



Zoomed out

As pandemic restrictions lift, many companies are left pondering the future of remote work, from how it shapes employees to how it impacts a company's bottom line. But with the right attitude – and the right training – many of the world's largest multinationals are showing just how profitable embracing WFH can be. Briana Pagano speaks with IT leadership expert **Surinder Kahai** to understand some of the most costly challenges for virtual teams – and how to combat them.

One day, employees were clocking into work, sitting in cubicles and chatting over the water cooler. Then, along came Covid-19 – and everything changed. Overnight, millions of people were thrust into the world's largest work from home experiment. Offices became obsolete. Commutes shrunk from miles to minutes. Boundaries broke down. Pets were promoted to colleagues. Tracksuits reigned supreme. Now, with vaccination rates rising and offices reopening, companies are at a crossroads. Many workers want to stay remote – in fact, 41% of UK employees polled in an Owl Labs survey said they would likely resign before returning to the office.

But in the back of their minds, leaders can't help but wonder: does remote work really work?

Surinder Kahai is no stranger to this question.

As an associate professor at Binghamton University School of Management, he has dedicated his career to researching virtual teams, IT leadership and computer-mediated communications – topics that were all thrust into the global spotlight during the pandemic. For most companies, says Kahai, the benefits of remote work are readily apparent: from decreased real estate footprints to increased talent pools. All the same, this new way of working also poses significant unseen challenges – some of which can be costly. ►

Human capital



The innovation imperative

For starters, Kahai believes that remote work will have an adverse impact on innovation. Why? Because innovation, he explains, is the result of a collaboration between two people who think completely differently. “For instance, somebody in finance and somebody in marketing might come up with a brilliant idea no one thought of before,” explains Kahai. “Or somebody working in IT might talk to somebody in HR, and together they invent a way to make employees more satisfied by using technology. It’s all about unrelated people who have not been talking to each other on a regular basis coming together and sharing ideas.”

To put it another way, innovation requires informal social interactions – chance encounters that traditionally happen at the lunch table, over the water cooler or during an office social hour. However, these interactions are few and far between in a digital environment. “Spontaneous innovation comes out of spontaneous interaction,” emphasises Kahai. “The best ideas aren’t those you plan. They emerge naturally from interactions with someone else who thinks differently from you, who is in a different domain altogether. That cannot happen online.”

So how can companies preserve innovation in a remote climate? One strategy, suggests Kahai, is to host in-person social gatherings throughout the year. “Even if someone is working from Iowa, make a point of saying ‘please visit us,’” he says. “Once every three months, four months, six months – whatever it is, you’ve got to do it.”

Consider the social media management company Buffer, which has been fully remote since 2015. Before the pandemic, it was hosting at least one team retreat per year in locations across the world, from San Diego to Singapore. “It’s remarkable to see the impact a week in the same place has on our team,” notes Buffer’s chief of special projects on the company’s blog. “After a week together, remote work is smoother, teammates are more energised and forgiving, projects

leap-frog previous obstacles, and everyone is more connected to the mission.”

Of course, Covid-19 has made it nearly impossible for coworkers to meet in person. As a result, video conferencing platforms like Zoom soared in popularity, providing a way to connect from afar. But Zoom calls aren’t a long-term solution, says Kahai. “Social chit-chat is missing on these calls, and that’s not natural,” he explains. In person, colleagues can pair off and have informal side conversations while waiting for a staff meeting to start. The same can’t be said for video calls: platforms like Zoom also fall short when it comes to providing spontaneity. While many of the best in-person interactions aren’t planned, video calls by their very nature are organised and regimented. As Kahai says, this is a major problem. “Human connection comes from spontaneity and the fact that you care,” he says. “You cannot plan that.”

Sure enough, many executives are struggling to strike the right balance for virtual communications. Some businesses, like HSBC and Citigroup, have piloted ‘Zoom-free’ days as a potential solution to employee burnout. “The blurring of lines between home and work and the relentlessness of the pandemic workday have taken a toll on our wellbeing,” explained Citigroup CEO Jen Fraser in a March 2021 memo. “It’s simply not sustainable. Since a return to any kind of new normal is still a few months away for many of us, we need to reset some of our working practices.”

In the long run, simple measures like this may even help businesses protect their bottom lines. According to one estimate, disengaged employees cost the UK economy an average of £340bn each year – so keeping staff happy and healthy should be a top priority in the virtual workplace.

Mind the gap

In a similar vein, enterprises have to proactively help employees preserve their humanity in a world of Zoom calls and Slack channels. After setting staff up with the right technology, says Kahai, leaders often make the mistake of thinking their work is done. But this is only the beginning. “So many leaders think that switching to virtual work is all about giving employees technology so they can connect to the network, email, make Zoom calls, and function as if they were sitting in their office,” he explains. “That’s not the end of the story. Virtual work means that the person on the other side is still a human being, and that person is missing the human touch.”

In other words, technology alone can only take companies so far. “There’s enough research telling us that technology is only a part of the solution, never a complete solution,” adds Kahai. “One has to combine that with being human. Because with technology, you are only creating distance or the potential for distance. The only way we can bridge that distance is by being human.”

41%

UK employees would rather resign than return to the office.

Owl Labs

Kahai brings this point to life by referencing a psychological concept called the 'attribution effect'. "When you're working in isolation, you have all kinds of gaps in knowledge about others," he explains – and in most cases, people automatically fill those blank spaces with negative assumptions. Sure enough, social psychology studies show that people are quick to attribute their own behavioural shortcomings to special circumstances – including illness, caretaking responsibilities and burnout – but are slow to show others the same courtesy. Rather than attributing a coworker's poor performance to some unknown personal difficulties, they're more likely to blame character failings like laziness or incompetence. All this changes, however, when coworkers have the chance to form genuine connections. As Kahai puts it: "When we're human and connect with others, then we're less likely to fill those knowledge gaps with something negative. Through connection, you can see what challenges another person is facing."

Fundamental to success in the digital landscape, social bonding stops the attribution effect in its tracks – tearing down digital walls of anonymity, driving empathy through connection and encouraging camaraderie among teammates. For one of the world's largest all-remote companies, GitLab, virtual coffee chats have been instrumental in building a strong sense of community. Moving beyond traditional happy hours and trivia nights, companies can also try more unconventional team-building events. For instance, Danish company Lykke & Co hosts virtual murder mystery and bank robbery simulations to strengthen staff relationships.

Goodbye, boundaries

Another major obstacle for remote teams, stresses Kahai, is the inevitable conflict between work life and home life. "Employees have two lives that they're trying to merge into one, and it's a huge challenge," he says. According to staffing company Robert Half, remote employees wind up working more hours – and 70% of professionals admit to toiling away on weekends as well.

According to Kahai, there are two types of virtual workers. "First, there are the integrators," he says. "They love remote work. For them, shifting from one thing to another is not a challenge." However, few companies are composed entirely of integrators – which leads Kahai to his next category. "The second type of person likes good boundaries," he explains. "For them, remote work is a challenge. Going to an office helped them create boundaries, but now you're leaving them to their own devices to figure out where to cut off one thing and begin the other thing. It's a challenge for them to turn themselves off at the end of the workday."

During the pandemic, many pundits suggested that managers set clear guidelines to establish boundaries – for example, banning emailing after 5pm. But Kahai says that since each employee is different, a one-size-

fits-all approach simply won't work. "Some people need boundaries, and some people can manage without boundaries," he emphasises. For instance, employees who struggle with boundaries might want a strict nine-to-five schedule, whereas their integrator colleagues enjoy setting asynchronous work hours. For this reason, Kahai resists hard and fast rules like limiting email communications to certain hours of the day.

"Some of the best leaders," he explains, "are what we call transformational leaders." Rather than treating all employees the same, transformational leaders show everyone individualised consideration. "Employees' work habits, needs for structure, and dreams might all be different," Kahai adds. "As a leader, you have to know that and adapt. Maybe one employee is busy with a kid during the daytime, and the evening is the only time when they can work. If they're working all night, they might want that midnight email."

Thinking outside the cubicle

Given the many complexities of remote work, leaders can't expect their staff to acclimate overnight. To truly succeed in a virtual environment, says Kahai, companies must make time for training.

Training, he admits, was always missing from the world of remote work. "Even before the pandemic, you'd see upper management at companies shipping out work to different parts of the world and assuming, 'We have Skype and email, so we should be able to manage remote work that's done in India and China,'" says Kahai. "And they wouldn't provide any training to the people who were managing the remote workers. Even now, I don't know many companies that have embraced training for remote work."

According to Kahai, this has to change. "Training is needed, both on the side of the leaders as well as the employees," he emphasises. Companies have already charted the landscape of cubicles and water coolers. But the virtual world is a different beast entirely. And at the end of the day, continuous education can be the difference between teams working remotely and remotely working. ●

€340bn

Cost of disengaged employees on the UK economy per year.

Office for National Statistics

