

FROM ADVANCED HEADSETS TO LARGE MONITORS

HOW IT LEADERS ARE EMPOWERING THE HYBRID WORKFORCE

Alison Taber's home "office" setup—a small laptop sitting on a dining room table—should be familiar to anyone forced to work from home by the coronavirus. Months after the lockdown, Alison already knows her working environment needs to change.

"It's not very comfortable," she says. "I'm in the center of the house where I hear all the noise, especially with the kids."

IT professionals know Alison's situation well. The overnight shift to employees working at home has created unprecedented challenges to provide better equipment and support.

In the early weeks, the priority was simply to keep employees connected so work could go on. Now, IT is taking a closer look at ways to improve the remote working experience.

Alison's home setup challenges are typical. As a customer service representative for a software company, she spends much of her day responding to support tickets. Many of her calls are with frustrated customers. But during these important conversations, she finds herself toggling between several applications on a 12-inch screen while trying to ignore the ruckus in her household.

Fortunately, improving the remote setup of employees is an area where IT can have an immediate and massive impact, one that makes a measurable difference to the business.

When Boston Consulting Group surveyed 12,000 professionals in three countries about their satisfaction with various remote working tools, the results were significant:

"Employees who are satisfied with their tools are about twice as likely to have maintained or improved their productivity on collaborative tasks as those not satisfied with their tools."

For Alison, relief arrived when IT sent her a professional headset with active noise-cancellation to reduce distractions. The company also provided a larger monitor so she could more easily switch between applications while on calls. In addition, she ordered a better desk and now plans to spruce up a basement area to create a quieter and less distracting environment.

For an enterprise IT team, delivering similar capabilities to a workforce of thousands of users can be a challenge. In a recent study, Atlassian surveyed 5,000 remote workers globally and found that nearly a third—29%—say their devices, software or systems don't function as well as those back at the office.⁴

And of those who were unprepared to work from home? Nearly half said they'd need a better working space to continue working remotely.

Companies can't take for granted that the work-from-home environment is suitable for business.

An eye-opening study by Nulab found that only 58.5% of those working remotely used a desk.³ About 13% used a dining table, 11% a couch, and about 7% a bed. Not surprisingly, people working from a desk are more likely to be more productive.

A Chicago-based ad agency loaned employees chairs, stand-up desks and large-screen computer monitors to keep them happier while working from home. The agency also provided a stipend for employees who needed to upgrade their home internet connection.

Many companies are following a similar path by reimbursing employees for authorized purchases or offering stipends for office equipment. Other firms allow employees to order from internal catalogues. With either approach, companies can create a safer and more professional environment for staff by offering programs that provide flexible options.

29% OF REMOTE WORKERS

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— ACCORDING TO ATLIASSIAN —

PREPARE FOR A DIFFERENT FUTURE

Will people ever return to an office full-time? For knowledge workers, going back to the old ways seems unlikely. According to McKinsey & Company, most employees, about 80%, enjoy working from home.⁵

Businesses are also realizing several important benefits, including cost savings and better access to global talent.

And management, seeing improvements in productivity, has gotten over its historic antipathy towards remote work.

Indeed, many experts believe the work-from-anywhere phenomenon represents a profound cultural shift, with more people than ever expected to permanently split time between home and office.

One of the factors driving this global shift in mindset is the unpredictability of the virus. In every region, relaxed restrictions have often been followed by a virus resurgence, making lockdowns part of the ebb and flow of this era. As a result, management and employees are preparing for a prolonged remote work experience.

In France, Fred Gravier has experienced this phenomenon first-hand. Fred directs marketing in Western Europe for a large, multinational company. He's been a "hybrid worker" for the past three years—that is, working from his home outside of Paris a couple of days each week and going into the office for the balance.

With the lockdown in March, he and thousands of European colleagues were forced to work from home full-time.

When restrictions in France began to loosen in June, his company sought to welcome staff back to the office via a scheduled "Office Day."

"They were very safety conscious," Fred says. The re-entry involved email reservations, temperature checks, hand sanitizing, social distancing, and visual reminders such as floor markings.

About 20% of the staff participated, but the experiment was short-lived. By fall, the virus hit Europe with a new wave of infections. Fred and his colleagues were sent back home.

This unpredictability makes it critical to set up the remote work environment. Like it or not, for many people, home is the office for the foreseeable future. More than ever, we have come to rely on our technology to maintain our human connections.

For Fred, his headset and camera have added a welcome dose of humanity to his interactions with colleagues. In his role as director, he works with a global team, many of whom he has never met in person. Although they've always talked regularly, before the pandemic, "nobody wanted to use the video," he says.

Today, everyone is switching on the camera. And in what has become an important ritual, each morning the team meets for a 15-minute video check-in over coffee. Whether the conversation turns to family, pets, or who's binge-watching what matters less than the human bonds that are formed.

Fred says the added visual communication makes him feel much more connected to his remote colleagues. "I work with people in 50 different countries," Fred shares. "I used to only hear their voices. Now I feel closer, like we're part of something together."

Jason Kleespies is the director of IT for a Denver-based law firm with branch offices stretched across the US.

His company was better prepared than most for transitioning to a remote workforce.

"Even before the pandemic, we had made the commitment to establish a 100% mobile workforce," Jason says. "We had a ton of meetings to plan how this would look."

Jason's focus was two-pronged: maintain productivity as well as security. Initially, his company had three different voice platforms, and he realized the firm needed to simplify and consolidate their equipment.

"One of the first choices we made was to support all the partners, attorneys and support staff with advanced headsets," Jason comments. "Depending on their role and responsibilities, not everyone required high-resolution cameras, while some did. But we determined early on that headsets with active noise cancellation, and which integrated with Microsoft Teams, were a must-have across the company."

~80% OF EMPLOYEES

enjoy working from home.

— ACCORDING TO MCKINSEY & COMPANY —

LOVE IT / LOATHE IT

Common kudos and complaints from remote workers, and how IT can address them

LOVE IT DEPENDABLE BANDWIDTH
IT Solution: Help users upgrade to an appropriate ISP package. Standard home products may be inadequate.

LOVE IT DOCKING STATIONS
IT Solution: Make it easy for users to travel between home and office by having a docking capability in both places.

LOVE IT LARGE MONITORS
IT Solution: Offer users options suitable for their environment and work style.

LOVE IT SHORTENING LEARNING CURVES
IT Solution: Offer users equipment that is the same in the office and at home, or structure a kit of peripherals (e.g., Bluetooth headset, video camera, wireless mouse) that can be easily set up in any environment.

LOATHE IT BACKGROUND NOISE
IT Solution: Provide professional headsets or speaker phones with hybrid Active Noise Cancellation (ANC).

LOATHE IT NO PHYSICAL WHITE BOARD
IT Solution: A digital pen and pad allow for easier, faster sketching on digital whiteboards during video calls.

LOATHE IT UNCOMFORTABLE FURNITURE
IT Solution: Consult with an ergonomics expert to provide guidance to staff and to identify the right solutions for equipping a home environment.

LOATHE IT POOR SOUND AND VIDEO
IT Solution: Consider a professional-grade webcam with HD resolution and built-in microphone, especially for executives and sales. For standard users, pair a good quality laptop camera with a professional headset compatible with UC programs like Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Add ring lighting if needed.

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1. Boston Consulting Group, "Remote Work: The New Normal," 2020. <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2020/06/remote-work-the-new-normal>

2. Atlassian, "Remote Work: The New Normal," 2020. <https://www.atlassian.com/resources/articles/remote-work-trends>

3. Nulab, "Remote Work: The New Normal," 2020. <https://www.nulab.com/remote-work-the-new-normal/>

4. Atlassian, "Remote Work: The New Normal," 2020. <https://www.atlassian.com/resources/articles/remote-work-trends>

5. McKinsey & Company, "The State of Remote Work," 2020. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/technology/our-insights/the-state-of-remote-work>