Making Remote Work Permanent

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Table of Contents

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Current State

Remote Work is the *Best*. Remote Work is the *Worst*.

Halfway through 2020, my conversations with professionals about remote work have fallen into a familiar pattern:

> This is the best.

> No commute = so much more productive

> And no dry cleaning bill

> Tho my home office is my toddler's play room :\

> Do you miss seeing people at the office?

> That & NYC. I NEED to travel again!!!

> This is the worst.

The Benefits & Challenges of Remote Work

Heading into the move to remote work, a lot of chatter centered around productivity and whether it would fall. From a scientific perspective, however, there's never been any debate: when people are engaged with their work, they can be more productive when working remotely.

Remote Work is the Best (The Benefits)

Time

Remote workers don't need to commute, which saves the average American nearly an hour a day[1]. Remote workers are also free to balance their own schedules (i.e., shifting obligations to make it to the cleaners before they close and freeing up time when they have it), resulting in slightly more productivity—specifically, about 10 minutes per day.[2]

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Money

Commuting costs, food, clothes, dry cleaning, childcare: employees can save $2,000 - $7,000 per year[3] working remotely.

For companies, the savings are a bit higher, with a 2.5 work-from-home (WFH) day-per-week schedule translating into $11,000 in annual savings *per employee*.[4] While productivity is the greatest source of these savings, reduced real estate spend and lower absenteeism also make meaningful contributions.

And for communities, the savings get big fast, as those 2,000,000 annual untraveled miles means reductions in the cost of handling traffic accidents ($275,000), and reductions in both hard and soft costs related to transporting, refining, and burning those 5,000 barrels of oil that would otherwise be needed to get people to the office.[5]

While hard to quantify at the individual level, these savings do nonetheless add up: during an early 3 weeks of 2020's Covid-19 quarantine, major cities around the world experienced a 60% drop in air pollution[6], a known driver of health and policy costs at every level of society.
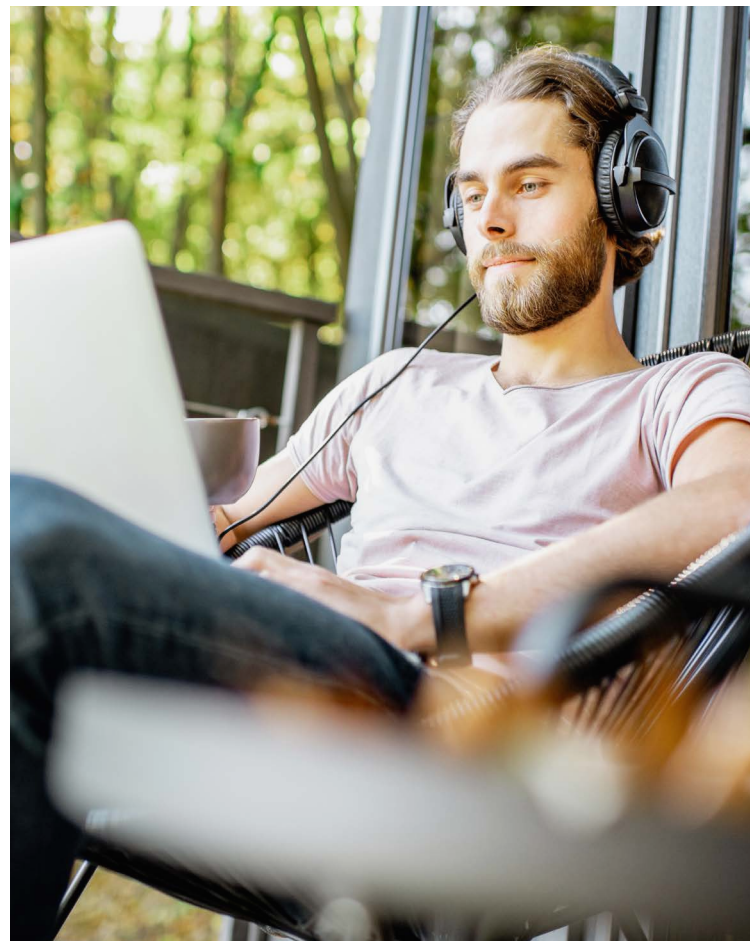
Mindset

This one's a mixed bag. On the one hand, stress levels related to being in an office go down, plus employees have more time for working out and other forms of self-care. On the other hand, people can feel isolated and find it hard to concentrate with all the distractions of home. And the long term, psychological impact of replacing real-life interactions with digital facsimiles is still being studied[7] —though we do know that it can have a stunting effect on self-development.[8]

So, What's the Problem?

All those studies were done with employees who were already engaged. Which, it turns out, is only one-third of remote employees. The other 67% are disengaged and more likely to quit.[9]

Crap.

And now we're not just talking about being "remote" in a general sense, but being remote during a pandemic-driven, enforced, society-wide isolation... meaning that small, work-from-home aggravations that people were likely to overlook during better times need to be reconsidered now that there's no escaping them.

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Remote Work is the Worst (The Challenges)

Time, money, and mindset tend to be big ticket items that get felt immediately. The challenges, on the other hand, tend to creep up on people over time.

Way too Many Assumptions about People & Work

Digital media carries less information than in-person interactions,[10] which pushes both the sender and receiver of messages to make all sorts of assumptions in their communications. Even something as simple as how much background should be shared needs to be assumed, making the line between "providing necessary detail to be helpful" and "callously mansplaining the obvious" real thin, real fast.

Cliques Become Impenetrable

"AMEN."

To start with, organizations that mix in-office with remote workers have always struggled to integrate remote teammates into office groups. (Can I get an "amen" from anyone who's ever been that lone voice dialed into a conference room, trying to follow with seven people who are there in person?)

But even amongst fully remote teams, cliques can form and can be extremely difficult to undo. As teams develop their own norms for using text abbreviations, emojis and jargon, and for the cadence and structure of messages, it can become difficult for outsiders to join conversations in a meaningful way. And unlike in the real world, where live interactions help cross-pollinate slang and jargon across teams, the opportunities for cross-pollination on digital channels is limited. For remote workers, the inability to confidently join in a conversation can become a significant barrier to an effective partnership.

No Serendipitous Encounters

In an office, serendipitous run-ins are commonplace. Ambient noise (literal and figurative) keeps us connected to what's happening around us and provides a way to correct for omissions—intended or unintended—in formal communications. But that serendipity doesn't exist remotely (it's not like we're running into people on Zoom), meaning that Slack channels, text messages, and file folders may as well not exist to those who haven't been invited to view them.

Unstructured Communication Channels Damage Our Mental Health

Humans are not terribly disciplined communicators. In a world where people are in physical proximity with each other, sidebar conversations and other asides help build relationships and create context, so that lack of discipline serves more as a feature than a bug. But in an all-digital world, that lack of discipline can quickly spiral out of control, resulting in conversational threads that veer wildly off topic, video group calls that have no way of checking a dominant personality, and a sea of message irrelevancy that simply drowns messages of any importance. But worst of all, consuming content through social networks—the very unstructured communication channels we turn to for communications—has a negative impact on mental health.[11] (Who knew?)

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Given the above, perhaps it will come as no surprise that one in five remote workers identify "collaboration and communication" as the biggest challenge they have with working remotely,[12] making it the most frequently cited drawback of remote work. Actually, it's tied for first, with this:

Loneliness

There are a few voices already sounding the alarm about an "epidemic of loneliness,"[13] and while a bit controversial, there is widespread agreement that key risk factors of loneliness, especially including living alone, are on the rise.[14] So whether remote workers genuinely struggling with loneliness or are simply more attuned to how a lack of human interaction with colleagues represents another risk factor they need to contend with, loneliness is on their minds: 20% of remote workers say that loneliness is the top challenge they face.[15]

Burnout is Real

People who are allowed to work remotely tend to intensify their work life. A lack of boundaries when working at home, overt pressure from the company, and (at least before the pandemic hit), feelings of indebtedness as a result of having been given the flexibility to be able to work at home were all found to have contributed to an intensification of work.

Why Haven't We Heard about these Drawbacks More?

Actually, we have. But when change happens, people initially get caught up in the novelty of it all, and when we're caught up in the novelty of something, we tend not to think too critically about it. We don't think about how current, real-time experiments in remote work are showing exaggerated results because of the Hawthorne Effect. (In science, one of the biggest problems with measuring the effects of change is that if people can anticipate the change in the experiment, they'll alter their behavior in the direction of what they perceive researchers want to see. The Hawthorne Effect is real and it's a real pain in the ass.) We also don't notice that the previous studies used to show the benefits of remote work were done, as mentioned before, with already-engaged employees. We just see the sheer volume of headlines touting "work from home" as a good thing, and say to ourselves, "If everyone's talking about this as a good thing, it must be… a good thing!"

But now, with the need to make remote work permanent settling in and the novelty of working from home wearing off, the drawbacks of remote work are more likely to become apparent.

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What Comes Next

Making Remote Work Permanent

3 Areas to Focus On

To make the shift to permanently remote work effective, we need a solution for keeping employees engaged, as well as engaging currently un-engaged employees, without the benefit of even occasional in-person meetings. And for this, we can turn to the typical, 3-prong approach, with focus on people, process, and technology, to create a simple, actionable guide:

The People

Embrace the Messiness of Managing People

Rule #1 of managing people is, never forget you're managing people. Rule #2 of managing people is, never forget you're managing people. Practically speaking, this means: (1) don't be surprised when your plans blow up and need to be adjusted for reasons that would totally get selected for a Buzzfeed.com list of "10 Times Workers in 2020 Acted Like It's 1820," (2) take the time to understand how your plans will be interpreted by the individuals on your team, and (3) make personal phone calls to find out what people are thinking rather than relying solely on surveys and group video calls.

Write It Down

As noted by Automattic, arguably one of the more effective remote organizations, "embrace the medium" by shifting from meetings and other forms of communication that have been optimized for in-person work to written documentation, which can be optimized for sharing and remote-friendly work.

Also in the category of "write it down:" in a digital world where regular sidebar conversations are difficult, keep note of fleeting mentions of birthdays, surgeries, or kids' names when they come up on group calls. Asking about those things during one-on-one conversations can go a long way to help people feel grounded and connected.

Call to Say "How Are You?"

Taking that last idea a bit further: set regular time aside to call or text employees and ask how they're doing. Having dealt with grief at work myself, I can personally attest to how much more genuine dedicated calls are than quick check-ins that are hastily inserted at the front of scheduled calls! Also, stand-alone calls acclimate employees to hearing from their manager (you) regularly and not just when there's a problem. And finally, they establish a model for keeping people connected that you can ask others to follow to cascade a personal touch throughout your organization.

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Celebrate the Wins

Bring the team together to celebrate one another. Even small wins become important in a remote world when you're looking to build engagement and culture! Not everyone needs it, but those who do—the extroverts on the team—really do!

Set up Friday lunch & Zooms. Yes, watching people eat via the screen is a bit awkward. But also yes, it's less awkward than not knowing anything about them. It may take a few iterations to get your Zoom lunch working (how many people should be invited to each? Should the conversation be structured?), but step into it and connect your team. Remember, one out of every five people on that zoom call isn't just managing loneliness, but considers loneliness the hardest thing to manage about remote work.

The Process

Set New Boundaries

We already established that when you can work all day, you're more likely to. To protect against the burnout that can come with an always-on mindset, companies need to take the time to set clear, intentional boundaries that make sense in a remote work environment.

Break Down Work into Tasks

Taking the time to break down work into "right sized" tasks—small enough to be understandable, big enough to allow for some flex—becomes much more important in remote environments. It may take some time to figure out how to do this well. At Moovila, we've discovered that the old management adage, "Tell them what to do, let them figure out how" works well to try to get the size right.

For instance, in the marketing department, tasks like "Set up a customer contact cadence" tend to work better than "Set up a customer email cadence," because in this scenario, "email" gets to the how, and it may turn out that a text or InMail or hand-written letter works better, so the tasks should be flexible enough to accommodate these potential changes.

Structure Communication

Miscommunications in a remote environment can be catastrophic, as errors might not get noticed until after a deadline is blown. Often, the problem isn't a lack of understanding, it's differences in understanding. (Thirty years ago, Chicago famously had to spend $309,000 to fix a problem when a tunnel, dug from one end by the state and the other end by the city, didn't quite meet in the middle despite both sides being "crystal clear" about the instructions.[20]) In loose communication channels like text and email, differences in understanding can be hard to see, let alone diagnose and correct. Structured communication tools that maintain a centralized, contextualized record of questions, clarifications, and updates, becomes critical.

Check for Equitability

Remote work policies should treat everyone equitably. For instance, enforcing video calls might sound great, but if one of your team members lives in a New York City apartment with two toddlers, and you also have a policy about keeping kids out of frame, well, that combination is simply not going to be workable for your apartment-dwelling employee. Make sure you get feedback representative of different cultures, genders, life stages, and living arrangements to check that policies work across the board.
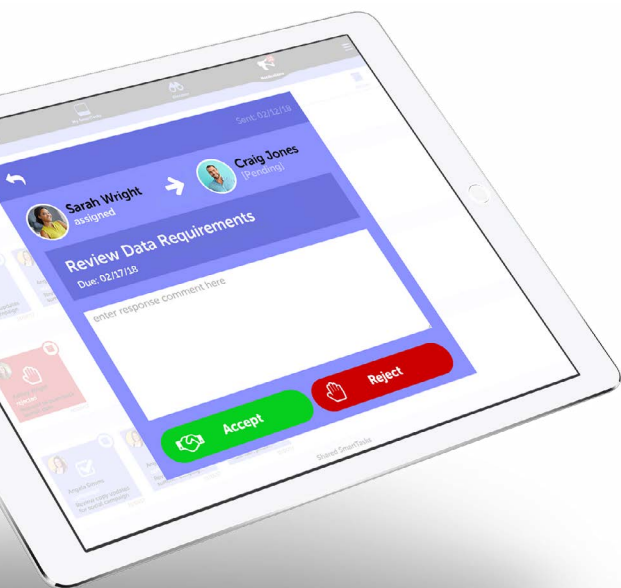
The Technology

According to studies we've undertaken with project owners, critical success factors for project success include:

- Knowing "who owns what
- Sharing a single source of truth for the latest information
- Knowing with confidence what tasks are driving the overall timeline (the "critical path," in project management parlance)

Email, Slack, and text can't help here. In fact, the proliferation of tools like these are part of the problem our surveyed project managers were dealing with. A tool like Moovila, with contextualize chat, extended team accessibility, and critical path visualizations, can help ensure that communication threads stay focused and in sync.

Specific things you should be looking for your technology to provide include:

Tracking Dependent Work

One of the biggest investments we've made at Moovila is in our Critical Path Engine. We know that a clear visualization of a project's critical path helps teams see which tasks are impacting the timeline, while inter-project dependencies and pinned dates can keep plans coordinated across silos—all critical to ensuring that a single source of truth is truly a single source of truth.
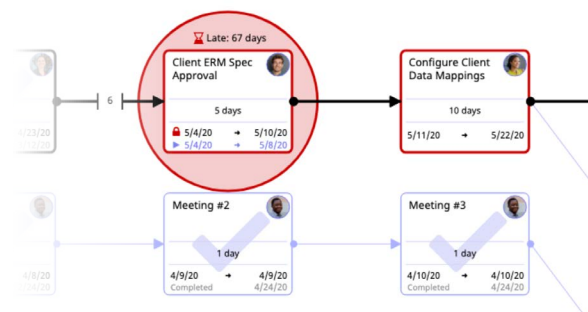
Managing Roles & Responsibilities

We know how difficult it can be to track roles and responsibilities: jobs change, teams change, priorities change. To simplify things, Moovila tracks responsibilities at the task level, requiring explicit acceptance of each task. This has the benefit of keeping work responsibilities clear and clean, even as overall job titles and org charts change.
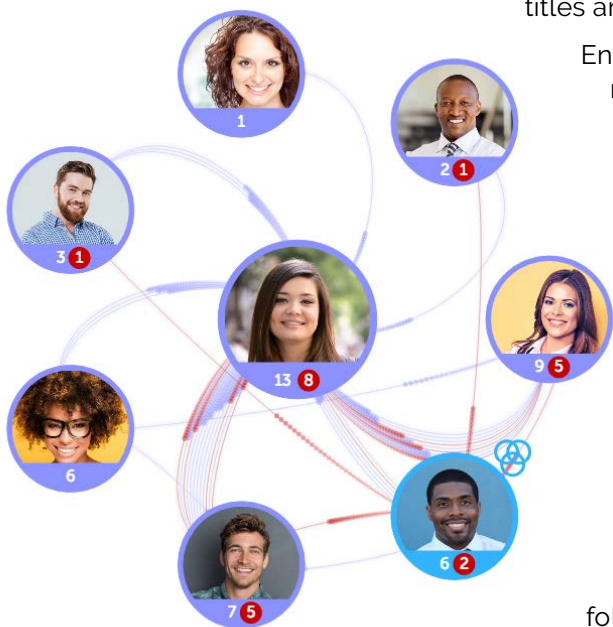
Enforcing explicit hand-offs has additional benefits, too: first, it means that delays caused by executives who are slow to sign off on new assignments are tracked. And second, it takes some of the political risk out of assignments of work: inevitably, projects reach a moment when a director in one area needs to ask a VP of another area for help (or maybe a vendor needs to ask a client to take over a task). These asks are often fraught with political dangers: ask the wrong way and watch out! By shifting those asks into the software, Moovila removes much of that risk.

Including Extended Teams

A massive challenge for many communication tools is tracking the people who have access to them, and the roles those people play. The inability to bring extended team members, including employees, customers, partners and vendors, into the fold, or integrate new team members into a project that's already in-flight, can create headaches, friction, and delays.

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Moovila solves this by allowing for project teams that can include members with different levels of access rights, allowing them to be brought into the conversation while easily protecting internally sensitive information. By keeping communication threads organized by tasks and teams—meaning that not only can extended team members be easily brought in to projects, but a new member of the team can see the historical record of what got discussed around a specific task without any distractions, sub-threads, or worry that a splinter thread might exist in a different platform with different information.

Secure

It likely goes without saying that security risks shift when people start logging into their systems remotely. Specific security threats are beyond the scope of this paper, but what does need to be taken into consideration is the fact that security protocols that prove too onerous will be circumvented, either directly (people simply won't take them), or indirectly (people will shift to an alternative communication channel). (And yes, Moovila is secure and both SOC2 and GDPR compliant.)

Accessible

The recent shift to SaaS provides a huge benefit in accessibility, augmented by companion apps and mobile-friendly websites. It's 2020—time to graduate to SaaS if you haven't already.

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Conclusion

> " *Rule #1 of managing people is, never forget you're managing people. Rule #2 of managing people is, never forget you're managing people.* "

Closing Thoughts

Remote work is the best, remote work is the worst. Either way, moving forward, remote work will not be a choice, meaning companies will have to figure out how to capture its benefits while mitigating its risks.

The right approach to your people (patience!), processes (thoughtful!), and technology (intelligent!) can help you accomplish these goals. And the larger your organization, the more important enabling technology will be.

Ultimately, helping your organization keep tabs on who owns what, which tasks are driving the overall timeline, and tracking everything in a single place is what will help you accomplish these goals. To do this, tools that provide structured communications, clarity around dependencies (critical path, including inter-project dependencies), and extended team access—like Moovila—will help you win.

TL;DR
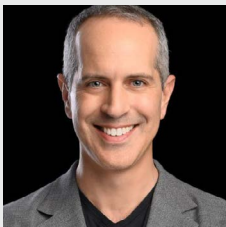
About the Author

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