Remote working
TOOLKIT

Strategies for managing remote teams
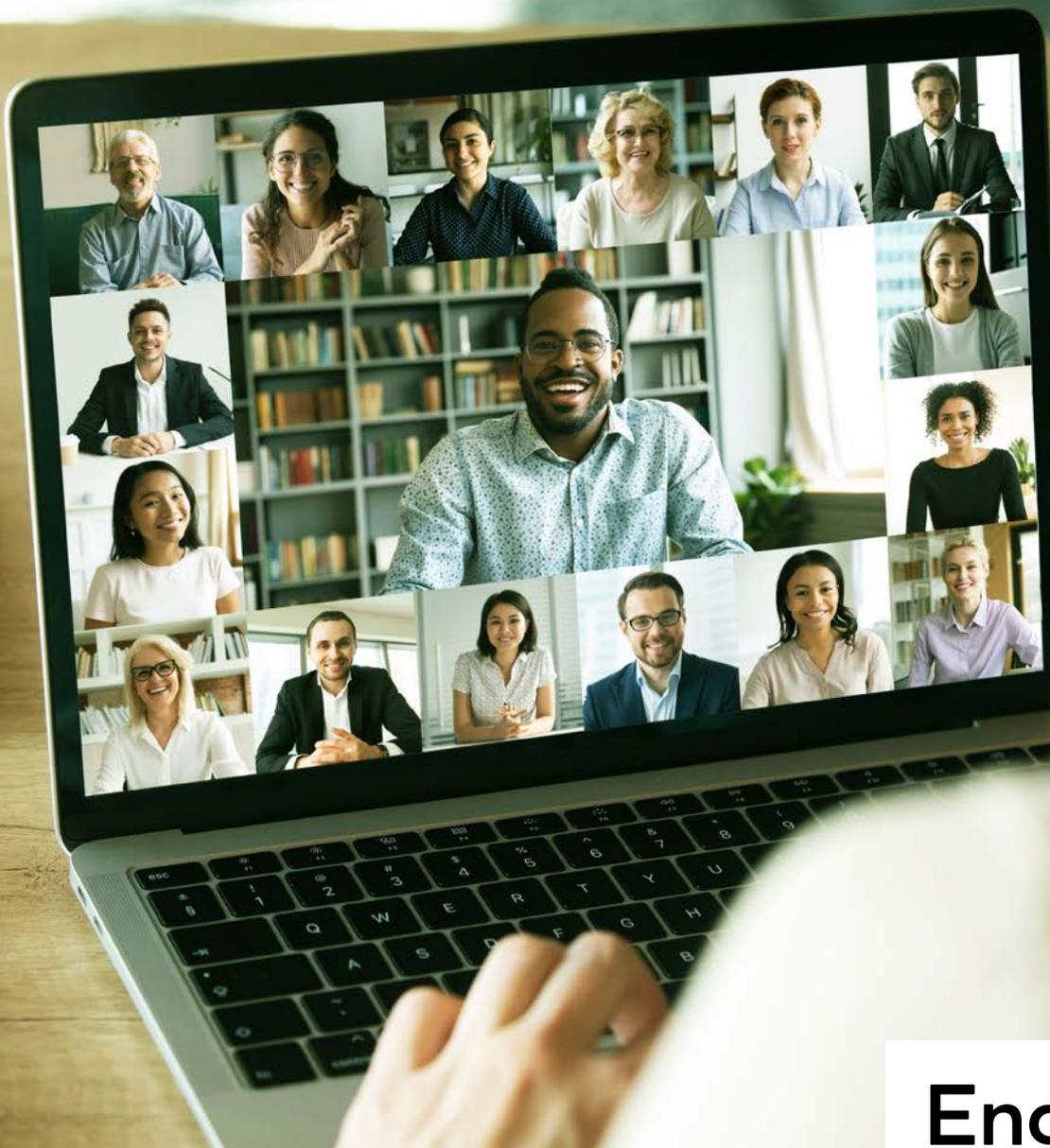
Engage Me
WORK WITH PURPOSE

Contents

Managing your remote teams

COVID-19 is expected to fundamentally change the way many organisations operate for the foreseeable future. Remote working is now our new reality.

Whilst many people around the world already work remotely, at least part of the time, working remotely is still a relatively new concept across the Middle East region.

Although it is always preferable to establish clear remote-work policies and training in advance, in times of crisis or other rapidly changing circumstances, this level of preparation may not be feasible. Fortunately, there are specific, research-based steps that managers can take that will make a big impact.

This toolkit offers guidance on how to work productively at home, manage virtual meetings, and lead teams through this time of crisis.
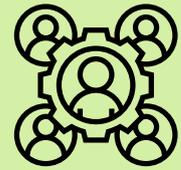
> *There's ample research showing that virtual teams can be completely equal to co-located ones in terms of trust and collaboration. It just requires discipline.*

Prof. Tsedal Neeley, Harvard Business School

Employer Perspective

It's important that leaders and managers understand the factors that can make remote working especially demanding. Otherwise, high-performing employees may experience declines in job performance and engagement. The Harvard Business Review has outlined the following factors for consideration.

LACK OF FACE-TO-FACE SUPERVISION

Both managers and their employees often express concerns about the lack of face-to-face interaction. Supervisors worry that employees will not work as hard or as efficiently (though research indicates otherwise, at least for some types of jobs). Many employees, on the other hand, struggle with reduced access to managerial support and communication.

LACK OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Newly remote workers are often surprised by the added time and effort needed to locate information from co-workers. Even getting answers to what seem like simple questions can feel like a large obstacle to a worker based at home.

SOCIAL ISOLATION

Loneliness is one of the most common complaints about remote work, with employees missing the informal social interaction of an office setting. Over a longer period of time, isolation can cause employees to feel less "belonging" to their organisation and can even result in increased intention to leave the company.

DISTRACTIONS AT HOME

Even in normal circumstances, family and home demands can impinge on remote work. Managers should expect these distractions to be greater during this unplanned work-from-home-transition.

Source: Harvard Business Review: Barbara Z. Larson, Susan R. Vroman, and Erin E. Makarius, March 18, 2020

Supporting remote employees

As much as remote work can be fraught with challenges, there are also relatively quick and inexpensive things that managers can do to ease the transition. Actions recommended by the Harvard Business Review include:

Establishing daily check-ins

Many successful remote managers establish a daily call with their remote employees. This could take the form of a series of one-on-one calls, if your employees work more independently from each other, or a team call, if their work is highly collaborative. The important feature is that the calls are regular and predictable, and that they are a forum in which employees know that they can consult with you, and that their concerns and questions will be heard.

Provide several different communication technology options

Email alone is insufficient. Remote workers benefit from "richer" technology, such as video conferencing, that gives participants many of the visual cues that they would have if they were face-to-face. There are other circumstances when quick collaboration is more important than visual detail. For these situations, provide mobile-enabled individual messaging functionality (e.g. Microsoft Teams, Workplace by Facebook, Yammer etc.).

Establish 'rules of engagement'

Remote work becomes more efficient and satisfying when managers set expectations for the frequency, means, and ideal timing of communication for their teams. Also let your employees know the best way and time to reach you during the workday.
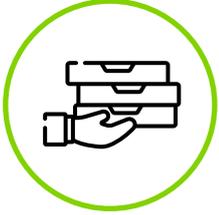
Provide opportunities for remote social interaction

One of the most essential steps a manager can take is to structure ways for employees to interact socially (that is, have informal conversations about non-work topics) while working remotely. The easiest way to establish some basic social interaction is to leave some time at the beginning of team calls just for non-work items (e.g. How was your weekend?).

Other fun ideas include:

- Virtual pizza parties (in which pizza is delivered to all team members at the time of the video conference)
- Virtual office parties (in which party 'care packages' can be sent in advance to be opened and enjoyed simultaneously).

Offer encouragement and emotional support

Especially in the context of an abrupt shift to remote work, it is important for managers to acknowledge stress, listen to employee's anxieties and concerns, and empathise with their struggles. Effective leaders take a two-pronged approach, both acknowledging the stress and anxiety that employees may be feeling in difficult circumstances, but also providing affirmation of their confidence in their teams, using phrases such as "we've got this," or "this is tough, but I know we can handle it," or "let's look for ways to use our strengths during this time." With this support, employees are more likely to take up the challenge with a sense of purpose and focus.

Source: Harvard Business Review: Barbara Z. Larson, Susan R. Vroman, and Erin E. Makarius, March 18, 2020

03 | Virtual meeting best practice checklist

Get the most out of your virtual meetings using this quick checklist for success.

Prior to the meeting

- ✔ Decide which technology you will use
- ✔ Plan and rehearse meeting technology
- ✔ Establish clear objectives
- ✔ Prepare a detailed agenda
- ✔ Share agenda and materials in advance
- ✔ Assign a facilitator

During the meeting

- ✔ Encourage participants to use video functionality
- ✔ Allow time for introductions
- ✔ Review objectives and ground rules
- ✔ Allocate roles (facilitator, timekeeper, scribe)
- ✔ Use the agenda to guide the conversation
- ✔ Frequently ask for feedback / call on people
- ✔ Use participant names
- ✔ Stick to your time contract
- ✔ Capture next steps

After the meeting

- ✔ Capture meeting notes and distribute in a timely manner
- ✔ Ensure that participants each understand their commitments / action items

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TOP TIP: BE ENGAGING

Boring meetings are tough to sit through. Since you put the work into organising a great meeting, make it interesting with lively interaction, good visuals or effective storytelling. Include breaks and icebreakers. Introduce you own meeting traditions – one CEO we know includes a ridiculous item on her shelf in the background. The item changes each meeting and her teams look out for it in anticipation and enjoy a light hearted laugh.

Employee Perspective

Top 10 tips for working remotely

Here are ten tips to help you find your focus while working from home.

1

Set up a designated workspace
Create a separate space for yourself to work in, somewhere you can focus on tasks without being distracted. Set up with everything you need for a normal working day and ensure that you have a comfortable chair.

2

Make sure you have all the tech you need
This includes a reliable internet connection, required hardware and software, access to your company network, any files and importantly, knowledge of how to get IT support.

3

Get out of your PJs
Don't start your workday in your PJs. Changing into clothes for the day will help you mentally switch into productive work-mode. It will also help you distinguish between work and home life.

4

Write a daily to-do list
Set out a list of realistic, achievable tasks to keep you focused.

5

Know when to step away from your desk
Be clear about when your workday begins and ends, and take breaks to refresh. It's easy to let yourself be 'always on' when you are home and office are in the same place.

6

Stay in conversation
Contribute regularly to team chats /group emails so you don't drop off the radar. Ask about what people are working on and share what's on your plate.

7

Foster relationships
Make time for non-work chats as you would in the workplace and use video calling to maintain face-to-face contact.

8

Be clear in your communication
It's always better to over communicate when working remotely. Speaking in person gives you visual and audio cues that help you communicate. Conversing remotely however, removes a lot of that extra information so make sure your communications are clear and concise.

9

Ask for support when needed
This is particularly important when trying to balance work and home demands (e.g. online schooling for kids during COVID-19). Chat to your manager and agree convenient work times when you can be productive – break your day into chunks.

10

Make remote working work for you
Change where you sit, put on music, whatever helps you work. And enjoy the perks – no commute or uncomfortable shoes, and all your home comforts within reach.

Source: CIPD UK

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ABOUT
ENGAGE ME

Engage Me is the Middle East's leading internal communication consulting firm. We believe in the power of communication to help organisations thrive. Every day we focus on improving the way people communicate, interact and connect in workplaces across the region and around the world.

We make internal communications more engaging, helping employees work with clarity and a sense of purpose.

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