



**Remote Learner Guide:** I am worried about losing the social interaction that comes with physical group work

### **Team members**

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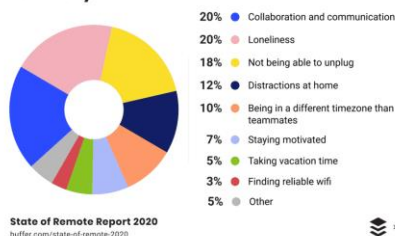
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## Introduction

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the working industry will likely last a lifetime. Companies who never facilitated remote working before were suddenly forced to embrace it and to make it work. There are many benefits to working from home but one issue that has had an impact on the workforce is the sudden feeling of isolation. A new study conducted by Qualtrics (2020), shows that there is a new global mental health crisis, showing the issues people are facing. 2,700 people were surveyed, with results showing 67% of people have higher stress levels since the COVID-19 outbreak, 57% have higher anxiety levels and 53% feel more irritable and feel sadness day to day. We found the statistics on this survey interesting and it made us want to research the topic of social interaction and group work further.

### What's your biggest struggle with working remotely?



(Get Lighthouse, 2020).

## Challenges of Remote Work

### *Isolation*

- Team members who feel isolated may feel lower job satisfaction and have lower commitment. They may not know who to turn to if they have a problem or feel disconnected from their group and may miss the informal chats with team members, coffee breaks and the opportunities to build relationships (Mulki et al., 2009). The article *Manager Control and Employee Isolation in Telecommuting Environments* (Kurland, N et al., 2002) explores the two types of isolation that are found in the telecommuting industry. Professional isolation and social isolation. The study found that when employees are working remotely, they felt that their upline manager cannot measure the work they are doing. They feel “out of sight, out of mind” and could easily be looked over for more challenging work, rewards and promotions. Professional isolation also leads employees to feeling that they are undervalued and unappreciated in the workforce and they could be easily replaced, as no one would

notice if they were gone. Socially, employees do not get the opportunity to form friendships or just get to know their colleagues on a personal level.

- Digital Workplace and Team Collaboration Expert, Ross Sedgewick suggests that having background sounds like news or radio can create a sense of companionship and comfort and allow for an employee to feel like they are working in an office environment. This could be particularly useful for employees who felt like they were just “thrown” into working remotely. (Sedgewick, R 2020)

### **Solutions to overcoming isolation**

#### ***Check in informally***

- It is important to check in with team members one-to-one or on team meetings to understand their issues or concerns relating to the remote work situation. Fostering this sense of care will foster a stronger team commitment and sense of belonging (Mulki et al., 2009).

#### ***Promote social interaction among team members***

- Communicating and maintaining relationships is important for day to day productivity and morale. Using email and chat rooms can feel very impersonal. Using methods like video calls can give a larger sense of personal connection. Leaders around the world are encouraging better habits to promote team bonding and communication which is something we could learn from studying from home. Sunil Prashara the President and CEO of the Project Management Institute incorporated a daily virtual team check in for 15-20 minutes each morning for employees to discuss topics not related to work for example about their families or pets, keeping it light-hearted, positive and informal (Brownlee, 2020).
- Leadership advisor, Niamh O’Keefe, recommends adding in virtual coffee breaks into a team’s day to promote bonding, a mental break or recharge and the social interaction we are missing from meeting with friends and colleagues at lunch or in the hallways. This may also improve innovation, problem-solving, productivity and idea generation in the long run (Brownlee, 2020).

#### ***Showing empathy***






- Showing empathy is also important as it is important to know that everyone is responding to the crisis in a different way and has different home situations, we

should allow for more flexibility and watch for signs if team members are behaving different than usual as they may need some help.

### **Using Video Calls**

- Meeting with a video call is the most effective method of communication that we have available to us now. Working remotely requires more communication, electronic communication such as emails and text messages contribute to the feelings of workplace isolation and makes it more difficult for remote employees to develop personal relationships (Mulki et al., 2009). Unlike audio calls, on video we can read body language which can tell us a lot about how somebody feels which is lost in a phone conversation, video calls ensure engagement, a lot of people join audio call meetings and do not participate, it is harder to avoid participation when your camera is on as you have to be present. Using video calls such as on Microsoft Teams or Skype, is the closest thing to a traditional face to face meeting available to remote teams and should be utilised by all teams.

#### **Communication channels are crucial for remote working**

Channel	Best for...	Communication considerations
 1:1 Call / VC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual catch-ups and building relationships</li> <li>• Discussing sensitive and difficult topics</li> </ul>	<b>Communication considerations</b>  Time to create vs time to process information  Synchronous vs Asynchronous  1:1, 1:N, or N:N  Structured vs stream  Formal vs chatty  Urgent vs important  Visual vs spoken vs written vs non-verbal clues
 Video conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem solving and co-creation using shared screen or whiteboard</li> <li>• Weekly planning and review sessions</li> <li>• Decision meetings</li> <li>• Workshops and trainings</li> <li>• Team talks and retrospectives</li> </ul>	
 Chat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process syndication</li> <li>• Urgent questions and seeking guidance</li> <li>• Keeping up to date in real-time</li> <li>• Social team talk</li> </ul>	
 Video captures & voice notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Showcasing and explaining work</li> <li>• Guidance to the team from managers with limited time</li> <li>• Debriefs after meetings that some may have missed</li> </ul>	
 eMail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Updates and status to large groups of people</li> <li>• Formal communication inside and outside the company</li> </ul>	

Source: McKinsey & Company Analysis

### **Building trust on virtual teams**

- Here is a useful video link from Harvard Business Review about building trust in virtual teams: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYqKaRSW1CI>
- The initial stage to group development is essential as it increases dependency among group members and it helps to build a social bond from the outset. Trust is a pivotal factor at the foundation of any team. A positive correlation has been established

between personal bonding and levels of trust (Lin et al., 2008). These enhanced levels of trust can give a sense of belonging to teams and foster a sense of social cohesion.

- There are a number of different activities which can be used to build these relationships, for example, having each group member share information about themselves along with what they expect the team to achieve. The social bond can be enhanced further by making sure to resolve conflicts early on and the conflicts themselves should not be looked upon negatively. The conflict portrays to one another that everybody is passionate about the quality of the project and this strengthens the bond as there is a common goal amongst the group. To make everyone feel involved, there should be regular feedback provided to each other so nobody is left out. These regular feedback sessions will enable members to feel more confident to take on more responsibility which in turn will lead to stronger bonds as regular communication will lead to the formation of more social capital (Yu & Kuo, 2011). While it may be hard to replicate physical group work in terms of gaining bonding, this shouldn't stop teams putting measures in place to try and enhance social interaction as best they can.

### *Encouraging open dialogue*

- Another way that trust can be built within group work is by creating an open discussion which 'professor James O'Toole and the late Warren Bennis described' as a base of 'successful teamwork' and a study made by 50 financial firms had noted that leaders of unique groups must encourage members to be honest with each another. (Ferrazi, 2014) This can be said within virtual group meeting that members are encouraged to speak up when something is being left unstated and calling out criticism that is not beneficial for the tasks. As an open dialogue is executed within the virtual group meeting a strong personal link is positively associated to effectiveness of information exchange and optimize the virtual team meeting. (Warkentin et al., 1997).
- The below video is from Harvard Business Review about on how to collaborate effectively if your team is remote and how to make it feel more real.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vradYqcXfGQ>

[\*How to Make Virtual Meetings Feel More Real\*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vradYqcXfGQ)



## **Conclusion**

To conclude, working remotely has many challenges such as the isolation and lack of social interaction. Over the past few years there has been a huge increase of awareness in the fight against mental health and both professional and social isolation could be a huge negative impact on the mental health of employees. This is particularly relevant in 2020, as many companies and Universities did not prepare their students and employees for the possible challenges that they may face working from home and ways they could help to combat the feelings of isolation. If the appropriate solutions are implemented such as building trust and using effective communication methods, working remotely can be a productive and efficient method of working.

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