Coronavirus & Working from Home: Part 1

**Working from Home: It's Initially Disorienting
Tips for Employers on Successfully Transitioning to Remote Work**

by Ted Archer

If you're an employer concerned about the spread of COVID-19, you're likely encouraging your staff to work from home. The Internet abounds with articles espousing the benefits of remote work: increased productivity, heightened employee engagement, improved morale, etc. As COO of a consulting company with a 100% distributed workforce, I can tell you that these benefits are real.

But there's a catch: *the truth is that working from home can be extremely disorienting*.

I last held a traditional office job eleven years ago. Back then society was on edge because of the financial crisis: jobs were being slashed, homes were being foreclosed, and stock markets were tanking. Hopefully we will avoid the deep sense of despair that we experienced in 2008-2009, but it's prudent for today's employers to think about ways for professionals to stay home and avoid the office.

> **This is Part 1 of our series**
> ***Coronavirus & Working from Home.***
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> It includes insights from Alliances Management staff, who have worked remotely since the company's inception in 2006.
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> The entire eight-part series can be viewed on our website.

I vividly remember my first week working remotely. I was excited, motivated, caffeinated, and ready to make my mark on a new company and with new clients. But each morning, after getting through the email backlog and then periodically throughout each day, I remember sitting in a quiet room (no kids back then!) and wondering *now what*? It wasn't that I didn't have scheduled calls or work to do. What was missing were the millions of little

cues about how my day was going. I had always naturally absorbed that information at the water cooler, at lunch, or simply by walking past a coworker's cubicle.

I had plenty of work to do, but not having *that information* was disorienting.

Eleven years later our staff of three has grown more than twenty fold. As coronavirus-concerned employers send their professionals home, I would encourage them to take steps to increase information flow among staff members. Here are four general ideas:

## Establish Clear Working Hours & Communication Expectations

Though most employees will welcome the opportunity to work remotely, managers should be very clear about when employees must be "in the office," the expected time frame for responding to colleague and managers' communications, and, importantly, the conditions under which an employee may ignore such communications to focus exclusively on a deliverable. Increased time for intense, focused work is one of the greatest benefits of working remotely, so it needs to be encouraged—but encouraged in such a way that team members don't feel ignored or dismissed.

"Check In" with Staff and Colleagues Frequently

In the office, your employees get dozens of points of feedback throughout the day: a casual comment at the cubicle about an email or a deadline, a thumbs-up from across the room, and more. With the office gone, good managers need to "stop by" virtually to ask if staff need help or if they have questions about a project. The problem is that the office check-ins are natural and unobtrusive, whereas the virtual ones can feel forced. Managers should go out of their way to offer help, express support, and stress that the reason for increased communication is to replace some of what is lost in a face-to-face environment.

Minimize Large Meetings and Manage Them Efficiently

I'm not a big fan of meetings. They have their place, but managers should always have a clear agenda, invite only those participants who are truly needed, and efficiently drive the meeting toward its objectives. Remote meetings can be even more disruptive than face-to-face meetings. All new remote workers will intuitively try to find new ways to efficiently interact with one another. They will send additional email, hop on impromptu video chats to
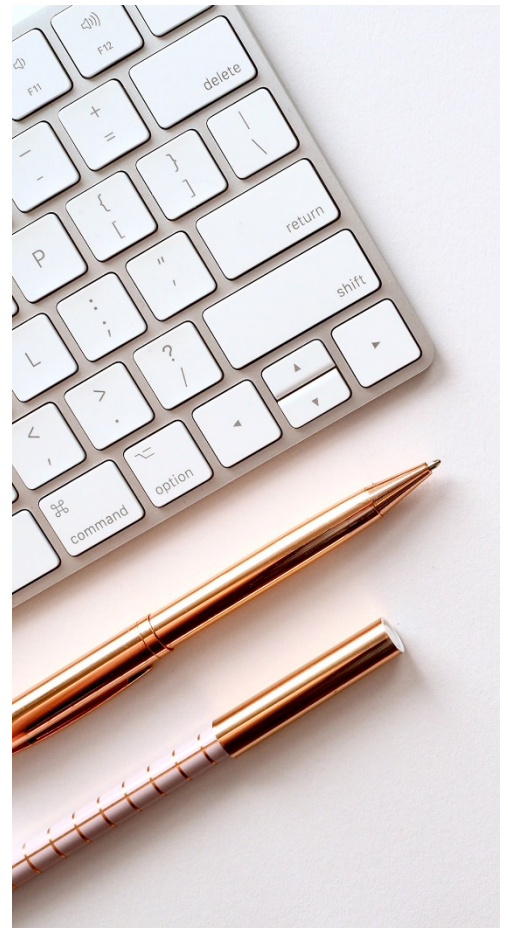
work through an issue, and manage several group chats to get the information they need. That workflow—different from the office but designed to transmit the same information—gets disrupted when everyone is pulled into a virtual room.

Encourage "Mini-Deadlines" for Projects

Managers should always establish clear expectations about when deliverables are due. However, in a face-to-face environment, staff and colleagues get more informal feedback on a project's status, see each other working, and have a greater sense of where things stand. When everyone is working from home, managers worry more about a project's progress, colleagues don't see progress being made, and there is heightened overall anxiety about deliverables. Establishing smaller deadlines for projects—whether to review an outline, draft, phase, or other—can increase confidence all around, not to mention provide each team member with valuable feedback on how to improve results.

About Alliances Management

Alliances Management is a consulting, association management, and strategic staffing firm that delivers top-quality project management, operations, and administrative services. Visit us at www.am.consulting or on LinkedIn.

Alright, those are our work-from-home thoughts for today. In the coming days, we'll examine different topics, ranging from technology platforms, to childcare, to the importance of flexibility, and more.