

[AUDITING \(/TOPICS/AUDITING\)](/TOPICS/AUDITING)

[TECHNOLOGY \(/TOPICS/TECHNOLOGY\)](/TOPICS/TECHNOLOGY)

[EXCEL YOURSELF \(/TOPICS/EXCEL\)](/TOPICS/EXCEL)

[MOR](#)

[SUPERANNUATION \(/TOPICS/SUPERANNUATION\)](/TOPICS/SUPERANNUATION)

[WORKPLACE \(/TOPICS/WORKPLACE\)](/TOPICS/WORKPLACE)

[CAREERS \(/TOPICS/CARE](/TOPICS/CAREERS)

[LEADERSHIP \(/TOPICS/LEADERSHIP\)](/TOPICS/LEADERSHIP)

[ECONOMICS \(/TOPICS/ECONOMICS\)](/TOPICS/ECONOMICS)

[TAXATION \(/TOPICS/TAXAT](/TOPICS/TAXAT)

[ACCOUNTING \(/TOPICS/ACCOUNT](/TOPICS/ACCOUNT)

How to get the most out of a flexible workforce

[WORKPLACE \(/TOPICS/WORKPLACE\)](/TOPICS/WORKPLACE)

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Managers may need to implement new systems and develop existing skills to ensure they get the most out of a more flexible workforce.

If flexible workplaces are to become a mainstay of our working lives in the long term, managers may need new methods of ensuring that productivity remains high.

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“As a leader, you need to role model the right type of behaviour – agree on what’s expected about responding to emails outside standard working hours,” she adds.

Robertson believes that communication and interpersonal skills are even more vital when team members do not physically share a workspace.

“The mentor also provides encouragement, skills reinforcement and advice on alternative strategies, which helps the mentee become capable of doing things that they didn’t think they could – and this is what leads to improved productivity and performance.” Peter Wilson AM FCPA, CPA Australia

“Managers may need to put more effort into what I call ‘people work’. That includes increased clarity around their team’s objectives and connecting with their people in one-on-one and group settings.

“Ask your team questions like, ‘What surprised you today?’ or ‘What did you learn that you weren’t expecting to learn?’ This kind of collaboration happens more informally when people are in the same physical location – for instance, when you bump into someone while you’re making a cup of tea.”

Peter Wilson AM FCPA, the president and chairperson of [CPA Australia \(https://www.cpaustralia.com.au/\)](https://www.cpaustralia.com.au/), and the author of [Make Mentoring Work \(http://www.cpaustralia.com.au/Library/Library.mvc/Itemdetails/151908\)](http://www.cpaustralia.com.au/Library/Library.mvc/Itemdetails/151908), agrees.

“As a manager in a remote space, you have fewer sources of intelligence on the total output of work. That requires you to be more proactive in ringing your team to see how they are going.”

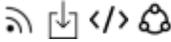
However, this may require overcoming an inclination to organise fewer catch-ups while working remotely, he adds.

“The longer you are alone, the more self-contained you can become – you might start to think that you don’t need to know what’s going on. It takes a fair amount of mental resilience to be proactive and continue to call people, and find out what they’re up to.”

It can also be time-consuming. As Wilson has discovered, it can even offset the time gained from the disappearance of the commute.

“Last week, I needed to discuss a complex matter with the board and the CEO before we all met together online. If we’d all been in the room together, we could have caught up in pairwise combinations for about an hour before the board meeting. Instead, the calls took me most of the day, because we were all working remotely.”

CPA Library resource: [Make mentoring work. Read now. \(http://www.cpaustralia.com.au/Library/Library.mvc/Itemdetails/151908\)](http://www.cpaustralia.com.au/Library/Library.mvc/Itemdetails/151908)



By Jessica Mudditt

Many employers have recently discovered the benefits of **flexible working arrangements** (</articles/2018/08/13/make-flexible-work-successful>) for their staff, such as improved mental health, higher productivity rates and reduced absenteeism. This is confirmed by **Creating Mentally Healthy Workplaces: A Review of the Research** (<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/creating-mentally-healthy-workplaces.pdf>), a joint report published by the Black Dog Institute, the University of New South Wales and the National Mental Health Commission in April.

The report also found that **mental health problems** (</articles/2020/03/23/mental-health-in-a-roving-workforce>) are costing Australian businesses in the vicinity of A\$11 billion each year – and that many of these issues are exacerbated by overly rigid workplace practices.

However, the benefits stemming from flexible work are not conferred automatically. Managers may need to implement new systems and develop existing skills to ensure they get the most out of a more flexible workforce.

Blurred lines

When the boundaries between work and home are blurred, many of us struggle to switch off at the end of the day. If left unchecked, this can **result in burnout** (</articles/2019/12/01/prevent-burnout-3-symptoms-and-how-to-avoid-them>).

“Many people have told me they feel like they have been working long days without necessarily being all that productive,” says workplace expert Michelle Gibbings. “If there’s no structure around when you switch off, it’s very easy to just keep working.”

To combat this, many leaders have been holding Zoom catch-ups at the end of the workday with the purpose of switching gears.

“Those in the meeting are not allowed to talk about work, because the intention is to draw a line under the workday. They might talk about their pets, or take the call while going for a walk outside,” explains Fiona Robertson, culture and leadership expert and author of the forthcoming book, *Rules of Belonging*.

She says managers also need to be clear around the rules of engagement. Creating a shared understanding about what can be done with a phone call or email, as opposed to a face-to-face discussion, will help prevent burnout and “Zoom fatigue”, which occurs as a result of excessive video calling.

To adapt, managers may need to be more rigorous in **scheduling and prioritising their day-to-day tasks** (<https://www.intheblack.com/articles/2020/08/01/9-time-management-techniques>).

Another way to prevent managers being overburdened with check-ins is to establish multiple channels of communication and development, such as by setting up a mentoring or coaching program.

The joint report found that this can also help boost personal resilience and stress management.

“If you’ve got a mentor – even a virtual mentor – they can offer a safe harbour where it’s possible to have honest discussions,” Wilson says.

“The mentor also provides encouragement, skills reinforcement and advice on alternative strategies, which helps the mentee become capable of doing things that they didn’t think they could – and this is what leads to improved productivity and performance.”

During a time of ongoing uncertainty and broader economic hardship, ensuring that all team members feel connected, heard and understood is crucial to achieving the interrelated goals of productivity, performance and **wellbeing** ([/articles/2020/04/01/pros-and-cons-of-corporate-wellness-programs](https://www.intheblack.com/articles/2020/04/01/pros-and-cons-of-corporate-wellness-programs)).

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