognised the need for increased internet security required for remote workers, and around 89% have made cyber security the main priority going forward. However, 96% of businesses with remote staff have already made changes to their cybersecurity policies and have laid out a detailed plan of what is required to ensure the correct protection and security are available outside of the office. Ikeda, S (2020)

Part 2

Personal Reflection on Managing Remotely

2.1 Description

In this section I will be considering my personal experience of remote management from a manager's perspective and that of an employee. I have also conducted my own research to find out if workers are happy to work from home and if when they can return to the office, do they want to. I created a questionnaire using Google Docs (2021) to ascertain the current thoughts and feelings of my peers. I will use Gibbs (1988) reflective model (Appendix 2, Fig. 1) to assist in my reflective process.

During my professional career I have managed a remote team and have experienced first-hand the challenges that this presents. I faced a challenge recently where the team communication had broken down, morale was low and the work of the team was suffering.

At present I am working from home and I am being remotely managed, for me this is uneventful and a preferred way of working.

2.2 Feelings

As the office manager I was responsible for a young team, to motivate them and ensure that the required works were carried out to specification, time and within budget. Initially I found this easy. However, the introduction of a new employee effected the team dynamic and presented more challenges. The team began to breakdown and communication became difficult and strained. This worried me, as the team were not in the office there was no way to monitor the situation and I became reliant on the team's feedback. I later learned that not all of the team were being honest in their retelling of events which confused me at first as I could not see that anything was to be gained in doing this. I then felt angry that my trust had been abused.

As a managed employee the only challenges I face are that of my own. I am content working in this manner as I am able to motivate myself and should I need I need guidance I am mature enough to ask for help. It can feel isolating at times and I would like to see my colleagues more to foster better relationships. My manager is available by email and phone and keeps in regular contact with me, ensuring that we have a meeting at least once a week to discuss priorities.

I found the questionnaire useful to gain an insight into how people currently work and how they would like to continue working. The creation of the questionnaire was enjoyable and really made me think about what questions to ask to get a clear overview of responses. Once I had gathered all of the responses, I really like the way that Google Docs (2021) presents the data into several pie charts and bar charts allowing a clear overview of the results.

2.3 Evaluation

Managing a remote team can feel frustrating especially if communication breaks down. When calling or messaging the team you must be mindful that the smallest inflection in the tone of voice can be taken the wrong way. Also, it is difficult to convey the correct emotion in a message and I have found that generally the message is read and interpreted in a way that reflects your current emotions. After my experience detailed above, I think that it is really important to be aware of the team dynamic and to ensure communication is consistent, this would hopefully enable you to spot any tensions early.

When managing remotely, regardless of the team size, it is important to remember to tailor the communication approach to the method, Thomas International (2020). For instance, if you are wanting a quick update from a colleague you may send an instant message or an informal email requesting the information. However, if the situation is sensitive, perhaps a poor review following an appraisal. It may be better received as a virtual meeting. When we communicate at a distance, we can miss out on non-verbal cues which enable natural interaction. This has the potential to inhibit effective communication to the team.

When working remotely it is difficult to form natural relationships with people, it is possible, but it will require more effort. There are several ways in which we build relationships with colleagues and not all of these are auditory or visual. There are important sub-conscious interactions taking place every time we engage with another. This could explain why some remote workers find it harder than others to communicate effectively when working in isolation.

There are many benefits to allowing employees to work remotely, for instance a business could save money on office overheads. Also, employees are considered to be more productive, in the main. Silvermann (2020). Due to technology, it is still possible to connect with your team wherever they are located.

I have also conducted my own research to find out if workers are happy to work from home or if when they can return to the office, do they want to. I created a questionnaire using Google Docs (2021) to ascertain the current thoughts and feelings of my peers.

2.4 Analysis

I am quite happy to be managed remotely as I am able to ask for direction when needed, I am self-motivated and hard working. However, there is a fine line as to the amount of contact needed. Too much and it can feel like you are being micromanaged, too little and you can feel despondent. Considering the obstacles that companies and managers have to consider when managing a remote team, I feel that the general output of work is better, and employees are more productive. Working remotely is preferable for many employees, managers and companies as it can cut costs, reduce the need for large uneconomical buildings and fuel. Employees will also save time wasted travelling to and from meetings.

The main consideration is mental health, it is wonderful that there is more awareness of this now but it still not enough, the pandemic GOV.UK. (2020), has shown how much we as humans need interaction with others to remain mentally and physically healthy. More work is needed to support employees in maintaining a healthy work/life balance, perhaps educating them to spot early warning signs and

encouraging them to ask for help. In addition, based on my experience of remote management, it would be beneficial to managers to receive help and training specifically around this way of management as it is more challenging without being physically present.

The questionnaire has produced some interesting results, out of the 30 people who answered the questionnaire 70% currently work from home some or all of the time. (Appendix 2, Fig. 2). A large proportion 57.1% of workers surveyed are new to remote working and have only been doing so since the start of the pandemic. GOV.UK. (2020) The remaining workers were already working at home and have done so for 1 year or more. (Appendix 2, Fig. 3) I also wanted to find out if in their opinion working from home is harder or easier than being in an office. 60% thought that remote working is harder than office working. (Appendix 2, Fig. 4) Even though more than half of the surveyed workers felt that working from home was harder than working in an office. 100% would want to continue working from home at least some of the time, with 40% preferring 2 days a week at home. (Appendix 2, Fig. 5)

2.5 Conclusion

Based on my personal experience from both aspects, I feel that to successfully work remotely there needs to be trust, patience and understanding. Just because something worked well in an office environment it does not necessarily translate into working well in a virtual environment. Expectations need to be managed, employees and managers need to be adaptable and willing to change to meet the needs of the employees, the organisation and stakeholders. Additional training and support should be considered for management and employees to re-learn how to work as a team at a distance.

A hybrid working environment appears to be the preferred method of work, this indicates that although there are many benefits to working from home, there are some really important basic human needs that can only be met by physical and social interaction.

It is important to recognise that employees have come to this conclusion, perhaps subconsciously. If this survey had been completed before the pandemic GOV.UK. (2020), forced home working, the results would have been very different. Partly due to the fact that not very many people had experience of home working and are likely to have assumed that it would be easier. However, now that we have mainly endured this experience as a collective, we have had the chance to experience the flexibility and self-management that home working requires. When this is compared to the scheduled discipline of office working, we have come to the conclusion that we need a balance of both to be of benefit and to function healthily.

To conclude, as human beings we subconsciously align with our colleagues in the workplace. This is evident in the way that we communicate face to face, avoiding interrupting another whilst they speak and a team working in synchronicity. This reiterates that basic human needs must be met in order to be mentally and physically healthy and functional. There may be an explanation to this unconscious realisation that we need to be around other humans, this can be evidenced in Maslow's Hierarchy of needs (Appendix 2, Fig. 6) Furthermore, many employees will often cite 'company culture' and 'lack of fulfilment' as reasons for leaving a job. Vivek Dodd (2020).

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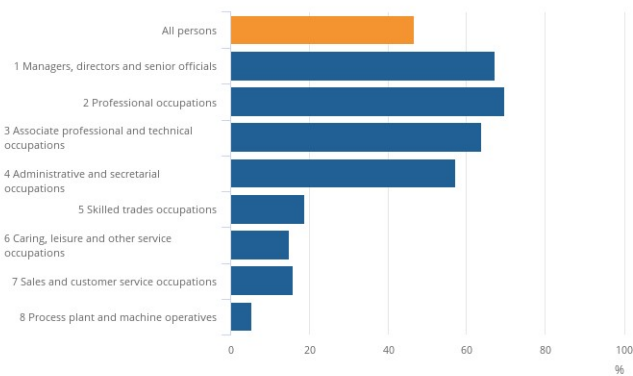
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Appendix 1

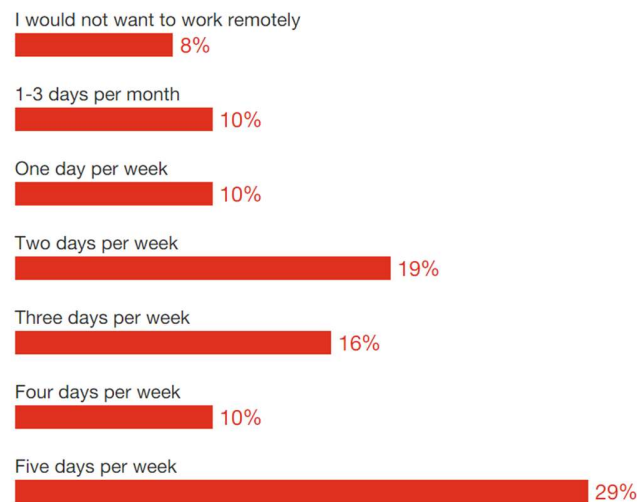
Figure 6: Occupations requiring higher qualifications and experience were more likely to do some work at home

Homeworking rates, by occupation, of those in employment (aged 16 years and over), UK, April 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics - Labour Market Survey

Fig. 1 Cameron (2020)



Q: How often would you want to work remotely after COVID-19 is no longer a concern (if your employer allowed you to work remotely as you want to)?
Totals do not add up to 100% due to rounding.
Source: PwC US Remote Work Survey
January 12, 2021. Base: 1,200 US office workers

Fig. 2 PricewaterhouseCoopers (2021)

Appendix 2



Fig. 1 Gibbs (1998)

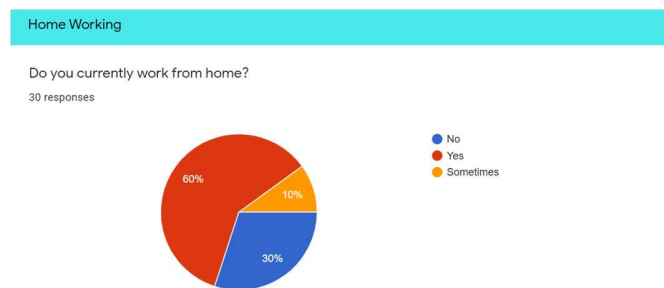


Fig. 2

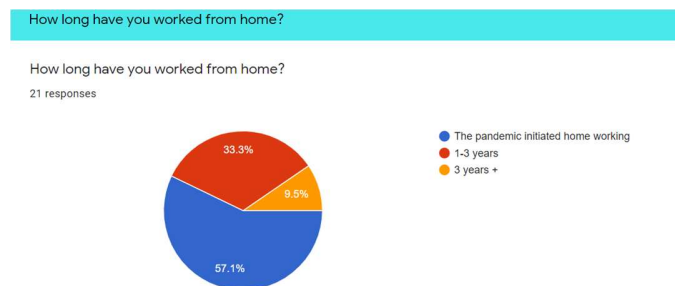


Fig. 3

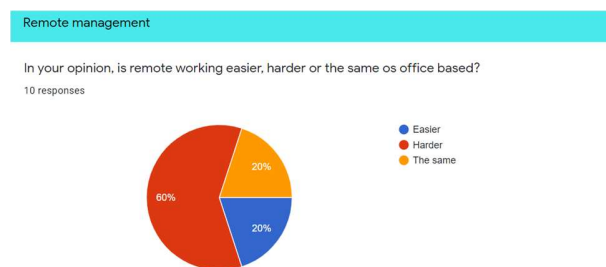


Fig. 4

Home working preference

If your employer offered remote working after the pandemic, how many days per week would you prefer?

30 responses

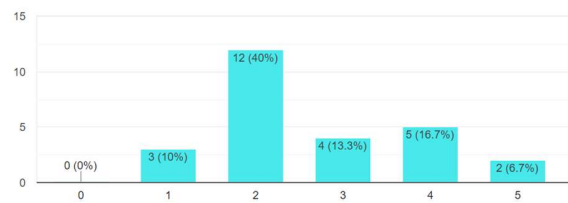


Fig. 5



Fig. 6 Vivek Dodd (2020)