How to Cultivate Effective 'Remote Work' Programs

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By Analysts Carol Rozwell

Initiatives:Digital Workplace Program

In an effort to reduce the cost of office space, application leaders often encourage employees to work remotely. However, if the emphasis is only on freeing up space, then these efforts will fail. This research describes the essential first steps of creating remote work programs.

More on This Topic

This is part of two in-depth collections of research. See the collections:

- Creating Digital Value at Scale: A Gartner Trend Insight Report

- How to Strengthen Your Digital Workplace Program to Sustain Digital Transformation

Overview

Key Challenges

- Mutual lack of trust undermines remote work good intentions.

- Stereotypes about what kind of work can or cannot be done remotely lead to unrealistic expectations and underperforming programs.

- Employees unaccustomed to the demands of remote work lose enthusiasm and suffer from loneliness.

- Creating a responsive technology infrastructure to enable effective remote work is complex.

Recommendations

Application leaders responsible for digital workplace programs that include remote work initiatives:

- Establish a foundation of trust by empowering both employees and managers to be effective in remote work scenarios.

- Determine what work lends itself to a remote model by analyzing responsibilities, tasks and the roles that can fulfill them.

- Prepare employees for remote work demands by setting accurate expectations and enabling supportive interactions.

- Stress-test your technology infrastructure to determine its capability to support remote work.

Strategic Planning Assumption(s)

By 2021, the increase in the number of employees who prefer to work remotely will allow organizations to support 40% more workers in the same amount of space as they use today.

Introduction

Remote work is on the rise. From 2012 to 2016, the number of people working remotely rose by 4%. [1] In the U.S., 43% of workers spent some of their time working remotely. [1] Remote work is a global phenomenon. There is a high proportion of work being done outside of the traditional corporate office in Finland, Japan, Netherlands and Sweden, as well as in the U.S. [2] "Remote work" refers to jobs that are performed away from a corporate office in a remote location. This paradigm recognizes that technology enables employees at all levels to work anywhere, at any time.

The desire to reduce real estate costs is forcing application leaders to revisit and revise their remote work strategies. Two trends make remote work programs feasible:

- **The digital workplace:** New and more effective ways of working are driving employee engagement and agility, in part by exploiting consumer-oriented styles and technologies.

- **Technology designed to improve employee interactions:** Examples include workstream collaboration tools and videoconferencing capability. These technologies are increasing the fidelity of communication among people working in a corporate office and people working from alternative locations.

Effective remote work programs require more than just giving employees smartphones, laptops and email access, and then allowing them to work from home. Remote work programs can be undermined by a lack of trust, when managers are not equipped to deal with employees they cannot see. Stereotypes and assumptions about what work can or can't be done remotely result in underperforming programs. Employees who are unprepared and underequipped to handle remote work demands suffer burnout, frustration and lost productivity. Moreover, application leaders fail to appreciate the breadth and depth of the infrastructure changes needed to support effective remote work at scale. In short, successful remote work programs hinge upon the answers to the questions in Figure 1.

Figure 1. How You Answer Four Questions Directly Affects Remote Work Program Success

Questions That Determine Remote Work Program Success

- Do we trust employees to do their work even if we can't see them?
- Do we have the kinds of work that can be done remotely?
- Do we have employees who want to work remotely?
- Do we have the technology infrastructure to support remote work?

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Source: Gartner (January 2018)

This research identifies four best practices that enable application leaders to start, or restart, effective remote work initiatives.

Analysis

Establish a Trust Foundation by Empowering Both Employees and Managers to Be Effective in Remote Work Scenarios

Mutual trust is at the heart of successful remote work initiatives in the digital workplace. Application leaders must trust that their employees will act responsibly when working remotely. Employees must trust that their employer will act in their best interest and enable them to be successful.

Creating a culture of trust is a top-down responsibility. Application leaders — working with colleagues in HR and business units — have a vital role in communicating to employees that the organization:

- Trusts them to do their work remotely

- Accepts responsibility to enable them to do so effectively

- Will fairly and transparently measure remote work productivity and performance

- Values their contribution and supports their career development

How can application leaders create, enable and sustain this culture of trust? They can take actions in three areas: authority, affiliation and accountability.

The Power of Authority

- Empower workers to make decisions regarding when, where and how they complete their work. Set up regular meetings to check on whether there are obstacles hindering their work.

- Secure technology and support services that enable both on-site and off-site workers to complete work efficiently and effectively. (See "Magic Quadrant for Meeting Solutions" and "Select the Right Technology for Modern Meeting Rooms.")

The Power of Accountability

- Create a transparent system of performance measurement that quantifies outcomes, not just activities or the amount of time spent on tasks. Establish assignments and goals with timelines. Track progress toward milestones on a weekly, monthly or quarterly basis, rather than on an hourly or daily basis.

- Focus on coaching, guiding and enabling managers who oversee remote workers. Determine managers' attitudes toward remote workers to ensure that no biases exist. Track the development of remote workers to make sure they progress at the same rate as on-site workers.

- Facilitate knowledge sharing and relationship building across individuals and teams by suggesting nonobvious connections that remote employees can exploit. For example, have the remote worker onboard new employees from outside the team as a way of getting to know them.

The Power of Affiliation

- Allow employees to invest time in building their social networks, so that they can establish and nurture trusted relationships with colleagues. This means supporting the face-to-face interactions needed to build trust as well as providing technology, such as videoconferencing, that enables richer interaction.

- Facilitate collaboration between on-site and off-site workers. Ensure that remote workers have counterparts in the conference room who will check in with them periodically to see if they have something to contribute. Alternatively, have everyone in the meeting participate remotely, and avoid the conference room altogether.

- Support employees' personal and professional development. Repurpose some of the cost savings from the reduction in real estate expenses toward remote-worker incentives. For example, encourage remote workers to attend local events to stave off feelings of isolation. Use events as a catalyst for holding "after event" face-to-face meetings.

- Give remote employees opportunities to increase their visibility with the organization's leadership by assigning them to special projects or roles. Put them in situations where they can participate with people outside of their "home" team.

Determine What Work Lends Itself to a Remote Model by Analyzing Responsibilities and Tasks

There are different criteria to weigh when judging what work can be done effectively by remote workers (either individually or in teams).

One way to approach this evaluation is to examine the existing operational models. Organizations may have one or more operating models that structure how employees do some or all of their work. Three well-known models that require remote work coordination are centers of excellence, self-organizing teams and "follow-the-sun" models. (In follow-the-sun models, operations shift between global locations as the workday moves westward with the sun's movement.) In such cases, remote work processes, policies and enabling technologies become a deliberate strategy of optimizing these operational models.

Another useful approach is to conduct real-life tests of working in virtual offices. Toptal asked 100 developers to spend a few hours each day working remotely with the rest of their team. [3] It then compared the experience with the way they worked before. The results helped to identify several weaknesses in Toptal's approach to remote working.

"Work" consists of the assignments and tasks that are needed to achieve a specific organizational goal. As such, there is no inherent understanding of "place" in this concept of "work." Place or proximity becomes relevant only when it's needed to achieve a goal. Specific tasks may or may not be "place-dependent." Manufacturing, healthcare delivery, and brick-and-mortar retail selling are tasks that relate to a place or a location. However, 3D printing technology and virtual goods, including ideas, digital documents or digital products, make work much less place-dependent.

In some cases, place is turned inside out: What's most important is the customer's location, not the worker's location. For example, are huge centralized call centers needed for efficiency when local call center representatives can be distributed and supported globally? LiveOps takes advantage of the "gig economy," employing the world's largest work-at-home call agent workforce with more than 20,000 agents. Its tagline is, "The modern call center isn't a call center. It's a network of virtual, on-demand agents."

Enabling effective remote work involves five interrelated actions:

- Determine how much remote work your firm can handle. Work is essential to the organization's functioning. Figuring out which specific assignments and tasks can be done remotely, perhaps supported by redesigned business processes, is critical to making remote work programs a success.

- Base eligibility on the work, not the person. Eligibility should not be personality-based because of the potential for discrimination.

- Establish outcome-based performance measures. Monitor progress steps and milestones. Outcome-based metrics often require a major shift in expectations, employee accountability and managerial responsibility.

- Determine whether a remote work trial period is necessary. This option allows people to try out a remote work opportunity before making it a permanent decision.

- Seek feedback on employee performance from peers. While obtaining peer review is a good idea regardless of whether an employee is a remote worker or not, it becomes especially important when the manager lacks visual clues about employee-to-employee interaction.

Prepare Employees for Remote Work Demands by Setting Accurate Expectations and Enabling Supportive Interactions

Remote work can be equally novel — and unsettling — for employees, managers and the organization at large. Depending on where workers and facilities are located, organizations may want, or need, a combination of remote, traditional and mobile work. In the 2017 Gartner Digital Workplace Survey, [4] we asked respondents what proportion of their time they would like to spend working:

- In the corporate office

- In a public place

- From home

- While traveling or commuting

Figure 2 shows the average allocation of time for each location. These preferences indicate that workers want the flexibility to work from their choice of locations and to feel productive regardless of where they are (see "Crafting Workspaces That Enhance the Employee Experience").

<p style="text-align:center;color:#E8700A;font-weight:bold;">Figure 2. Average Time-Split Preferences Across Different Work Locations</p>

Location Preferences in Proportion to Overall Working Time

Traveling or
Commuting
7%

Public
Place
7%

**Average Allocation
of Time**

Home
29%

Corporate
Office
56%
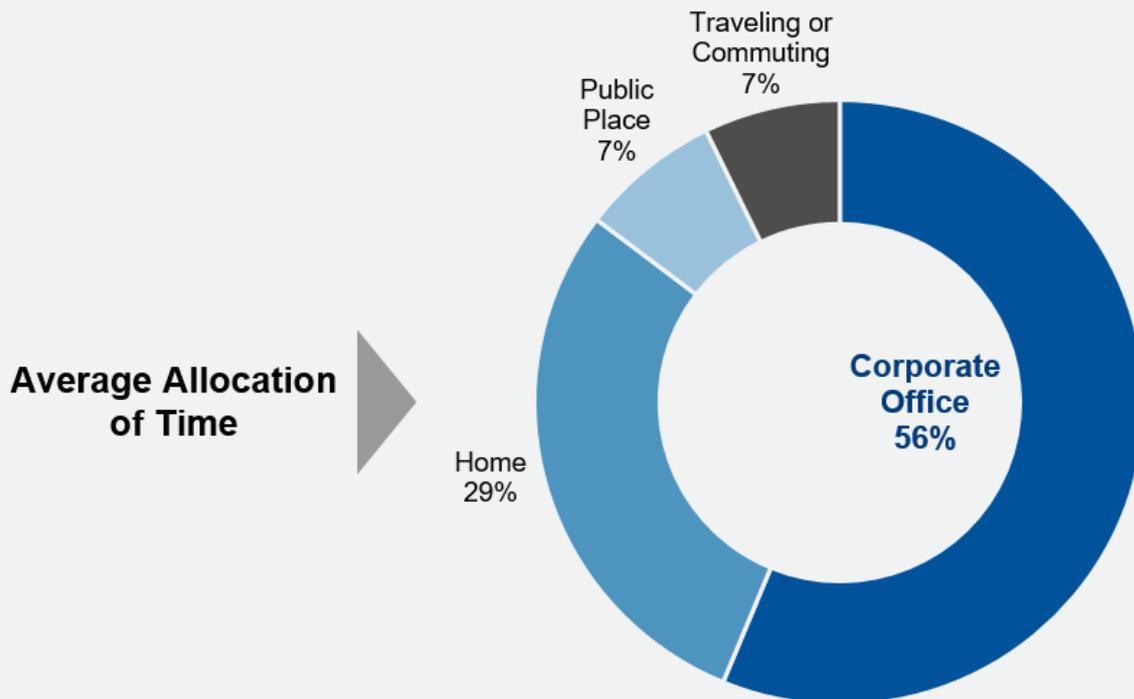
Base: Excludes "don't know" answers; n = 2,994.
Q. If you could make the schedule yourself, what proportion of time would you like to spend working ...?
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Total does not equal 100% due to rounding.

Source: Gartner (January 2018)

Creating remote work programs benefits both employers and employees. By implementing a systematic approach to effective remote work, employers can win significant advantages, including:

- Reduction in real estate expense

- Lower employee absenteeism

- Increased employee retention

- Improved employer brand

- Access to a larger talent pool

- Potential to create a more diverse organization

Effective remote work programs enable increased employee productivity and reduce employee stress, according to an array of studies. Nearly two-thirds of organizations supporting remote work

have documented higher productivity. [5] Best Buy, BT and Dow reported that remote workers are 35% to 40% more productive than people who work in corporate offices. [5] AT&T found that remote workers worked an average of five hours more per week than their office-based counterparts. [5] Eighty-two percent of remote workers self-report that remote work lowered their stress levels. [6]

However, remote work is not free of human costs: Loneliness is a major factor in employee burnout. Fifty percent of people say they are often or always exhausted due to work — a 32% increase from two decades ago. [7]

Enabling new hires to quickly build workplace networks is key to counteracting loneliness and optimizing employee effectiveness in remote work programs. Application leaders should lead by example by becoming experts in tools that make communication and collaboration effective (see "Lights, Camera, Action; Get Your Message Across the Right Way in Web Conferences"). To build and sustain healthy trust, application leaders must also create opportunities for ongoing interactions with and among remote workers, their teammates and their managers. Frequent check-ins with remote employees help them feel less isolated.

Stress-Test Your Technology Infrastructure to Determine Its Capability to Support Remote Work

Remote work technology infrastructure enables effective performance by remote workers. The specific elements of this infrastructure will depend on the type of work for a given role. Infrastructure decisions must account for training, support and levels of service, so that employees are enabled to work well from multiple disparate locations.

Most organizations have at least some existing remote workers, whether sanctioned officially or allowed by informal arrangements. Application leaders should stress-test the existing technology infrastructure to ensure it has the scale to support remote work. They also need to determine whether the infrastructure has the necessary capabilities for accelerating digital business and for increasing employees' engagement.

Technology decisions can also change the nature of responsibilities and tasks — enabling them to be done remotely. Application leaders should assess the different ingredients in the technology mix to optimize the experience of remote workers. These are some of the questions that they need to address:

- **Employer-supplied technology:** What equipment will we provide to employees? How will we manage those assets during their useful life? What process will we use to dispose of those assets?

- **Home office expectations:** Are there minimum requirements we expect employees to meet, such as having a room or space dedicated for work?

- **Network access:** Is there a minimum internet speed employees need to procure? Who will pay for internet access?

- **Videoconferencing**: Will we provide videoconferencing capabilities for all employees? How will we compensate for areas with low bandwidth? (See "In the Digital Workplace, Conferencing Markets Are Evolving Into a Meeting Solution Market.")

- **Collaboration tools**: What additional applications and tools should we add to our infrastructure to enable more effective interaction for remote employees? (See "Magic Quadrant for Meeting Solutions.")

- **Technical support**: Does our current technical support strategy need to change in order to effectively support remote employees? (See "Magic Quadrant for Managed Workplace Services, North America.")

- **Office resource scheduling**: How will we make it easy for remote workers to find available space to work when they have the need to come into the office? (See "Market Guide for Resource Scheduling Applications.")

Table 1 provides some examples of how different organizations outfit remote workers and what they expect employees to provide for their home offices.

Table 1: Sample Options for Outfitting Remote Workers

Company ↓	Type of Work ↓	Minimum Standards ↓	Technical Standards ↓
Amazon [a]	Customer service	Employees must have at least a year of prior customer service experience and a high school diploma. They must also pass a background check.	Employees must procure a PC with high-speed internet. They must also have an analog phone line and a quiet workspace.
Apple [b]	Customer service, team and area managers	Employees must have a quiet, distraction-free room. Apple provides a desk and an ergonomic chair.	Employees procure the high-speed internet connection. Apple provides an iMac and headset.
Facebook [c]	Engineers and developers	No formal approvals or logistics procedures are necessary. Employees just update their statuses to "work at home" (WAH).	Most employees have laptops rather than desktop machines, and VPN access is preconfigured.

Company ↓	Type of Work ↓	Minimum Standards ↓	Technical Standards ↓
Infosys [d]	Coding, testing, system analysis, etc.	Employees can work from home nine days per month.	Employees ensure they can get access to corporate email and chat on the corporate intranet. Infosys provides a laptop.

[a] See "Amazon Jobs From Home in the Customer Service Department," Real Ways to Earn Money Online. [b] See "Jobs at Apple: Frequently Asked Questions," Apple. [c] See "What Is Facebook's Policy on Working Remotely?" Quora. [d] See "All You Need to Know About Infosys Work From Home Policy," HackzHub.

Source: Gartner (January 2018)

Case Study

A foundation of trust is essential to the success of remote work programs. If that is not present, then remote work programs will fail. The following example is compiled from multiple client inquires.

A newly promoted manager struggled with the fact that many of his phone calls to a remote employee went to voice mail. Trying to get an immediate response via email was not successful either. This made him suspicious that the employee was not doing her work and instead spending time on personal matters.

In fact, the employee was familiar with research showing that frequent interruptions decrease productivity. She consciously allocated time to respond to emails and phone calls, as well as to perform other aspects of her work. She avoided dealing immediately with interruptions that would become distractions and cause her to lose her concentration.

Even though the employee explained her approach to organizing her work to her manager, the tension between the two grew. The employee felt the stress of the constant monitoring and lost respect for her manager. Eventually, she decided to leave the company and go to an organization that was more remote-work-friendly.

Evidence

[1] "State of the American Workplace," Gallup.

[2] "Working Anytime, Anywhere: The Effects on the World of Work," Eurofound and the International Labour Office.

[3] "Toptal and Facebook — Creating a Global Virtual Office," Toptal.

[4] **2017 Gartner Digital Workplace Survey:** Results are based on a Gartner consumer study conducted to understand digital workers (including changes and trends in their sentiments and expectations), explore worker engagement and examine workers' satisfaction with applications provided by their organizations. The survey was conducted online from February through March 2017, with 3,120 respondents in the U.S., Europe and Asia/Pacific. Participants were screened for full-time employment by organizations with 100 or more employees, and had to use digital technology for work purposes. Respondents' ages ranged from 18 years to 74 years. Quotas and weightings were applied for age, gender, region and income, so that the results were representative of countries' working populations.

[5] "Pros and Cons," Global Workplace Analytics.

[6] " State of Telecommuting: 2014 Survey Reveals New Trends in Remote Work," PGi.

[7] "Burnout at Work Isn't Just About Exhaustion. It's Also About Loneliness," Harvard Business Review.

Recommended by the Author

Understand Five Key Types of Worker to Energize Your Digital Workplace

Create a Catalog of Activity-Based Spaces in the Digital Workplace to Improve the Employee Experience

Align Smart Workplace Efforts With Employee Needs for Knowledge-Based Work

Crafting Workspaces That Enhance the Employee Experience

Market Guide for Resource Scheduling Applications for the Workplace

Out of Sight, Out of Mind? Managing the Remote Worker

Overcome the Fears, Embrace the Benefits and Launch a Remote Work Pilot Program

Recommended For You

Toolkit: Remote Work Policies

Collaborative Work Management in the New Work Nucleus

Maverick* Research: The End of Office Space

The Role of Email and Calendaring in the New Work Nucleus

Survey Analysis: Digital Worker Workspace Preferences

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