

On being human: how behavioural science can help virtual working



In 1816, Mary Shelley spent the summer in Geneva in the company of her family, Lord Byron and his physician John Polidori. The weather was dreadful due to the eruption of Mount Tamboro in Indonesia, and the group spent much of their time locked inside to escape the incessant rain. The group had stirring discussions on science and the principles of animation, Polidori contributing his medical knowledge for the authors' more creative musings. To up the antics, one evening Lord Byron challenged everyone to a ghost-writing contest. Mary Shelley's resulting story was the origin of *Frankenstein*. Lord Byron contributed a fragment of a story, which [Polidori developed](#) and eventually turned into *The Vampyre*. Thanks to the isolated circumstances, the creative sharing of perspectives and the need to pass the time, two of the most iconic science-fiction works of all time were created.

A large proportion of the UK labour force are today working from home as part of the Covid-19 response. This change of context provides an opportunity for individuals to step out of their routines and generate new working styles for themselves and their teams. The change is also an opportunity for firms to [discover](#) what does and does not work for agile working, and even enjoy productivity gains. This silver cloud in a grey sky relies on managers embracing this opportunity and exploring changes in their management style to accommodate virtual working. Against this backdrop, we present five key insights for virtual working from the behavioural science literature that can help improve motivation and morale at this unique time in history.

1) Build trust

This is a period of great uncertainty, where an employee's trust in their colleagues and firm [will determine](#) how well they adapt to the necessary changes. Higher levels of trust promote positive interpersonal relations and prevent negative performance effects, particularly in [demographically diverse](#) work groups. It is therefore more important than ever for managers to build trust among their colleagues. To build trust a manager can:

- **Pay attention to how they frame communications:** Employees are likely experiencing information overload and it can be difficult to get key messages across. The Inclusion Initiative's recent report on [Virtual Inclusion in the City](#) (Lordan, 2020) covers key actions managers can take to provide clarity on the team's goals and increase the effectiveness of communication.
- **Trust employees to create a self-fulfilling prophecy:** Treating team members based on certain expectations [makes it likely](#) that their actual behaviour will reflect back those expectations. This phenomenon is known as the "[Pygmalion effect](#)" – coined after George Bernard Shaw's play of the same name (*My Fair Lady* being the musical version) in which a professor makes a bet that he can transform a flower-girl into an upper-class lady simply by treating her so. It is also similar to the more fully documented "[Placebo effect](#)",

whereby simply taking tablets that you believe to have healing effects (for a medical ailment) directly alleviates symptoms. It follows that if managers trust that their team members will do the right thing, they can create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

- **Embrace mistakes:** To build trust in teams, managers need to be trustworthy themselves. When competent leaders reveal vulnerabilities, it [stimulates oxytocin production](#) in others. They are then perceived as more likeable and empathetic – a phenomenon also known as the “[Pratfall effect](#)”.

2) Encourage kindness

When transitioning to remote or homeworking, managers may overfocus on their workplace interactions which are at the centre of social networks. However, research has shown that [weak ties](#) (or acquaintances) have a (surprising) positive impact on subjective wellbeing and feelings of belonging. At a time when working at home has been thrust upon us, there is an opportunity for managers to encourage the formation of weak ties within their organisation, bringing together people from geographically distant sites.

This arises because while isolation can spur loneliness, what researchers call everyday sociality – in essence being nice and interacting with others – is a potentially powerful remedy. In a recent experiment, employees from Coca-Cola in Madrid were randomly assigned to [give or receive](#) a random act of kindness. Over four weeks, givers were asked to perform kind activities towards a chosen colleague from a list of receivers who were unaware of the study’s purpose. As a result, both groups improved their well-being. Interestingly, these acts were also paid forward – givers of prosocial acts, such as spontaneously bringing someone a coffee, inspired kindness in others creating a virtuous cycle.

When thinking of inclusion in a virtual workplace, kindness initiatives which bring more distant team members together are worth then considering as part of the Covid-19 response. Small acts like emailing a thank you note to a colleague or offering to tick something off their to-do list can brighten someone’s day.

3) Emphasise knowledge sharing

The idea that two heads are better than one is woven into the narrative of our working lives. However, lessons from behavioural science show that this is not necessarily true. Groupthink has been shown to impact innovation as people reduce the search for hidden information and [attempt to reach consensus](#) to maintain a friendly atmosphere. This may help us feel happy at work but is not good for business. Virtual working provides an opportunity to reset this norm and increase the [sharing of unique information](#) within teams, to the benefit of team performance.

A meta-analysis of the literature in virtual teams examined the findings of ninety-four studies to uncover how teams share information. Virtual settings are linked with better knowledge exchange, with teams who are highly virtual found to share more unique information than those with low-virtuality or working face-to-face. The underlying mechanism is that it gives team members [more opportunity to weigh](#), consider and digest information before reaching decisions. And it can allow everyone to get their voice heard.

A recent study analysed global teams dispersed across six countries to uncover best practices for virtual working. The authors found that teams which formalised goals, roles and scheduling at the beginning of projects, built cohesion and helped establish a team identity. This in turn increases knowledge sharing, which was shown to be instrumental in [improving effectiveness](#) in virtual teams. Of course, just because teams share more information it does not mean they integrate it. There is evidence that in a virtual context while idea generation is high, the arrival at a solution that [integrates differing perspectives](#) is more difficult. A challenge for management to watch out for!

4) Focus on understanding differences

The success of virtual working relies on colleagues embracing technology, and for some there will be a learning curve. When supporting employees moving to a virtual setting, allow for individual differences in tastes wherever possible. Take some time to understand how people work and provide employees with software that supports their personal working style.

Many variables important to behavioural scientists will also influence how people work virtually, for example self-control. This is evident from a recent study which illustrated that people who felt less control in their work [benefited](#) from a software which blocked online distractions. Thirty-two information workers installed a software which blocked non-essential websites on their computers for one week. They were then asked if blocking distracting websites provided them more costs or benefits. Those with lower control over their work reported being able to focus for longer periods, during which they experienced more flow and were more productive. However, those with higher control worked longer stretches without breaks and reported higher stress levels.

This suggests online distractions, and strategies to minimise them, might have a positive or negative influence on individuals depending on their personal differences. Those who were already better at self-regulating their behaviour used social media and other distractions as a way of taking short mental breaks. When removed, it left them worse-off while benefiting those who needed the extra help. Encouraging employees to experiment with what works for them without prescribing 'a one hat fits all' approach can have productivity gains, and improve employee wellbeing as they enjoy control over their work style.

5) Relinquish control

As human beings we like to feel we are in control of what we are doing. If we don't feel in control, it's natural to feel [stressed and demotivated](#). Experiments have found this phenomenon to hold true in [both humans and rats](#). It is perhaps no surprise, then, that while most people would prefer more freedom at work, a need to feel in control as a manager makes giving freedom to team members difficult. However, this is a personal development point for managers that is worth exploring. Aside from most employees liking autonomy, [having greater freedom](#) in work has been linked to higher levels of employee productivity and well-being.

Further, in a study of 927 employees across sectors, giving employees the [necessary space](#) to experiment with alternative work procedures and methods has been positively linked with worker engagement, and employee innovative behaviour. At this time, people are unsure about how long virtual working will continue. They are adapting to a new environment while dealing with added pressures such as balancing family and work. It is therefore important to empower employees and experiment with their best working style.

Conclusion:

Here we have provided five behavioural science insights for managers of virtual teams. While there is no one-size-fit all solution and we still have a way to go in researching virtual inclusion, behavioural science literature still has valuable insights to offer. It highlights how virtual work during the Covid-19 response may have a positive impact on individuals and teams. By looking on the bright side, we can recognise the benefits of people having more control over their work habits and use this time to encourage kindness and solidarity. Trusting employees, understanding how they are different and ensuring all voices are heard are things we can do right now. By the time the Covid-19 response is over, we might not all have written the world's next greatest novel, but managers and firms can have laid the groundwork for an engaged and connected workforce.



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