



WORKING FROM HOME

One of the biggest impacts of Covid-19 is the sudden and ubiquitous requirement for persons to self-isolate, alongside the demands for non-essential businesses to close offices. Although this was done with the intent to mitigate the risk of people associating in crowds and spreading the virus – especially to those at risk – many businesses have sought to continue operations with a remote workforce, connecting and collaborating via available technology, to ensure some measure of continuity of operations.

For workers who have grown accustomed to working on-site, at an office, the reality we all face today brings a lot of disruption and discomfort, in a number of ways. This article explores some simple and proven strategies to leverage working from home and overcoming some of the isolation effects of Covid-19 lockdown, to help persons transform their operation challenges into opportunities for a stronger tomorrow.

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The ability to work from home (telecommute) is not a new idea, but has now become a requirement in the face of restrictions imposed on the population. And the feedback all along suggests the phenomena bears significant psychological, operational and other social effects that need to be factored. Working from home and having to utilize technology to work are significant shifts to When, Where and How work is done, and can manifest as uncharted territory for many. Interestingly, this need for ‘adjustment’ applies not only to the workers of a business, but to management themselves, since many businesses demanded persons be in office (often for a specific period of time) and performance was based on presence.

So what are the challenges that this new reality brings? Persons having to work remotely have typically struggled with issues such as work times and dealing with distractions, amongst others, and these issues are now supplemented by additional considerations given everyone is at home – the spouse, the kids, neighbours and such.

The main challenges can be contextualized in the following:

- Work Times
- Work Environment
- Type and Nature of Work
- Available Resources
- Recreation, Leisure and Self-Care

In this article, we focus on the individual aspects of working from home and working in a self-isolation context, considering what the main effects can be some simple, accessible and cost-effective strategies can be to help us overcome the challenges and even emerge stronger than before. □

WORK TIME

Persons working from home have tended to work longer hours. Historically, working from home was seen as a privilege (primarily granted to technical staff), and the emphatic response was to show that although home, work was still being done; the privilege of working from home did not



translate into abandonment of the job. This 'Always-On' employee would feel the imperative to respond instantly to communicate, always be available for chats, and would be sending correspondence (even engage co-workers) late into the night. This is not a sustainable practice, and can very quickly lead to burn-out, sub-par performance and questionable positions / decisions, if not wear away at your physical health and put you at even greater risk.

Maintaining Set Work-Time: The solution to this is to set hours for work, with deliberate cut-off times, over the course of the work day. Having set hours for work helps you to not only focus your effort, but maintain that critical work/life balance that will help you sustain your contributions over an extended time-period. Some persons work best in the morning period, others afternoon, yet others in the dead of night. If you know what times you work best, then you would want to segment your 24-hour day into time-sets, and allocate specific time-sets for your various tasks. But there's a catch. Setting the hours based on productivity may not be consistent with the timings of others. This is where open communication and an understanding management would help in no small measure to establish effective work-times and deliverable deadlines.

Working with Kids Around: Another dimension and challenge of the current reality is the fact that everyone is confined to their homes. It means its not just us individually at home, but so are our spouses, and the kids, and neighbours.... This is different from 'traditional' work-from-home arrangements when we would be at home alone for extended periods of time. From a time viewpoint, working from home as a parent means working in shorter segments, with much more distractions while the kids are up and about, and significantly less energy when they are in their down-time. Having help allows you to mitigate some of this – 1 person is with the kids on a rotating hour-by-hour shift system, if both

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have to work. Technology tools have become central to keeping kids quiet and safely at home for extended time periods. Not that this is an ideal situation, but it can be a useful workaround if some tasks and deliverables require additional time and attention. Gaming, videos, movies, augmented reality apps and virtual tours, etc. have all proven to be useful to capture and maintain kids' attention, and with the parental controls in place it can be a safe and educational means to gain some much-needed time. Over a sustained period, it may be a good idea to allow for it in key time-sets – say for example a tech time between 1 pm and 3 pm daily, giving you some time after lunch-hour rush to get some work done.

Working Alongside Others: For some persons, the challenge they face may be neighbours playing music or TV loudly to interrupt your work. Relationships are the primary vehicle to help in this challenge – communicating with your neighbours to some compromise can help, or if



not, then communicating with authority – the building superintendent or even neighborhood police may become necessary. This may not be ideal situations to treat with, but in the Covid-19 environment we may be forced to and it may prove necessary. The good news is everyone is struggling to deal with this ‘new reality’ and therefore may be more inclined to help each other out. The bad news is ‘Lockdown Fatigue’ may result in shorter tempers and lower tolerance. What your specific situation is would be

disruptions. We have had sufficient practice previously with ensuring mobile phones are muted or switched off, so one would expect this would also manifest in the virtual meeting space, if the same level of tolerance is given.

Planning Time around Delays: All too often, meetings are delayed or persons join late because of delays in runs to the stores etc. The Covid-19 reality of ‘essential services’ only commutes, and the ‘social distancing’ measures of limited

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extremely contingent, but at the very least know there are options to help you overcome the challenges in the short-term.

Trying to get colleagues to function effectively online is proving a struggle for some persons. Long down times before a meeting actually starts, repeated testing of audio and video settings, interruptions from some people’s audio feeds, toggling screens for file sharing... these have been proving trying for those who put in the effort to master the techniques and minimize

numbers of people in any establishment at any point in time, has resulted in a long-lines to get to the supermarket, pharmacy, or anywhere else that one needs to get to. So while its takes a lot less time to get from point A to point B, it is taking a lot more time to get into point B. From a time-viewpoint, the additional ‘line-up’ times need to be factored, to allow for effective time-management within your operating time-sets and for those virtual meeting schedules. □

WORK ENVIRONMENT AND AMBIENCE

Although some aspects of work-from-home arrangements are convenient (a more relaxed dress code, for example), working from home is proving be a very trying obstacle to overcome, with diverse realities based on different living conditions. Smaller apartment-based urban dwellings have a distinct challenge of maintaining suitable workspace in limited living amenities, while sub-urban and rural residences may face a challenge of not having suitable infrastructure or capacity available to support the

work that needs to be done. We cannot do much to change the available infrastructure, but we can focus on those areas within our locus of control, and try to optimize these for greater impact.

Dedicated Work Area: The working-from-home reality tends to allow work to bleed into our other living spaces – the living room, the dining table, the bedroom and so on. Whilst this allows for you to be productive in relative comfort of your living quarters and make full use of the space you have, it has the double effect of allowing you ‘no-escape’ from your new working



environment, which can contribute to faster burn-out or work-saturation. It is suggested that a suitable coping strategy is dedicating a specific area for work-related tasks. This can be a desk, room or floor (some persons have even built annexed home-studies) that allow you to dedicate to work-related material and tasks. This practice helps with mentally ‘signing-in’ to work, and allows you to ‘sign-out’ as per your time-sets, leaving other areas of your home to be work-free and help maintain balance in your life. If your living space is limited, consider having a work-kit that you set out in preparation for the start of work, and which can be packed-up and stowed when you are done, so that it’s no longer ‘in your face’ and in your space.

Ambient Temperature: Numerous studies have suggested that ambient temperature is a critical factor in work performance, and an optimal ambient temperature of 25.5° C (approx. 77° F) is best conducive to human comfort. If you are in a

controlled temperature environment (e.g. air-conditioned space), this may be an easy setting to fix, but if not, you would want to select an area that is relatively cool (or warm, depending on your current climate) and conducive to operate from within your time-sets.

Work Attire: In many instances, working from the comfort of your home allows you to dress in relaxed attire, and even for online meetings persons have been sharing ‘behind-the-scenes’ views on social media of being dressed from the waist up, with much more relaxed attire otherwise. For some, however, relaxed attire accompanies a relaxed mind-set, which can affect work-performance. If this affects you, consider having specific attire for work-hours that you maintain – maybe not as elaborate as if you were heading to the office, but at least to get you in the mindset for performing in the tasks you have slated. □





TYPE OF WORK BEING DONE

Computer-based work is something most persons would be familiar with, once their job requires computer-based applications. Notwithstanding, organisations have had a rough couple of weeks of trying to get group collaboration and digitized work processes up and running – Zoom was a big winner at the onset, alongside WhatsApp groups and other cloud-based applications. Others have had to take different approaches consistent with their work demands and affinities. However,

commonly occurring challenges include the inability of persons to effectively manipulate the software to their purposes.

Where work has been newly digitized, persons can expect design flaws alongside insufficient training resources for manipulating the software effectively. Should this manifest as a recent or recurring problem, the attitude and tone of response can have a significant impact. I would be the first to acknowledge this is usually an individual attitudinal issue – and is contingent on many factors at the organizational, supervisor and individual-worker levels. However, the common problem is that for some firms, the movement of work and performance to an entirely digital, remote workplace brings with it some transition issues that affect all stakeholders.

Positive Attitude: Complaining about the scenario would evoke a radically different response from your audience than someone who shows more understanding of the situation, tolerance for ‘works-in-progress’ and commitment to get through this as a team. In this time of crisis across all sectors and levels, however, being someone that helps steer the team through the challenges faced is an opportunity to demonstrate your readiness to play a more central role in the organisation and its direction – along with the benefits that accompany them. Consider for example making a log of issues, challenges

and obstacles that you think compromise the ability of the team to be effective, or proposing alternative solutions that can help to stem the recurrence of problems. This can include the timings in which meetings are scheduled, the platform that is being used, or there may be some aspects of the digital artefacts (such as the cloud storage folder being used or digital versions of previously paper-based documents).

Learning to Overcome: the imposition of new technologies and platforms would require persons to firstly ensure effective access, and secondly become familiar with the new tool-kit which they are required to use. Effective access translates into selecting the right platform for purposes, and ensuring that what the platform requires is available to everyone on the team. Where there are outliers without all the necessary requirements, provisions or alternative work policies would be required to be put in place. For example, for one school, classes were moved to online classrooms, and for those students where resources were not immediately available, an alternative method of preparing a printed packet of the work requirements was put in place for their access. No one was left behind, and although this proved more cumbersome to coordinate, it meant each person was afforded the same opportunity for progression and work.

Beyond effective access, each new software brings its own learning curve, and others would be required to wrestle with the features, functions and use-cases until manipulating them becomes second-nature. To this end, what is emerging is a two-fold dynamic that warrants attention – some persons express preference for 1 brand of software over another (e.g. 1 video-conferencing or cloud-storage platform over another), which may not be aligned to other persons’ preferences. A stated criteria for selection becomes a useful tool to help manage the associated fallout – and can include technical fit alongside intuitive design, ease of use, equipment resource demands, costs, flexibility in accommodating different



needs, etc. The explicit criteria for selection would help everyone be aligned to, and buy-into the final decision made, or conversely would allow persons to source perhaps even more effective tools for which the organisation can benefit.

The Use of (& Need For) Meetings: Up to this point, meetings were used for all types of reasons – from brainstorming ideas to bringing everyone on the same page, to avoiding speaking to a single individual... many were unnecessary and most were ineffective in the results generated. In an online, remote-work environment, some persons may well try to replicate the traditional role of meetings using video-conferencing platforms. However, given that persons would be working at different times during the day, from different environments and while managing different roles, meetings may not be the most pragmatic basis for ongoing engagement of a team.

In a scenario where persons are working independently and remotely, virtual meetings are being used to (1) agree on the outcomes and their due dates, and (2) monitor performance and progress towards the outcome. Digitally, the agile methodology has been a significant contributor to this work arrangement, and having a progress map (that shows individual and entire team's progress in real-time or near-time) helps persons to manage their individual performance asynchronously working towards a deadline.

Rocking that To-Do List: In the absence of a governing office environment, self-driven work in the face of distractions in the home and online might be too difficult for some, and this triggers negative effects that can affect self-esteem and worth, enthusiasm and morale, or even the patience and tolerance to cope with isolated work environment. One of the most effective approaches is managing yourself as a worker – at the start of each day capture all that you intend to work on and complete for that day. Having segmented your day into time-sets, you can

prioritize tasks and assign them to the various time-sets as you see fit. In this way, you are managing your time by establishing set times to achieve set outcomes. This of course is all relative – you would go over time in some areas and complete other areas sooner than expected – which is fine. But it means that you have a constant feed of tasks that are working on, taking it day-by-day. Before you know it, the week evaporated and you achieved x-much more, or got soo much closer to your goal.

Many espouse use of tools and apps to help you through this, and this may work for some; for others, the use of technology might place them too close to distractions competing for their interests. Picture it – on your way into your To-Do list app of choice on your phone, you receive an IG notification and step in to check that out, only to be sucked into a 2-hour browsing session that takes you to a TikToc video of a 20-year old spraying a cat with coke... If the temptation is too great, consider using a notepad or notebook (as in the literal item, not its digital brand equivalent), and have your lists and your workplan done by day / project as proves best-suited ☐

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AVAILABLE RESOURCES

Working from home, remotely and using technology may be a new way of working and bring its own challenges, but working with shared resources can be quite a different issue altogether. Many homes may experience limited number of computing devices, and with everyone having to



work online, this can present quite a challenge. Having a system available for the kids to participate in online classes, you and your spouse to share for virtual meetings and other digital work that needs to be done can create scheduling problems and missed meetings / opportunities as a result.

Mobile & FOSS Solutions: in many instances, mobile devices can allow persons to function at a minimum level while the PC or laptop is being used otherwise. In today's operating context, mobile apps of PC-based software abound, so that using one's phone or tablet can ensure one can sit into a meeting or class. Others have taken down and dusted off older equipment and tried to get these working. Some persons have reactivated older machines and switched to free and older machine-friendly linux-based platforms to supplement available equipment, which eased the strain on equipment accessibility. The good news is that newer linux applications (such as Ubuntu or Linux Mint)



are as responsive to platform-independent applications that are being used – both in terms of mobile and PC -based computing environments.

'Essential' Supplies: The sudden restrictions imposed and the closure of non-essential businesses, alongside the emergent demands as structures and technologies were put in place to respond, translated into the scenario where some persons are seeing gaps in their home IT and home office needs – from printers to stationery and so on. The gaps are exacerbated by the fact that many stores are closed and therefore resolution may prove difficult to many. Online retail and delivery services are proving their value to some in this regard. Online ordering with curbside or delivery service is helping households to function to some basic degree, while for others a communal approach is alleviating much of the pain-points associated with unavailable commodities. Persons pooling resources to support their individual efforts has emerged as an immediate convenience to many, giving the group the ability to immediately recover and function □

RECREATION, LEISURE AND SELF-CARE

The Covid-19 requirement for persons to self-isolate and maintain social distancing is a shock to many, and with good reason. Isolation from society is the basis of imprisonment in many societies, and the negative psychological impacts

of being unable to visit – even on a restricted basis – the bars, clubs, cafes, parks that they have grown accustomed to, are compounded by the inability of persons in many areas to cook in some instances, or being forced to consume a limited range of foods repeatedly, alongside the learning curve stresses of work-from-home and learning to use technology – it can be overwhelming to many



and some in fact have proven themselves unable to cope. For most it is tolerable, and a mix of digital content and social media have been helping persons to recover (doing virtual workout sessions), share their frustrations and adventures (especially in the kitchen), and overall function at some reasonable level of normalcy.

Taking Time Off: In the work context, having ring-fenced work into set times and places, it is important that persons (still bound to the same apartment or home) set some time aside for relaxation, recreation and leisure. Recreation and leisure can be bound into any number of home-based activities – be it technology-driven (such as gaming, creating digital content, catching up on series’ seasons, starting an interest-based cause or group online, or starting a training course); or non-tech-based activities (including reading, sewing, gardening, drawing, painting, craft, exercise, learning to DJ...). One individual stripped down an old computer and is in the process of reassembling it (Good luck, guy. If you don’t have extra parts left over, you did it wrong). Others have chosen to adopt pets to care for and keep them company. Whatever option you choose would vary by individual interest and preference, but it is worth noting that having some avenue to channel your energy and attention is more important than what the activity is – think of it as a mental distraction that you enjoy, and it is completely ok to decide you are not interested and make the switch.

Working Your Body to Help Your Brain: Working from home also tends to demand a lot of ‘brain-work’ – perhaps up to 80% of effort is on some type of communication (reading or

consuming content, and writing or creating content, or participating in virtual meetings) – which can leave drained and exhausted. A common and emphasized recommendation to deal with this demand is to establish a daily exercise regimen – an intense 30-40-minute workout session has been shown to increase blood circulation, help build focus and retention, and relax muscle groups that are locked in fixed positions for extended periods. Doing this as part of your daily activities, or at minimum 3-4 days each week, promises to have considerable positive effects on your work, your abilities and your overall mood.

Managing Your Mental Health: The frustrations of working from home alongside the frustrations of being in isolation can take its toll on your mental health. The stress of work, meetings and managing your time, effort and concentration, along with the restlessness of being stuck indoors can lead to spates of depression, frustration, anxiety and loneliness. These can trigger downstream issues of alcoholism, substance abuse, or even violence propensities.

A good proven method to manage these issues is that of Journaling – writing your thoughts both as a means of self-expression (that leaves you feeling better) and as a method of clarifying your thoughts, and their train, towards a more manageable endpoint. Journal entries can be broad and general in its scope – an expression of your thoughts about life in general or the situation you find yourself in; or it can be very specific and focused on a particular issue – being frustrated with your meal plan or a work-related issue. □

PARTING THOUGHTS

The Covid-19 environment is relatively harsh on established lifestyles. But it is also an opportunity. Looking back, there is a lot we can focus on that we miss. While we can savor every memory, looking backward will not be very useful in moving forward. The world has changed as a result of Covid-19, and we may not be sure in what ways specifically or over what time frame, but there is the wide recognition



that the 'New Normal' will look differently from the past. In the same vein, trying to predict the future with precision is futile – no one could have expected this pandemic and its simultaneous global effects. Whether it results in a global recession, or a boom in consumer spending, or even shifts in the supply chain is left to be seen. Rather, focusing on the situation at hand, and devising strategies to effectively deal with the difficulties or benefitting from the opportunities would help you to build a significantly stronger tool-kit in preparation for whatever may come your way.

There is a quote that goes, “Anyone can give up, it's the easiest thing in the world to do. But to hold it together when everyone else would understand if you fell apart, that's true strength.” It is widely recognized that performance is based (up to 90%) on mental resolve than it is on physical abilities. Ghandi alluded to this when he said, “Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will.”

In this current reality, some people recognize the opportunities and are working on capitalizing on these opportunities as best they can. For others, our wills are certainly being tested, and being forced into isolation we have the opportunity to build our resolve. It takes constant effort, repeated attempts and recurring failure before we get it right. But ultimately it takes courage to admit failure and resolve to try again. Mary Anne Radmacher is quoted as saying, “Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, “I will try again tomorrow.” Who knows, from this entire experience, our greatest source of pain and strife can become our greatest strength □□□

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