

Working from home: idea that workers who aren't visible are slacking off is outdated

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Long commutes are a bleak fact of working life – but do they have to be? The laptop in your bag and phone in your pocket are sufficient for most kinds of office work. Even so, we insist on carting our devices with us, through rain and traffic, just to sit at a desk that's nearly identical to the kitchen table at home.

In my doctoral research I've spoken to people who have given up on this illogical daily routine. They work remotely from their homes for their organisations. Rather than wake up early to catch a bus or train, these remote workers use everyday technologies to do their work and stay connected with managers, clients, and colleagues.

But surely these workers aren't really "working" – don't they just sit in their pyjamas watching Netflix?

Remote workers are very aware of this negative image. They worry about being perceived as lazy, and they often work hard to be taken seriously. Despite these efforts, remote workers can still feel misunderstood and on the "outer" of organisational life.

I've found that in order for remote working to "work", we need to learn how to stay connected using technology. For this to happen, we need to break free of old habits and embrace new ways of managing and relating in the digital workplace.

First, it's necessary to adjust the assumption that workers who aren't visible are slacking off. This negative perception is outdated. Do you know what the person two desks down from you is doing on their laptop? Could you hide that you're reading this article?

Some organisations realise this and react by spying on their workers. Software is installed that monitors remote workers electronically. Programs take screen shots of the workers' computer. Key strokes can be measured to keep track of productivity. This is dangerous territory for two reasons. Firstly, you are ultimately communicating a lack of

trust. Secondly, remote workers who are fearful of being monitored in this way can withdraw from the very technology that they need to stay connected.

A remote worker who is reluctant to use technology because they fear being monitored is likely to feel isolated, and that's a problem for everyone. A lack of connection to others in the organisation can negatively affect both the employee's wellbeing *and* their productivity. Communication is after all an important aspect of knowledge work.

In my research I found that instant messaging systems can create spaces for employees to build social connections that help them to both cope with difficult work problems and to learn new strategies that help them work more effectively. But workers need to feel comfortable taking the time to express themselves online for this to work.

So what can managers do to keep remote workers productive *and* happy? Managers play an important role in engaging and developing employees who aren't sitting in front of them. Remote workers need to feel connected and recognised. What's needed is not an electronic whip, but a genuine professional relationship where goals are discussed and developmental opportunities are offered – even if these discussions take place in a digital meeting space.

A weekly scheduled phone meeting with a manager can go a long way in helping a remote worker reconnect with office politics. This regular contact can make a worker feel like they matter to the organisation. The manager can also look out for signs of distress. Once scheduled, these meetings should be treated as sacred – waiting by a phone that never rings can be disproportionately demoralising to a remote worker.

No one is arguing that human interaction will die out. In many cases however the reason we join the daily march into the city is plain habit. It's easy to keep working, managing, and organising within the four walls of the office – we've been doing it for over one hundred years and we're used to it. What's harder is learning new ways to stay connected while embracing flexibility.

Decent technological infrastructure is crucial for remote working to work, but it's not the latest gadget that creates a good workplace – it's people. If managers are serious about offering flexibility to their workers, they need to be available online, for example via instant messaging, phone, or email. Workers need to communicate clearly and regularly with colleagues. Files need to be kept up to date and securely accessible.

With all of these new kinds of connection, new boundaries need to be set up. No one wants to work “everywhere, all the time”, and employees and employers will have to negotiate and discuss their limits. It will take adjustment, but think of what we stand to gain.

So will the office become a relic of the past? We won't give it up anytime soon. For many, having a physical separation between home and work is desirable. However, if organisations want to have access to the best talent, they need to take flexible and remote working arrangements seriously. This means rethinking how employees are managed and developed. Are people who are offsite included in decisions? Are they trusted? Are they talked about at all, or is it a case of “out of sight, out of mind”? Traditional mindsets will need to be challenged, but the benefits of an inclusive, accessible workplace are worth the effort.

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