Experts warn coronavirus remote working may impact employee wellbeing

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With a high number of UK employers now asking people to work from home, British businesses need to get prepared or brace themselves for a potentially significant impact on employee wellbeing.

Remote working isn't always as Instagram-worthy as it may seem. A global survey last year found that many remote workers struggle with unplugging from their work (22%), loneliness (19%) and communicating (17%)*. Another study found that 41% of remote workers reported high stress levels, compared to just 25% of office workers.**

When the remote reality sets in

Business culture and remote working expert, Jane Sparrow, says "a little bit like when it snows, the first day or two of homeworking can feel quite fun - it's different, you don't have to get up as early, there's no morning commute - but then the reality sets in and it can become a real challenge for people.

"If you're used to seeing your colleagues or customers every day, feelings of isolation can creep in remarkably quickly. This new remote working environment can also affect focus, a sense of team and creativity. It's not something that is often talked about but if we are to help our teams stay healthy, happy and ultimately productive, we have to recognise and manage the high stress environment that remote working can create for many people."

Learning lessons from Asia

Jane is founder and director at The Culture Builders who have been supporting China and Hong Kong based, global luxury fashion, beauty and lifestyle retailer, Lane Crawford, through the eye of the Coronavirus storm.

Andrew Keith, the company's president, says "it's hard to articulate the array of unprecedented challenges this situation has presented but at the heart of our response has been supporting people and keeping them connected - to each other and the organisation.

"We've been developing people managers on how to support their remote teams, providing daily top tips and inspiration to keep people motivated and working intensively with the top team on role modelling essential behaviours for effective virtual working. I started a VLOG a number of months ago to have an emotional and direct connection with every one of my people, during such a difficult time, which has had a huge positive impact."

The challenge for business

With millions of UK employees already working from home and millions more expected to follow, the challenge is on for businesses to keep their people positive, connected and productive.

Jane Sparrow says, "There are so many benefits of remote working, for both people and business spanning wellbeing, productivity and the environment. A possible upside of this whole situation is that it may prove the case for more flexible working within companies who have been slow to adopt it.

"However, many leaders, teams and companies come at remote working assuming that people will just do it well or adapt easily to it, if it's new for them. The other thing we see a lot is businesses putting in a new or enhanced virtual working tool - and considering the job done.

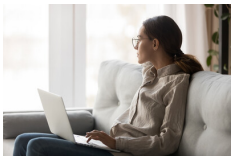
"We need to remember that we're all human - and so dropping people into a totally different way of working with just a new video communication platform - it doesn't work. We have to think about how we keep people feeling connected, that they're still part of a team and that there's still a strong support network in place."

Jane Sparrow's top ten tips for effective remote working

1. Don't focus on tools alone

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With video communication, webcasting, messaging platforms and more, the tech is there to make this work. But attitudes and behaviours are just as vital for a productive remote team.

2. Create a third place

There's the office, there's home and then there's the virtual third place. Agree as a team how you'll behave there for virtual collaboration success e.g. it's acceptable to send a quick message to say "I'll call you back" if you're deep in focus.

3. Ensure social continuity

When we work remotely, our exchanges become more formal and task focused. Pick up the phone, or ping a message, just to see how someone else's day is going. Virtual team check ins at the start and end of each day replicate the usual social greetings and create connection.

4. Adapt working structures

What works in the office may not remotely. Instead of lengthy meetings, have short virtual huddles with a strong chair so people don't get lost because they're not physically visible. Apply this thinking to team resourcing, scheduling and action planning.

5. How are we feeling?

Keeping in tune with how teams are feeling is even more critical when they're remote - have five minutes on the start of every virtual meeting to say hello properly and see how people are.

6. Help people to manage distraction

Distractions are the biggest reason why many people say homeworking wouldn't work for them. Get your leaders to talk openly with people about how they're managing theirs - specific break times and rewards throughout the day are a good start!

7. Say thank you more

We have a human need to feel valued and when we work remotely the opportunities for this diminish. Make sure your business is seeking out and actively sharing success and your managers are dialling up the appreciation.

8. Energising - your way

What gives us energy is different for everyone but your people need to work it out fast for success. A tried and tested formula is breaks + movement + fresh air (every so often). Plus avoiding the lure of the biscuit cupboard with healthy snacks instead.

9. Walk the virtual walk

There's a critical role for leaders and managers to connect, support, coach and role model. Task your managers with choosing two different people to call each day for a 10 minute check in.

10. Be realistic and honest

If schools and nurseries close, the impact on how we are able to work will be even greater. Businesses will need to respond quickly and empathetically - leaders being open and honest about their own working patterns (and limitations) can really set the tone.

For more thinking and top tips on effective remote working subscribe to The Culture Builders podcast.

Notes to editors

* 2019, Global Survey, Buffer - https://buffer.com/state-of-remote-work-2019

** 2017 United Nations report -

Photo caption - “Remote workers can quickly feel isolated, distracted and lonely” says business culture and remote working expert, Jane Sparrow.

Photo credit - remote working stress by Anton Korobkov, Shutterstock

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About Jane Sparrow

Jane is an organisational culture expert, published author, expert facilitator, performance coach, impactful speaker and global commentator. She has worked with businesses across the world, including Centrica, UKTV, Sony, Lane Crawford, Dyson, HSBC, Rugby Premiership and Sky, to create and sustain high performance cultures.

About The Culture Builders

The Culture Builders is a UK-based consultancy that works globally and specialises in building high performance teams and workplaces. Their client list includes global corporates, UK NGO & Government organisations, NHS trusts, charities and SMEs including Sony, NTT Security, Dyson, The Government Office, BBC and Arqiva. The Culture Builders is a carbon-neutral company.

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