

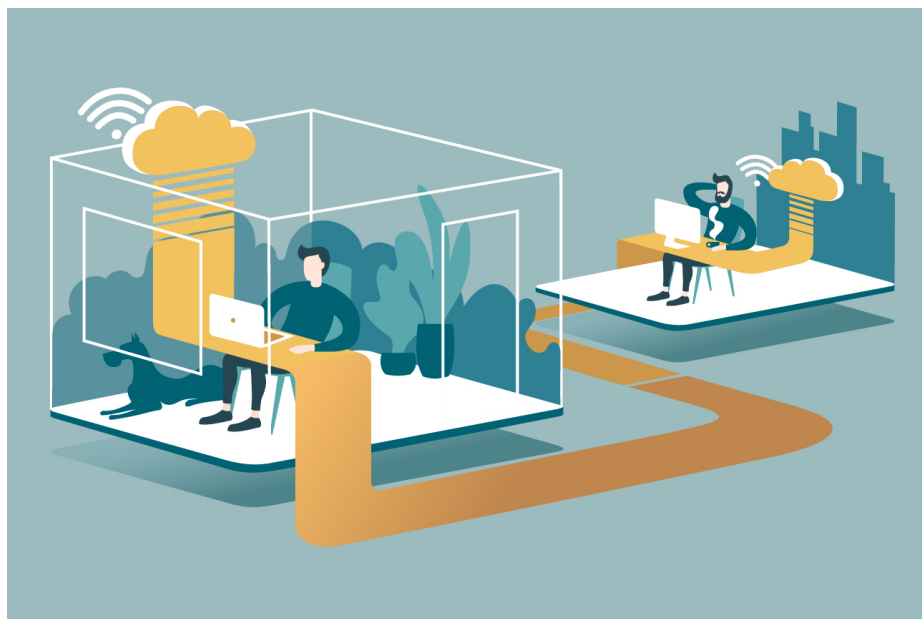
COLUMN

Three Elements for Successful Virtual Working



Lynda Gratton • April 06, 2020

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Our cumulative experience of what makes virtual working succeed, and what gets in its way, can offer valuable insight at this challenging time.

In recent years, millions of people worldwide have adapted to working virtually. In recent weeks, tens of millions have joined them, and more will continue to do so in the coming months.

The lessons from the past — on how to acknowledge and balance the roles of technology, social needs, and work rhythms — are of crucial importance to us now. They can also become catalysts to longer-term change.

Past Waves of Virtual Working

First, a brief history. People have adapted to virtual working in three waves. In each wave they have come to terms with the benefits and limitations of technology, the social

impact of collaborating from a distance, and how the design of work impacts productivity.

Virtual working began in earnest in the 1980s, fueled by technological developments. Freelancers — the social pioneers of virtual working — used the early incarnations of personal computers to design products, build code, and write and edit from their homes. From a work-life perspective, they loved the autonomy and flexibility, and they began to teach others how to configure home workspaces.

In the second wave, beginning around the early 2000s, the practice of virtual remote working expanded from the pioneering freelancers to include corporations.

Technology companies' “anytime, anywhere” mantra was taking hold. Across the world, businesses began to let employees work from home. They also began to *expect* them to work from home, at any hour of the day. Capabilities drove expectations. The 2003 outbreak of SARS (severe acute respiratory

syndrome), which spread to 29 countries, gave that agenda momentum.

But even though working remotely was becoming vogue, managers fretted about how to manage and measure performance of employees who were doing their jobs anytime, anywhere — and out of sight. There were concerns that as people became isolated, their capacity to work collaboratively and to innovate decreased. Virtual working could be lonely.

That, in a sense, was the impetus for *virtual coworking*. Concerned about the downsides of solitary work lives, people began to cluster in coworking spaces. They wanted both the flexibility of virtual work and the camaraderie of fellow workers. At the same time, companies such as Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), based in India, began to build enterprisewide platforms that enabled all employees, wherever they were located, to work collectively and also gave

management tools to assigns tasks and manage performance.

This set the tone for where we are today: having advanced collaborative platforms and tools *and* an understanding of the importance of face-to-face communication for emotional well-being.

The Current Wave: Mass Experimentation

The challenges we are facing now as managers and employees are unprecedented. In the past few weeks, many people have begun working from home with just one or two days' notice, and their struggles have been fueled by the speed, the sense of shock, and the inclusive nature of the shift — *everyone* is affected.

That means that home-based workers are no longer just young parents who prefer to work

from home, or employees of companies that are trying out schedules where people spend four days at the office and one day at home, or citizens of countries like Denmark, where flexible working is the norm. They are everyone, everywhere.

We are all facing similar challenges, and we all have to be inventive and adaptive in our responses. But while the challenges are extraordinary in terms of speed and breadth, let's remember that we are not moving into entirely uncharted territory.

Three Key Elements of Virtual Work

What we've learned from the earlier waves of virtual working is that we need to acknowledge and balance three distinct elements: technology, social needs, and work rhythms.

Technology: Keep it intuitive and be prepared to experiment. Technology has

always been the enabler for virtual working. We know it best meets people's needs when it is part of the regular flow of work and matches the task at hand. That means, for example, using group platforms for project work, switching to video for more interactive conversations, and using the telephone to catch up.

These major jolts can be a time for experimenting with technology, and some early adopters are showing what this experimentation could look like. Take, for example, the global law firm Dentons, which launched its [Big Inclusion Project](#) with an all-hands, 72-hour online brainstorming event. Generating more than 3,000 actions and ideas, it was a huge impetus to change. It also built confidence in working virtually among its attendees.

Social needs: Reimagine the home workspace and make it human. We learned from the early freelancers that their home spaces were crucial. They did best when

their workspaces protected them from outside distractions, provided easy access to the tools of their trade, and were dedicated exclusively to work. No doubt this will be tricky in households where more than one person is working and children are off from school. These unique circumstances will require both empathy and agility from managers as people rapidly adapt to these new circumstances.

We also learned from the third wave that the hubs of virtual coworking were created to balance the isolation of working from home. People who clustered in these local physical hubs needed to feel they were part of a bigger community.

For many people, these social connections are not going to be possible to maintain. During my recent webinar about virtual working, the almost 3,000 participants were polled about what they were feeling. When asked which of several statements best described their experience with virtual work,

just 2% chose “I find the technology frustrating.” Others selected “I keep getting distracted by my family” (10%), “Gives me time to really think and concentrate” (15%), and “Love the autonomy and flexibility” (25%). But by far the biggest percentage (46%) highlighted their social isolation, choosing the phrase “It works OK — but I miss the social interaction of the office.”

So it is crucial that we find other ways of making the workspace human.

Communication systems like video will be essential, as will enabling employees to participate in informal watercooler conversations, virtual coffee breaks, or virtual after-hours get-togethers. (Some joke about meeting up for a “quarantini”: It’s like a martini, but you drink it alone.)

Work rhythms: Embrace a daily ritual and focus on values. We’ve learned from virtual workers that they do best when there is a natural rhythm to their daily calendars and rituals. That could mean dressing in work

clothes, or having check-in meetings at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. It could also mean always starting projects with a video touch point, and scheduling additional video check-ins at the midway and end points of projects. The emphasis is on checking *in* rather than checking *up*.

What companies like TCS have shown from their enterprisewide platforms is the importance of building strong collaboration practices, such as deciding up front on goals and key roles, clearly defining boundaries and spans of control, clarifying tasks and processes, and measuring roles and commitments. In times when employees are out of sight, TCS leaders emphasize the importance of focusing on values. For them, trust is key. They have to trust that people working from home are engaged and productive. They described it this way: “Trust someone until they have proven untrustworthy.”

Outlook for the Future

There is no doubt that as the weeks and months elapse, these will be tough times for everyone. But as leaders, you have the chance to set the tone right now by focusing on these three key elements.

Looking forward, what is clear is that even when all of this is over, we will not be in the same place we started. One Chinese businessman said as much to me in early March over a video link: “In the pre-pandemic world,” he noted, “I used to travel between Hong Kong and Beijing once a week for a couple of meetings. Now I find I can do four or five meetings a day. My productivity has significantly increased.” After China gets back to normal, will he still fly every week? I doubt it.

We’ve all developed bad working habits. Scheduling too many meetings, having long commutes, and not spending enough time

with our families are common complaints that people have long said they wished could be fixed. Our carbon footprints as well as the wear and tear on our mental health have warned us this behavior was wrong. But these are working habits that are deeply ingrained and hard to shift.

This moment gives us an opportunity to shift them and to reset how we work. I don't think for a moment that the COVID-19 pandemic is the end of colocated work — we humans thrive on face-to-face interaction, and our innovative spirit demands it. But what it will do is show more starkly than ever how we can embrace both the virtual and the physical and can get the most from both. In the post-pandemic world, those leaders who are able to blend these ways of working will recover better and be more resilient for the future.

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