



Could remote working become the new normal?

Back in 2015, a survey of business owners by Virgin Media Business predicted that 60 per cent of office-based employees would regularly work from home by 2022. This year, global disruption saw us prematurely exceed this figure. The majority of office workers began working from home to ensure business continuity. Could our current experiences of remote working mean that we continue to exceed this prediction?

Here Alex Darby, head of people at [EU Automation](#), explores how businesses can embrace a new era of working.

Businesses, particularly in industrial sectors, often focus on how to make production as efficient as possible. In 2020, managers around the world had to quickly transition to working from home to maintain productivity during global disruption. Some businesses tried remote working for the first time and others extended their existing flexible working policies. So, what can we learn from this disruption and how can we apply it to our future working environment to make people as efficient as possible?

Commuting to offices for a nine-to-five job doesn't work for everyone because it can be expensive, stressful and time consuming. Employees now demand more from their employers to increase flexibility — believing that less stress and wasted time will improve their wellbeing and their output. Workers can choose their hours based on their personal productivity, swap long meetings for efficient video conferences and better balance work and personal responsibilities.

Implementation

Communication is key in business, so when the recent pandemic resulted in more people working from home, businesses had to find a way to stay connected. Video conferencing platforms seemed most popular — Zoom, for example, saw daily traffic increase by 535 per cent and reported 200 million meeting participants daily in March 2020. Similarly, daily active users of Microsoft's Teams communication app grew from 20 million active users in November 2019, to 44 million in March 2020.

Remote working in the long term is easier said than done — it takes more than choosing a good video conferencing platform. Businesses must consider how their team can effectively and securely access content from multiple environments. Every business will have a different set up, for example employees might use corporate laptops or personal devices. Employers should consider the best environment for their team. For example, should they host a server that employees access using a VPN, store data using a cloud-based environment and access content on shared platforms such as Google Drive or Microsoft Teams?

Will offices become obsolete?

As more businesses embrace remote working and less people are in the office at any one time, employers may reduce available workstations and office space. However, businesses should not remove private workspaces all together. Remote working can improve productivity, but employers should also be aware of the importance of a group workspace.

Embracing company culture and developing relationships can be difficult to do digitally. Businesses should consider how they can adapt the workspace to maintain these important relationships and encourage communication, collaboration and engagement. Larger meeting spaces, for example, can provide space for company meetings, training sessions and events where the whole team can gather.

Flexible spaces can take several forms, such as an activity-based space so employees choose where they work based on the task, hot desking spaces or co-working spaces that businesses share.

“People are starting to realize that we need to be provided with different types of infrastructure, because we don’t do the same thing during the whole day,” explained Christhina Candido, PhD in Civil Engineering at the University of Sydney. “There are parts of our day that we need to go to a space to concentrate, there are parts of the day where you actually are happy to hang out with colleagues. And there are times that you actually

need to have a moment to yourself.” Offices should find a happy medium of these employee requirements.

Could it work for the factory?

Some tasks, particularly in manufacturing, require workers to complete physical tasks using machinery that cannot leave the facility. The need for human workers also means that the industry is less prepared than others to embrace flexible working.

Workplace performance specialist Leesman published a survey of more than 700,000 employees worldwide about their experience working from home. Of the 52,240 surveyed from the manufacturing and engineering sectors, 53 per cent had no experience in working from home. In comparison, 52 per cent of people in other businesses had regularly worked from home or at least had some remote working experience. So, can the manufacturing industry embrace this new way of working?

Flexible technology

While a factory worker cannot complete all their tasks over a video conference service, facilities managers can invest in technology to increase flexibility. Virtual reality (VR), for example, allows teams across different areas of the business, or even different geographies, to collaborate. Manufacturers could use VR to host meetings, train new employees using a virtual machine and tools or allow multiple teams to collaborate on a project from different locations.

Wearable devices can also improve collaboration between factory workers and management staff who could work from home. For example, employers can access data from devices worn by factory staff to visualise operations from their homes and ensure that staff are productive and safe. Factory employees can also use wearables and augmented reality (AR) to immediately access real time data or information that can help them complete tasks, such as machine maintenance, accurately and quickly.

The future workplace won't be the same for everyone — some roles still require people in factories or other facilities. However, we believe that all businesses can learn from the few months that the entire world was operating from home. Improving flexibility could be the answer to improving productivity.

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