

Leading Virtual Teams



Field Notes from a CEO

Maren Deepwell



ALT

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Leading Virtual Teams - Field Notes from a CEO is published by the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) in partnership with Open Academia.

<https://doi.org/10.25304/alt.2022.01>

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Series: ALT Occasional Publications | Includes bibliographical references.

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To Martin and our two canine writing buddies
who made this book possible.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank the Association for Learning Technology for the support for this venture. Special thanks go to Professor Helen O'Sullivan, Chair of the Board of Trustees, without whom this publication would not have happened, as well as the Trustees at time of writing, who reviewed the manuscript: Bella Abrams, Peter Bryant, Lorna Campbell, Elizabeth Charles, Shonagh Douglas, Sharon Flynn, Natalie Lafferty, Keith Smyth, and David White.

Many of the examples in this book were collected between 2017 and 2022 in my role as CEO of the Association. I am grateful for the input from everyone I worked with, especially the core staff team, with whom I shared the transition to becoming a virtual team and the years since. The transition was a unique opportunity for me and the team as a whole to shape a new era of a long established organisation. Many of our experiences from 2018 to 2020 were chronicled in collaboration with Martin Hawksey, who has given his kind permission for this book to include many of the ideas we originally blogged about.

This book is subtitled *Field Notes from a CEO* because my years as an Anthropologist taught me how to adopt a researcher's outlook. Although I have settled into a different mindset in my 10 years as a CEO, no longer just observing, but leading, I still find myself just as curious about seeing the world from someone else's viewpoint and doing my best to walk a few steps in their shoes. Leading a virtual team has challenged that ambition in interesting ways, and provided me with a new field for inquiry. My fondest thanks to the Material & Visual Culture staff and colleagues at the Department for Anthropology at UCL, who inspired me so much during my time there.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to acknowledge all the open practitioners and researchers who have shared their insights and provided input along the way.

Thank you.

INTRODUCTION

From virtual learning to virtual working

In 2017 I embarked on a journey of organisational transformation as the CEO of an independent charity, as we took our organisation from a traditional, office-based model of operations to a fully virtual, distributed team. In comparison to many businesses who were forced to adopt homeworking in response to the global pandemic, we made the transition for strategic reasons over the period of a year. Instead of sending staff home with a laptop 1 day and starting homeworking the next, we went through formal consultation periods and implemented the transition gradually, providing support and training at every stage. As a result, we made a very successful transition and started to focus on how to evolve our approach to working as a virtual team beyond practical considerations from the outset.

When I set out to create a new vision for what working for our virtual organisation would be like, I came across a lot of practical advice about infrastructure and business processes,¹ and I also found many management books² that seemed intent on helping leaders translate traditional power structures from the office to the virtual workplace with a strong

1 G. Tsipursky, "Remote Work Can Be Better for Innovation Than In-Person Meetings," *Scientific American*, October 14, 2021.

2 J. O'Duinn, *Distributed Teams*, 2nd ed. (John O'Duinn, 2021).

emphasis on productivity, cost-savings and employee surveillance. None of what I came across helped answer my questions.

What I was looking for was authentic insight into what it's like to manage a virtual team and to lead an organisation from home, and to do it well. And by doing it well I mean not only meeting budget targets and KPIs but to balance business needs with employee happiness and wellbeing. I was looking to find creative and fun ways to work with people you may never meet in person, and to build meaningful working relationships. I wanted to find ethical ways to work online that respect employees' privacy and build trust between the organisation and its staff. In short, I was looking for the opposite of the 'office-deficit' model.

This is why I wrote this book — a book I wish I had when I was setting out on my journey to lead a virtual team. I hope it will provide a source of inspiration and a prompt for reflection to my readers, and will be of practical help with managing hybrid, blended and fully distributed teams and organisations.

The great online pivot³

In 2020 countries around the world moved learning online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ UNESCO reported that over 91% of the world's student population was affected in 2020 and in the UK, most schools, colleges and university campuses closed from March 2020 until the end of the summer term. The 'Great Online Pivot' enabled students to continue their learning during months of lockdown and the gradual return to in person teaching.

At the same time as learning moved online, a parallel shift was also seen in the workplace for an increasing proportion of the population. In the UK, the average percentage of adults working from home at least some of the time increased from 27% to 37%,⁵ and estimates suggest that

3 M. Weller, "The COVID-19 Online Pivot," *The Ed Techie*, March 9, 2020.

4 E. Howard, A. Khan, and C. Lockyer, "Learning during the Pandemic: Review of Research from England," *Ofqual*, July 12, 2021.

5 ONS, *Business and Individual Attitudes towards the Future of Homeworking, UK: April to May 2021* (Office for National Statistics, 14 June 2021).

globally up to 88% of organisations ‘encouraged or required employees to work from home’⁶ from March 2020.

A year on from the initial pivot, the UK Business Insights and Conditions Survey⁷ (April 2021) showed that in the education sector 48% of employees continued to work from home, the fourth largest percentage behind Real Estate Activities (57%), Professional Scientific and Technical Activities (71%), and Information and Communication (81%). According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), 24% of businesses overall intend to use increased homeworking as a permanent business model going forward, and in education this rises to 37.6%.⁸

Reporting from the survey, the ONS further states:

Both businesses and individuals preferred a ‘hybrid’ working approach (a mixture of both office and home working) in the future. However, while nearly two-fifths (38%) of businesses expected 75% or more of their workforce to be at their normal place of work, a large proportion (36%) of those currently homeworking thought they would spend the majority or all their time homeworking in the future.

This aligns with predictions made by a survey conducted by Gartner, which shows that in the U.S., ‘82% of respondents intend to permit remote working some of the time as employees return to the workplace’⁹ and a further forecast that ‘by the end of 2021, 51% of all knowledge workers

6 Gartner, “Gartner HR Survey Reveals 88% of Organizations Have Encouraged or Required Employees to Work From Home due to Coronavirus,” *Gartner*, March 19, 2020.

7 ONS, *Business Insights and Impact on the UK Economy: 28 July 2022* (Office for National Statistics, 28 July 2022).

8 ONS, *Business and Individual Attitudes towards the Future of Homeworking, UK: April to May 2021* (Office for National Statistics, 14 June 2021).

9 Gartner, “Gartner HR Survey Reveals 88% of Organizations Have Encouraged or Required Employees to Work From Home due to Coronavirus,” *Gartner*, March 19, 2020.

worldwide are expected to be working remotely, up from 27% of knowledge workers in 2019'.¹⁰

Although these surveys also highlight that there is still significant uncertainty across all sectors, the greater adoption of hybrid and home-working looks to be a certainty. What started as a response to a global crisis is now becoming part of the status quo for an increasing number of people. But what does this look like in practice?

When learning moved online and homes across the world suddenly turned into virtual classrooms, many students' first experience of learning online at scale was a response to the crisis. It is remarkable to consider what was achieved with little or no notice by learning technologists all across the world, supporting staff and students. Learning technology made learning, teaching and assessment during the pandemic possible, and provided some continuity in the face of what is commonly referred to as unprecedented circumstances. But we also know that what many experienced was an emergency response version of online learning which was borne of necessity using whatever tools and platforms were readily available. It wasn't a carefully designed offering full of creativity, engagement and flexibility as the best online or blended learning can be. There was no time to learn from the rich body of research and practice that would usually inform the design of new courses and modules, there was only time to respond to crisis after crisis as months of lockdown dragged on. The lessons learnt by those who had to implement some form of continuing education in the crisis provides a useful model for many of the issues now facing all organisations in terms of their workforce.

Many employees who suddenly found themselves at the kitchen table with their laptop had a first taste of working remotely in a time of crisis. Just like schools and colleges had little notice before they moved online, employers often had to send staff to work from home from 1 day to the next with little or no support or preparation. The result, for many, was the equivalent of online learning during the crisis, a kind of emergency homeworking.

10 Gartner, "Gartner Forecasts 51% of Global Knowledge Workers Will Be Remote by the End of 2021," *Gartner*, June 22, 2021.

It is important to acknowledge that home-schooling and home-working kept many people safe during the dark days of 2020. Following this, our response has to evolve from crisis provision to a brighter vision of what virtual learning and virtual working should, and could, look like. As universities, colleges and schools invest in expertise and infrastructure to take their blended offering to a new level that takes full advantage of what learning online has to offer, so must employers who are looking to adopt a hybrid or home-based working model. In learning and teaching we might think of the digital learning environment or learning management system as fundamental to learning online at scale, and for the workplace there is comparable infrastructure to be put in place. However, once you have your foundation of technology, policy and capability, where do you go?

In education, online learning is often viewed as inferior to in person learning and teaching. The common perception is that if you translate what you are used to doing in person and on campus online, you lose something in the process; the common perception being that it's a 'lecture-deficit' model. Online learning, particularly during the pandemic, can easily be perceived as being less engaging or not as collaborative as studying in person, and a 2020/21 UK student survey found that fewer than half of the students felt that their learning environments were reliable (47%), easy to navigate (46%), or well-designed (41%).¹¹

It is important that we shift 'the narrative about online education from a deficit one. ... We need to find ways to ensure that we see some advantages to this different mode of education and garner the benefits of its particular world of possibilities. ... It won't be easy; it won't be cheap; but our online education won't be a paltry imitation of old and tired genres like the lecture'.¹²

Creating a richer vision for the future of the virtual classroom highlights what we need to imagine for the future of the virtual workplace, too, and this is the primary purpose of this book.

11 C. Killen and M. Langer-Crame, "Student Digital Experience Insights Survey 2020/21: UK Higher Education Findings," *Jisc*, September 7, 2021.

12 T. Jessop, "Let's Lose the Deficit Language about Online Education," *Wonkhe*, June 3, 2020.

In this book, I want to look at what's beyond translating office-based working practises online, and not focus on what home-workers lose in the process, in a kind of 'office-deficit' model. Instead I will share how a distributed organisation can be a welcoming and warm place to work, and how you can empower staff in making virtual working an equitable and engaging reality that benefits the organisation and the individual alike.

A watershed moment for remote working

We are at a pivotal moment in the history of remote working as in countries like the UK we see a shift to more hybrid, flexible working in practice and in policy. One indicator of the changes in how we work are new laws and policies that seek to formally express how the relationship between employers and their digitally connected and increasingly distributed workforce is changing. Whilst in the UK we haven't yet seen an introduction of a code that would give employees a legal right to disconnect for example, other countries including France (2016), Italy (2017), Spain (2018) and Portugal (2021) have introduced such policies over the past 5 years,¹³ and others including Ireland is working towards doing so.

Although digital technologies enable remote working in new and more connected ways, it is by no means a new practice. Working from home has a long history. Here in the UK for example the industrial age saw a rise in home-workers, usually women who worked from home for an outside employer, and who were described as the 'hidden workforce' or the 'sweated trades' (Bythell, 1978). This type of work stood in contrast to independent, skilled craftspeople who practised their trade from home prior to industrialisation. Inequalities affected these home-workers; and poor working conditions and pay were particularly widespread between 1850 and 1914 across a broad range of industries, including the tailoring industry, shoe, glove and boot making, and also straw plaiting and sack making (Pennington & Westover, 1989).

13 A. Henshall, "Can the 'Right to Disconnect' Exist in a Remote-Work World?," *BBC*, May 21, 2021.

A 100 years later, at the beginning of another era of widespread homeworking, we are now faced with renewed questions about the rights of remote workers, working conditions, and how new working practices may increase inequality and for which sections of the population. Some workers may now have more flexibility working from home, but the pressures of competing demands such as caring for children or other family members whilst earning an income remain constant. Other issues such as the increasing digital surveillance of employees and privacy concerns around homeworking practices further highlight the need for careful and considered approach to setting out policies for the future of working remotely.

A horizon scanning report published by UK Parliament in April 2021¹⁴ highlights how little is known about current practice and the long-term impact of an increase in flexible employment. It highlights, for example, that:

The impact on health and well-being of the increase of technologies in the workplace and long-term working from home is not yet known and could have potential effects on healthcare systems. Positive benefits from increased flexible working will not be equally distributed throughout the population and could increase economic and social inequalities.

We are at a watershed moment for remote working in the sense that we have an opportunity to set out a vision for leading distributed teams and virtual organisations that is informed by the lessons from the past as well as the shift in perspective that the pandemic has brought about.

The following chapters will explore different phases in the lifecycle of a virtual team and consider some of the key questions that their leaders and managers face. Importantly, they will explore how to lead a virtual team whilst balancing the demands of the organisation with the wellbeing of the employees.

14 A. Hobbs, "The Impact of Remote and Flexible Working Arrangements," *UK Parliament*, April 29, 2021.

A note on the terms used in this book

There are a number of terms that are commonly used to describe working away from an office including homeworking, distributed working, virtual working and online working as well as hybrid working. In the aftermath of the pandemic, **homeworking** became commonly used in government reports and policy documents in the UK, and I have used this term accordingly to describe the practice of working from home. Working from home is often part of **hybrid working**, a term commonly used to describe employers' enabling staff to work away from the office for some days each week, for example working 3 days per week in the office and 2 days a week at home. **Remote working** can encompass homeworking, but employees may also work from other locations that are remote from their usual workplace, such as working remotely on a construction site. It implies that there is a central hub, such as an office, from which remote workers are removed. **Distributed working** or a distributed team or organisation refers to the way a group of employees work together, who may be working from a number of locations including their home, an office or elsewhere, on a permanent basis. A university with a number of different campuses may, for example, work like a distributed organisation even if a lot of interactions happen in person. **Working as a virtual team** or organisation is used to refer to working as a distributed team/organisation primarily interacting online/virtually using digital technologies. This is the model that this book focuses on.

This book is written in the UK context, although I try to draw on international examples where possible. There have been significant changes in law since Brexit, which for example impacted on employment law as well as data protection regulations. Where case studies used in this book refer to a specific regulation, such as GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation – the EU regulation on data protection and privacy) for example, these have been referred to by the name used when the case study was written. Whilst some of the specific legislation and social factors may be different for international readers, I believe most of the examples and suggestions in this book are sufficiently general to be applicable in a wider context.

Open leadership of virtual teams

This book is intended as a source of inspiration and a prompt for reflection first and foremost. It is based on my experiences leading a virtual organisation, insights gained from peers who generously shared resources and references, and it also includes lessons learnt from my colleagues which have been shared via blog posts and podcasts¹⁵ since 2018. The work that this book represents is an exercise in open practice, or rather open leadership of a virtual team.

Openness is one of the core values of my professional practice and for many of the communities I have worked with. Openness in the context of leading virtual teams can take many forms, so as a starting point we can use the definition of the ‘Open Organisation Leaders Manual’, which uses five principles as part of its Open Organisation Definition:¹⁶ transparency, inclusivity, adaptability, collaboration and community.

In open organisations, transparency reigns. As much as possible (and advisable) under applicable laws, open organisations work to make their data and other materials easily accessible to both internal and external participants; they are open for any member to review them when necessary. Decisions are transparent to the extent that everyone affected by them understands the processes and arguments that led to them; they are open to assessment. Work is transparent to the extent that anyone can monitor and assess a project’s progress throughout its development; it is open to observation and potential revision if necessary.

In terms of distributed teams, most of our focus is on ‘the extent that anyone can monitor and assess a project’s progress throughout its development’ as the day-to-day needs of working together effectively differ from those a team would have when everyone is physically in the same office. Providing ways for employees to achieve a wider sense of alignment to strategic objectives and values is another priority. The concept

15 M. Deepwell, *Leading Virtual Teams – Archives (2018–2022)*.

16 The Open Organization Ambassadors at Opensource.com, “The Open Organization Definition,” *Opensource.com*, April 2017.

of ‘alignment’ instead of ‘fit’ is a useful way of thinking when leading a diverse team, particularly during recruitment.

Whilst this definition of an open organisation is useful, it is also limited as its perspective is derived from the experiences of open source/software companies. Still focused on a similar area is the Mozilla Open Leadership Framework,¹⁷ which focuses on three steps (design, build, empower) and provides a theory of change framework.

Working in education or the third sector (or non-profit sector), where teams can have a varied and expansive portfolio of projects and tasks, it can be harder to make the kind of internal ‘joined-up-ness’ work for everyone than when you are all focused on making a product shipping deadline. Regardless of what industry, there’s a balance to be struck between enabling individuals to get on with their work and effective team communication. And it can be hard to determine how much information is actually useful and why.

Many virtual teams find that they have to adopt an iterative approach to designing processes as the tools they use, change or are updated. Whilst an agile way of working is good in many ways, it’s important to be aware that any change requires time and effort that would not be needed if things stayed the same way. It’s always a big ask (and one that requires a strong common understanding of the reasons behind it) to spend time and energy changing things when there’s so much to be getting on with. Especially when things don’t look ‘broken’ but still need ‘fixing’ to avoid disaster in the long run, it can be a hard argument to make. As well as requiring time and effort, changing internal processes can also temporarily rob teams of the comfort and confidence that comes with familiarity.

When you are faced with a lot of change, an open approach can prompt us to reflect on what alternative sources of comfort a team can turn to when uncertainty and change are constant. One example is to look beyond a period or process of change, and thinking ahead to what things might look like 3 months into the future or a year ahead. Doing so as a team, using a new kind of SWOT analysis¹⁸ for example, can create a greater measure of understanding. Here’s one such approach.

17 Mozilla, *The Open Leadership Framework* (Mozilla, 2018).

18 J. Hall, “How an Open Team Can Assess Threats and Opportunities,” *Opensource.com*, October 12, 2017.

In *Leading Effective Virtual Teams: Overcoming Time and Distance to Achieve Exceptional Results*, Nancy Settle-Murphy¹⁹ argues that part of the unique challenges of virtual teams is that ‘it’s harder for team members to tell whether they’re out of alignment about important issues ... and once out of alignment, it takes virtual teams much longer to pull back together’. Settle-Murphy goes on to highlight one of the challenges for virtual team leaders is ‘ensuring that all share the same understanding of team goals’.

This is an important motivation for this book. It is intended to demonstrate what open leadership of a virtual team may look like and provide examples of putting it into practice.

The research and practical examples in each chapter are relevant to many different contexts, but are primarily based on working in the education sector. The ideas and approaches discussed will be of practical help with managing hybrid, blended and fully distributed teams, but this book is not intended to be a practical manual for managers. It is not intended to provide technical or legal advice.

Chapter by chapter overview

FROM THE OFFICE TO ONLINE

Chapter 1 starts with the process of setting out as a virtual team. One of the key issues explored is how to involve employees in the process of transitioning to working remotely, including formal consultation processes with employees, planning a transition phase, and reviewing work policies. If, like many, you have made the transition in a hurry, this chapter offers prompts to reflect on your journey and to check in with how your vision is working out in reality. The chapter will provide practical examples of how to get started, including, for example, how to support staff in reviewing their homeworking set up, how to establish continuous upskilling processes for existing staff and virtual onboarding for newcomers.

This chapter also explores the singularities of recruiting for a distributed team and how to give prospective co-workers a sense of what

19 N. Settle-Murphy, *Leading Effective Virtual Teams* (CRC Press, 2013).

working with you and your team is like. It will discuss what factors shape an online recruitment process, and how to build relationships with new colleagues once they join.

The second part of the chapter is based on first hand accounts of an organisational transformation from a traditional, office-based model to working as a virtual team. Through several accounts, the key points in the journey are charted, from the first day, to the first month, the first year and beyond. If you are considering closing your offices for good and making the move to becoming a virtual organisation, this chapter offers you the chance to listen to different voices from within one organisation more than 2 years after moving to working as a virtual team. Hear staff reflecting on how the reality differed from the initial plan, why it's important that the values of the organisation are reflected in the new working practices, and what the upsides and downsides of working from home long term can be.

CREATING A POSITIVE WORK CULTURE

Chapter 2 is about building a virtual team spirit. Here the focus is on ways to engage staff and manage people who may never meet in person. Whilst hybrid working is on the rise, many staff have little experience building relationships exclusively online. The chapter will examine what factors determine which team building activities will be the most effective in your context, such as:

- What shapes the way your virtual team works?
- How do you find the right balance between online and in person activities?
- What do you want your team to feel like on a day-to-day basis?

This chapter provides prompts to consider these questions initially outside of practical constraints, such as institution-wide policies, and start with a focus on the culture you want to foster.

Examples of how to start creating a positive, virtual team culture are explored such as virtual show & tell sessions, blended and online team days as well as physical items such as team merchandise, treats

and presents. This chapter also offers ideas about how to interact with colleagues away from the screen, for example through team walks or walk and talk catch ups; or how to make time to reflect together (or on an individual basis).

One of the most challenging aspects of creating a positive work culture for virtual teams is finding balance between formal and informal interaction, via channels such as email or instant messaging. How to incorporate different communication channels into the day-to-day ways of working of your virtual team is key to the culture of the team and its atmosphere. Distributed working can often seem less warm or less connected. In this chapter, approaches are highlighted which help virtual teams share moments of success and positive feedback with each other in a way that is meaningful.

FINDING BALANCE WHILST MANAGING A VIRTUAL TEAM

Leading a virtual team is a challenge and Chapter 3 focuses on different approaches of how to lead a distributed team whilst maintaining a life/work balance. Although working from home is nothing new, few of us have long-standing experience of managing virtual teams and few staff have much experience of working remotely long term. This is a huge barrier for many managers, particularly those who have had to transition teams online during the pandemic and subsequently introduced new hybrid working models.

Wherever you are on the scale of experience and confidence, this chapter invites you to take a step back and look at your approach, starting with your own digital skills and capabilities (or the lack thereof), how to get more comfortable in your (virtual) workspace and how to look after your wellbeing.

From there, how to build trust in your team is explored, how to manage people without being able to supervise them in person, what to do about managing teams at scale or across different time zones, learning from companies like Google and how to establish an effective culture of collaboration whatever the scale of your team or organisation. We will look at the commonalities and some of the differences that come into play whether you are managing a virtual team of 10 or 10 000.

One issue that comes up increasingly as both the use of technology and the scale of the organisation increase, is how to be 'smart' in our use of technology, and in practical terms that often means collecting data about how we work in the form of 'people analytics' and using the insights gained for the benefits of the organisation. Which is why this chapter ends with a section on open leadership as a call to critically consider what kind of leader you wish to be in the virtual workplace, and how you can translate those values into practice through open leadership.

MATURING AS A VIRTUAL TEAM

Some of the most challenging aspects of effectively leading virtual teams only present themselves over long periods of time. In contrast to managing a traditional, office-based workforce, there are a lot of factors at play that you have little or no control over when you manage people remotely, from moving house to the impact on health and wellbeing.

Much of what is discussed in Chapter 4 focuses on the microcosm of working from home long term. The aim is to chart examples of what can make working from home challenging, explore strategies for avoiding common problems from the outset, and share ideas for home-workers to establish a positive work-life balance.

This chapter has two parts: the first part focuses on everyday challenges that individuals within virtual teams have to negotiate in the long term: finding a way to work from home that is suitable for them, finding balance between work and their personal circumstances, and how to be present in the virtual workplace.

The second part of the chapter expands the perspective from the individual to maturing as a team or workforce. Here we explore strategies to support working from home long term, how to establish strong communication channels and a sense of trust that you can draw on when things go wrong. The second part of the chapter concludes with reflecting on what we can learn about leading virtual teams from the experiences during the global pandemic. There is much about grace and compassion that we can learn from the experience in order to help virtual teams mature into a way of working that presents a viable, long term future for working from home.

LOOKING AHEAD TO THE FUTURE OF VIRTUAL TEAMS

For some, working from home and being part of a virtual team is already a reality. For others, the thought of leaving the physical workplace behind is a nightmare vision of a future in which the boundaries between work and life erode. We don't know yet what the long term impact of the global pandemic will be on the way we work. We do know that at least in the UK working from home during lockdown has opened up the possibility of a more flexible way of working for more people than before. And, I would argue, we are seeing more organisations choosing to close their physical offices and establishing virtual teams. So what does the future of virtual teams hold, in particular for small and medium sized organisations who work in education and the third sector (or non-profit sector)?

The concluding Chapter sets out to explore three dichotomies that are at the heart of working as a virtual team:

- How to balance employee wants and employee needs;
- How boundaries between homelife and work evolve;
- Where the responsibility lies between employee and employer.

One of the conclusions to be drawn from the experiences of lockdown working is that care is an essential ingredient in the recipe for successfully managing virtual teams, and in the final part of this chapter we explore a new kind of professionalism for virtual teams which is emerging. The final reflection questions if and how we can balance the affordances of technology and the needs of human beings; to navigate learning and working virtually at scale whilst respecting the privacy of the individuals and, ultimately, to create a future for leading virtual teams which challenges the inequalities and inequity that we know exists as well as being sustainable for the planet.

CHAPTER 1

Setting out as a virtual team

In 2020, many organisations adopted working from home whilst countries were placed in lockdown. Since then, working from home for one or 2 days a week as part of a hybrid model has become a more common practice. Even if we don't yet know what the long term impact of crisis measures on working practices will be here in the UK or globally, it has highlighted that working away from the office has its upsides and indeed that having no office at all can be a viable option for many.

Considering how a team or a whole organisation could manage without a physical base, be that a corporate HQ, a campus or a small room tucked away somewhere behind a front door with many name plates, is an interesting challenge, especially for leaders and managers. A physical workplace does a lot more than provide a registered address. It houses the material and technological infrastructure required and it provides space for individuals to spend their days, working together and individually. Architecture, layout and furniture impose a sense of order and provide structure. An open plan meeting room, a row of closed office doors, cubicles decorated with family photos, the watercooler or tea kettle: these are all familiar elements of the contemporary workplace and they impose a sense of 'being at work'. Even in non-traditional workplaces, where casual clothes, well stocked kitchens and sleep pods set a different tone, there are material and visual signifiers that convey that this is, predominantly, a place of work.

Imagine yourself as an industrial archaeologist or anthropologist surveying empty offices in 2020 and consider what you would have learnt about our attitudes to work and business from studying these deserted spaces, just as we might study the factories and offices of a different age.¹ Even a single organisation's spaces can be insightful, providing a sense of its values and culture, how it relates to its staff and wider community.

When setting out on a transition to working virtually, it is important to reflect on not only what lies ahead but also what will be left behind and what it means. In order to create a good virtual working environment, what makes a physical workspace work and fails need to be taken into account, even if the physical space is not an office or a campus but a home. Whilst those factors may differ from organisation to organisation, there are key factors that should be taken into account for anyone setting out to work virtually.

Key considerations for setting up virtual teams

Setting up fully virtual teams, shares many commonalities with creating a hybrid workplace or supporting a distributed workforce. There are, however, some important differences that should be considered from the outset. Virtual teams, for example, might meet and work together in person, but don't have a physical workplace like an office or a campus and all workplace policies and practices must reflect that. Similarly, working as a virtual team implies that the primary infrastructure is online and thus services and support structures need to be aligned to that approach. For instance, in a virtual team you would not require staff to attend a team meeting once a week in an office or come to meet their HR advisor in a particular city. Instead, everything happens in the virtual workplace.

INVOLVING STAFF

Any transition from office-based to virtual team is complicated, messy and requires appropriate resourcing. Even if you are starting something new and you have a blank slate, employees should have a role.

1 C. Stephens and S. Lubar, "A Place for Public Business: The Material Culture of the Nineteenth-Century Federal Office," *Business and Economic History* 15 (1986): 165–179.

Whether you are working with a short timeframe or have a year to plan ahead, involving staff from the outset is imperative.

Here are three key points to focus on with staff:

- Firstly, consider if there is a significant change to the terms of employment (for example, if you are moving from an existing contract for office-based work to working virtually), which may require a formal consultation process and should include union involvement where applicable.
- Assess the impact of practical changes, such as leaving an established work place and transitioning to working from home and meeting the needs of a diverse workforce.
- Review how the role of individual staff may change in a virtual team, i.e., the nature of admin tasks, the skills required to use new systems and workflows or the way in which staff will collaborate and interact.

The language used to set out the vision of what's ahead to staff is important. Not everyone's understanding of what it means to work remotely or as part of a distributed team is the same. Also, different terms have different practical implications, so it's important to differentiate between, for example, remote and homeworking. The term remote working can encompass homeworking, but employees may also work from other locations that are remote from an office or the campus, such as working remotely whilst travelling or a research lab. Remote working thus provides greater flexibility, enabling employees to work from shared or public spaces as well as their home. The term homeworking meanwhile implies that the employee will be predominantly home-based. What works best for a particular team will depend on the nature of the work, for example, if private or quiet space is essential or if the work is client-facing.

Depending on the contractual terms and conditions you start with, the review of the contracts and consultation with staff could take significant time and (legal) resources. Setting out a clear timeline for all involved helps keep all stakeholders engaged and provides opportunities for questions and concerns to be raised.

Transitioning to working as a distributed team may change the nature of a job considerably. For some that may be welcome news, whilst others may dread losing a workplace they enjoyed and valued. From the outset, it's important to get a feel for how staff are feeling and note worries and concerns. One way to address concerns is to share the broader vision for why the organisation or team is moving to virtual working. There are likely to be strategic benefits as well as tangible ones for individual staff, and unpacking these and sharing them in detail is an important part of supporting staff through the transition.

Whether you use polls and surveys, formal consultation or informal chats, it is important to get a good sense of how key staff are feeling about the transition and also consider the likelihood of losing staff during the transition or as a result of it. One of the risks associated with a transition like this is that the new way of doing things may not suit everyone. The disruption of the transition itself will be multiplied by staff leaving, so it's worth planning ahead for best and worst case scenarios.

A good strategy for helping staff feel more empowered is to provide information about what it means to work from home, including for example, claiming tax relief for job expenses. Whatever way of working you decide on will require organisational policies such as policies for work devices, data protection or GDPR compliance that are appropriate for the context.

Each mode of working also offers different options for employee benefits: office equipment, furniture or a homeworking cost contribution may be attractive to home-workers whilst membership of a shared work space or café vouchers may be more popular with remote workers.

A key component of successfully creating a virtual team is to ensure that the contract of employment clearly reflects how the organisation works and that it offers benefits that are aligned to this way of working.

Involving staff in the practical changes required to make such a transition is an important opportunity to help everyone get to grips with the reality of what's ahead. If you can, enable staff to pick a date when they clear their desk, decide what to take, and how to make the move. Offering a range of different options when it comes to picking homeworking equipment is another way to give staff a greater sense of control over the transition (and can offer a helpful way to reduce the

remaining stock of furniture and equipment in a soon to be unoccupied office). If you are starting from scratch meanwhile, you could allow your team to pick items from a particular supplier, or set a budget for essential equipment individuals can choose themselves.

If your timeframe permits and you are moving your workforce from working in an office to online, introduce working in a blended way as far in advance as you can. You might for example offer individuals to start working from home 1 to 2 days a month, moving to a day a week, and then increase the proportion of time spent working away from the established workplace. Such period in the transition for 3 to 6 months, during which you are operating a increasingly blended model of working, is the ideal opportunity to reflect with individual staff on any difficulties they can identify, for example ask if there are particular tasks that they want to complete either at home or in the office, or if there is a specific piece of equipment they have in the office that they miss at home and so forth. It also prompts individuals to get a sense of what the reality of working in new ways feels like to them and to identify any tensions between the desire to work from home and the reality of being a home-worker. In my experience, this will have a positive impact on staff retention in the long term. Joint activities such as holding staff meetings online can offer another way to introduce a blended way of working. Opportunities to experience new ways of working in practice help iron out how a particular process can be translated to virtual working before you are 'stuck at home with no one to ask'.

It's especially important for leaders and managers to be very clear during the transition period about what issues can be fixed by the employer and which are the responsibility of employees. For example, if you decide not to provide office equipment such as an office chair, and an individual decides to work from their kitchen table and subsequently complains about back pain, they need to be clear who is responsible and what policies are in place to guide both employer and employee. A checklist or assessment will help employees consider health and safety aspects of working from home. When an issue arises, ask yourself what you would do if it persists and how you would resolve it 6 months or 6 years down the line. Whilst there is a growing body of formal policies for homeworking to guide employers, in many cases policies designed

for office-based work are simply being adopted and are often ill suited to homeworking in the long term. Parameters of employers liability insurance models may be changing gradually as organisations adopt hybrid and remote working more widely, and employee wellbeing and productivity for virtual teams in the long term are important to consider more widely. For example, most display screen equipment assessments are based on the assumption that an employee uses a formal workstation in a public workplace, not working with a range of devices and in different locations within the home and beyond.

Whatever you set out as an expectation at the beginning is going to shape everyone's expectation of what working in a virtual team will be like and it's important to make sure everyone is clear what the vision is from the outset. In the case of display screen equipment assessments for instance, employers may specify that home-workers need to have a permanent workstation at home with a suitable desk, chair and equipment that meets the requirements of the standard assessment.

Without a shared physical workplace, issues such as these need to be communicated clearly by other means, and this can be challenging. Turning around and explaining something or helping someone doesn't happen when you don't share a physical workspace. You can't set a physical example for colleagues to see. Instead, virtual ways of communicating have to take the place of office interactions.

One way of approaching this is to take an open approach to leadership. As a manager or a leader you could for instance share regular updates with your team, blog about your own practice, hold town hall meetings and so forth. Activities that bring people together and offer informal opportunities to interact can act as a regular prompt to reflect and share the perspectives from within the team; it helps to set aside time to have a regular dialogue about the transition to create space outside of the formal consultation.

A great example of such an approach are the messages to staff,² written and published by Melissa Highton as Director of Learning, Teaching and Web Services and Assistant Principal Online Learning at the University of Edinburgh during the pandemic in 2020.

2 M. Highton, *Messages to My Staff* (Melissa Highton, 2020).

Below is an example from 29th May 2020, which highlights her leadership in a transition period in practice:

Dear All,

Well done for making it through another week at home. Today is the last day of the semester. Thank you to all of you for adapting well and working so hard to ensure that students can complete their studies.

As the easing of the first lockdown begins, discussions about how and when the campus will reopen are happening across the University. It is hard to imagine what the new normal will be.

In the meantime, we must wave goodbye to 6 of our student digital skills trainers who leave us to spend their summers and future careers in new and exciting ways. The Digital Skills Team are working with the Careers Service to think about what online support can be offered to graduates seeking work and attending interviews online.

On Monday we welcome 20 new student interns....

Writing weekly emails is a powerful way to share progress and communicate with a team in transition.

To conclude this section, here are two examples of weekly updates to staff that I wrote whilst managing a team in transition: the first and last weekly email update as my organisation moved to become a virtual team. The first email is dated 2nd October 2017:

Dear everyone

Starting this week we will be sending out a weekly update on the transition to keep everyone in the loop, share information openly and encourage us to collaborate and communicate throughout.

1. Meetings this week

This week is the first consultation meeting, 2.30 pm on Wednesday in the office.

This meeting is for all staff involved in the TUPE transfer process.

2. New staff FAQ

We've set up a shared Google doc (attached) to have a place where everyone can add their questions. Once a week we will review any questions and post responses. This way we have one place to keep track of progress and everyone can find relevant information.

3. Information and support

Following the consultation meeting this week, we will circulate dates/times of future meetings and specific times for meetings with for example HR. However, you can also contact our HR contact or me with anything you don't wish to post in the shared doc.

This weekly update will develop to include more as we progress through the transition, and if you have any suggestions of what you'd like to see included, please share these in the FAQ doc.

Best

Maren

The final weekly update was sent on 29th January 2018:

Dear everyone

This is the final transition update before we actually make the move. From next week we are moving to a new format to keep track of progress, details of which are included below.

Exciting times ahead!

1 Host organisation liaison

Public announcement has been published.

HR: all staff cards have been returned and P45s have been issued.

Office: we have agreed arrangements for phones, office and furniture, PCs and other tech and Post. Extra recycling pick up has been requested.

The office will be handed over on Tuesday afternoon.

Post will be held in the post room for weekly collection.

The main phone number will have a message referring to our new phone number on it.

2 Office and home-working

Most documents for storage have already been picked up, with the remaining boxes being picked up on Monday.

Remaining files belonging to our Finance Officer will also be picked up on Monday. All other staff have completed their move.

Equipment has been purchased and is in use.

New phone system is set up and in use.

Policies and the new employment handbook are in place.

All staff have access to their individual staff records, including pension information.

Payroll system is ready to be set up in February.

3 Next steps in our transition

From next week, you will no longer receive a weekly transition email.

Instead we will continue to review progress at weekly team meetings,

Trustees will continue to meet before the Board meeting each month

to discuss progress for this financial quarter. We will continue to

use the office transition project plan, but the shared FAQ doc will no longer be used.

Our HR Advisor is in regular contact with all staff to provide

support and advice and all feedback from staff to their most recent

communication has been positive. We will continue to provide

regular opportunities to discuss concerns or get support.

For now, I'd like to say a big thank you to everyone for helping us

make this big transition. We have accomplished a lot in the last few

months and looking back at our weekly updates I am pleased to see

that we have managed to weather these changes well.

I look forward to what comes next!

Best

Maren

RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

In the UK in the aftermath of the pandemic, there have been issues raised about how where we work may impact on the benefits

offered to employees. For example, many jobs in London offer additional pay, known as London weighting and in the Civil Service for example, is worth about £4000 annually to offset higher living costs in the capital.³ The question that arose was what would happen if an employee currently entitled to London weighting continued to work from home. This leads to the question of whether employers will offer different terms and conditions, including remuneration, to employees who work from home in future and what wider ramifications this may have in the long term.

Those considerations aside, virtual working does offer a different value proposition to prospective employees. The advantages of working from home and the flexibility that brings with it are significant, as this quote from John O'Duinn highlights:

...companies and organisations can enable a more diverse and healthier workforce if they allow people to work remotely, at least some of the time.

For instance, consider how difficult it is for a blind person, or someone who is confined to a wheelchair, to commute into an office every day by taking a bus for an hour each way. The commute itself is stressful and exhausting. Will that individual also be able to give their best to the work if they are already tired from just the commute?

Or consider parents of young children who need to remain within a 10-minute drive to their children's schools in case of emergency. If remote work is allowed, you gain access to a whole other talent pool of potentially highly-skilled employees.⁴

Once you have made the jump and offer hybrid or fully virtual working, recruitment and selection processes need to reflect that and enable you

3 A. Allegretti, "Civil Servants in London Could See Pay Cut if They Resist Return to Office," *The Guardian*, August 9, 2021.

4 J. Davis, "Create an All-Star Tech Team: Welcome Remote Workers," *Information Week*, March 13, 2018.

to find the best candidates in the larger number of applicants you are likely to attract.

If you are looking to adjust the selection process for virtual working, here are ways to get started:

Set out expectations clearly

Ensure that role descriptions and adverts set out clearly what you offer in terms of flexible/homeworking. Be as specific as you can about what you provide (for example, equipment, financial support etc.) and what prospective employees will need to have in place (such as a dedicated work space and suitable Internet connection). If you have policies that are specific to homeworking, refer to these and spell out precisely what your expectations are. Particularly in the post-pandemic workplace, many people's experiences of homeworking may have been formed during a time of crisis, and won't necessarily reflect what a 'normal' approach looks like long term. Include details such as 'we expect all staff to be in on Wednesdays for a team meeting' or 'our normal working hours are between 9.00 am and 5.00 pm' to help prospective candidates get a sense of how flexible your approach is.

Review your internal processes

It can be difficult to find comprehensive guidance for recruitment processes that happen online and in most contexts your existing policies and training should continue to apply. That said, it is important to review what everyone participating in the recruitment process needs to be able to do in order to fully participate: if panel members struggle with the meeting software or reviewers don't understand how your online score sheet works, then the recruitment process is going to suffer. It may seem like an obvious point to make, but even experienced managers need time to gain confidence undertaking online recruitment fully. Ideally, test your process with role playing and by user testing all elements beforehand and if appropriate conduct a test call with candidates prior to the interview, so that you can put yourself into the shoes of a candidate and gain a sense of what their experience will be.

If your organisation uses a particular tool or platform for all meetings try to use the same platform during the recruitment process.

Similarly, try to use as many of your familiar workflows when designing the practical elements of the interview. In the absence of a physical environment, the candidates will get a much better sense of the organisation if the interviews happen on the same platform that they will be using day-to-day. In a sense, it's the virtual equivalent of seeing your office or visiting campus.

Include virtual working questions

It can be very helpful to include questions specifically about virtual working in the interview. It can help you learn more about each candidate and establish a rapport about some of the challenges you can encounter. For example, you could ask something like: 'Have you had any experience working from home previously?' and 'Can you expand on the main challenges you've encountered and/or perceive?'. You might be surprised how relevant responses to such questions can be, highlighting issues like isolation and maintaining boundaries between work and personal life.

It can also help establish whether candidates have experience working remotely in a solo capacity, for example running their own business or working as a consultant, or working remotely as part of a team. Whilst there are many transferable experiences there are also some important differences, such as the volume of communication required, having to be available for team members and meetings more frequently, and having a shared sense of starting/ending a day. Often individuals who have worked remotely only in a solo capacity underestimate the extent to which this makes a difference and the interview can help establish a common understanding of what the organisational working culture is day-to-day.

Homeworking long term

If you are offering homeworking full-time or some days of the week on a permanent basis, it is worth reflecting how this can impact on staff as things change either in the workplace or at home.

For example, the tools you use as an organisation may change significantly over a period of 5 years and require constant upskilling. Virtual working often relies on tools that are frequently updated,

impacting on workflows and requiring changes to procedures. Whilst this is true of everyone in the workplace to different degrees, the impact of such changes can be felt more keenly as a home-worker, for example if you start your week by logging in and suddenly your usual Monday morning catch up meeting won't let you join or if you can't reach work in a domestic emergency because of software updates. Being reliant on tools and platforms that are updated according to manufacturer's release schedules can cause havoc for even the most technically minded of staff, and requires everyone to be adaptable to a larger degree than a traditional office setting where support can be provided at your desk or in your building.

Committing to working from home long-term can seem an easy decision initially, but can become challenging during periods of change at home, such as a house move, changes in family life or relationships as well as issues relating to physical and mental health. What seemed a good fit initially may turn out to be problematic a year on.

Any and all information that you can provide for candidates to help them reflect on the realities of working from home and being part of a virtual team in the long term is valuable and increases the chances of finding the best candidate.

Virtual interviews

In many cases, the interview is the deciding factor in the recruitment process and if you are recruiting for a virtual team you will hopefully have experience in organising meetings online.

For virtual interviews, preparing ahead of time is key. Common pitfalls include:

- using a platform that is only available to individuals within your organisation;
- failing to ensure your interview is fully accessible;
- lack of appropriate support for panel members;
- not specifying for the candidate what is involved ahead of time.

Plan in time for the candidate to set up and test things before the formal interview starts and allow time for things to go wrong. First impressions in virtual interviews happen both ways and candidates have likely prepared very carefully so it is worth being very explicit with everyone taking part in the recruitment process how to represent themselves and the organisation.

As with the other elements of the recruitment process, established HR guidance will apply, but in addition, ask yourself what went wrong in bad meetings and interviews you have attended. Everyone has experiences of chairs not seeing their hand up, technical difficulties not being resolved, cameras being switched off when they should have been on and so forth. Even for experienced staff, checklists can be really helpful for virtual interviews and ensure that candidates have a better and fairer experience.

If you find yourself interviewing someone in a suit, sitting in front of a perfect office backdrop and never breaking eye contact whilst giving you textbook answers although you were expecting to have an informal conversation from your kitchen table with your cat walking across the screen, then you are experiencing a mismatch of expectations.

Interviewing online robs you and the candidate of many common assumptions and cues about what's expected and how to behave, so be as explicit as you can both in the way you communicate and what information you provide ahead of time. For example, if formal workwear is commonly worn in your organisation, make candidates aware of that. Similarly, if it is not usual for staff to use digital backgrounds and if it is acceptable to see each other's (family) life in the background, you can make that clear as well. Consider carefully how you can eliminate as many factors that could distract you from the purpose of the interview as possible. You don't want to focus on someone's unusual virtual backdrop or their unexpectedly formal attire instead of the key questions around the job.

Experienced managers pick up a lot of cues when meeting candidates in person and that can help you take action to calm nerves and make candidates feel welcome. Online, the cues are still there, but it can be a lot harder to get beyond someone feeling nervous once you have had a technology fail or sound drops. Chairs should be prepared to start the

interview in a manner that helps settle everyone and also pause proceedings if unexpected difficulties occur.

Equality and equity are particularly important in the context of virtual recruitment, starting with the connectivity and equipment required to apply, to the tools and software required to take part in the interview process. A tool or platform that the organisation has a licence for and which is thus easily available to all staff may not be accessible to prospective candidates for example. The relationship between technology and human beings is an important theme that runs throughout all chapters of this book. Virtual working requires us to establish what that relationship looks like in a work context and consider what tensions it causes alongside the benefits it offers. This is particularly important when it comes to designing equitable and fair recruitment and selection processes.

I have intentionally focused on recruitment processes that are conducted largely by human beings using technology as tools for recruitment instead of recruitment undertaken by machines and algorithms. I have chosen to do so as this book is focused on knowledge workers and professionals who work in education contexts and automated selection processes are not predominant as yet, at least in my experience.

No doubt certain types of recruitment are becoming ever more determined by automated processes and artificial intelligence, and scenario based virtual interviews and skills tests can provide a useful addition to recruitment processes. Someone who comes across brilliantly in a prepared written application, virtual test or on email may not be able to communicate well in real time or on screen.

If the role you are recruiting for relies on communication and collaboration in a virtual team, it's important to put human interaction at the centre of the selection process and ensure that the candidate you are appointing has the required skills for the role.

A note on setting up home-workers

Making things work as a virtual team relies heavily on technology, as well as the time, effort and resources put into getting policies and practices right. One approach that can be very effective is to introduce

a regular check-in, with a requirement to review and visually record, i.e. take a photo of the work station, at least annually. Depending on the physical space available individuals may have slightly different requirements, for example one may need a footrest and another an anti-glare cover for their screen whilst someone else may need an upgrade to their office chair and so forth. It is worth considering how you will deal with such requests and to be very clear what the employer will support and what is the responsibility of the individual.

The set up for homeworking is a huge factor in the long term physical and mental health of your workforce and it can feel much more outside of your control than the equivalent situation in an office would. If appropriate, you may wish to include this kind of guidance in the information for prospective employees as well as in annual/regular processes for all staff. Ensure that it is a compulsory part of everyone's practice to review and document their workstation and that you have a way to monitor this and address any issues that arise.

Many new or temporary home-workers start out working with their laptop on the sofa or at the kitchen table and then report back and neck pain or wrist problems. The set up of the workspace should be an important part of the induction process and not left to chance as it's your opportunity to get things right from the outset and avoid problems and illness further down the line.

ONBOARDING AND UPSKILLING

The onboarding and upskilling process for new staff is one of the most time consuming processes and for virtual teams it can pose a logistical challenge as well. In a virtual team you will need to induct individuals into how you work as well as what to do, for example:

- Introduce and explain the purpose of chat channels/forums;
- Set out a schedule for regular meetings/catch ups;
- Highlight ways to get help and how to ask questions that come up.

The virtual equivalent of sitting next to someone at their desk and shadowing them is working synchronously online, often sharing screens and

working through procedures or following workflows together. This can be a tiring experience for everyone involved, more tiring than doing so in person, and attention and focus can suffer after a relatively short period. It's worth taking that into consideration before you set out 8 hour days of online induction for the first week.

There is much we don't see even when we share screens whilst working together online, i.e. how someone uses a keyboard shortcut for example or what key they press to accomplish a particular task. Errors and misunderstandings can easily creep in when we transfer knowledge online, and everyone needs to develop specific communication skills, such as saying out loud what they are doing and frequently stopping for questions and going over things again. It might sound like overstating the obvious, but seemingly insignificant oversights during the induction process can cause a lot of problems later on, for example when someone uses different keys to format documents or takes a lot longer to create a report because they don't know that there is a keyboard shortcut.

Many people feel that building relationships online becomes easier once they have met in person. Thus, they include opportunities to meet in the induction process and convene regular in person meetings or team days. You may not be able to do so or you may have a blended team. Whatever your context, the key point is to set aside time as part of the induction process to just hangout and have lunch or a coffee or a chat. Virtual working can quickly become all work and no social interaction, particularly if a new member of staff joins an established team and everyone already knows each other. Wherever possible, include informal opportunities to spend time in your regular working practice and emphasise how important this is. If you are the manager in charge, make sure you always attend and don't prioritise 'work' over time with your team.

Onboarding a new member of the team is also an opportunity to check in with how your policies work out in practice. What's changed since the last time you reviewed those policies? Have the tools and platforms you use changed? Are you still using the same Slack channel or Teams folders? Has Google Meet been updated again? Chances are that the processes you document for your virtual working get outdated quite quickly.

Thus, onboarding new staff is always a good opportunity to upskill your workforce.

Let's look at data protection, and GDPR training as an example:

For home-workers, finding the right balance between providing guidance and support whilst ensuring individuals also take appropriate responsibility can be difficult. For example, you may have policies about how to secure laptops or delete temporary files and review these as a team or share updates on how these are being implemented. Yet, even though you can monitor and review processes regularly there is a large element of trust in a virtual working context. To some extent you have to rely on everyone taking responsibility and making it part of their day-to-day working habits to follow new procedures. Explaining the reasons why an organisation mandates certain things should help ensure that everyone understands their importance. So for example, when you undertake GDPR training you can prompt staff to reflect on how legislation relates to the organisation's values and how it affects staff on an individual basis. There are different types of risks associated with data processing and data transfer when all work and work machines are located outside of an office. For instance, it is important to document data processing activities which includes how and where data is stored and how data is transferred. This may be simplified if your team uses centrally managed devices, which can help you mitigate a number of risks through device security policies and the build-in security features. In order to manage risks in areas like GDPR compliance and safeguarding, it is worth considering having a 'homeworking' rather than 'remote working' policy. This can help manage the risks associated with regularly using open Wi-Fi networks in places like coffee shops and prompts consideration of the security of home networks; and maintaining security when travelling.

Becoming a virtual team: A case study of organisational transformation

Things can change significantly when you start working as a virtual team. Now that we have explored some of the practical considerations of setting out as a virtual team, I want to focus on how such a transformation changes things in practice.

Drawing on first hand accounts recorded over a period of 18 months, this case study explores the impact of such a transition from different perspectives. It provides insight into the process from the first month to the end of the first year as a virtual team and beyond.

Context

This example is focused on the Association for Learning Technology (ALT), a UK-based charity with under 10 employees established in 1993. The organisation is governed by a Board of Trustees, who announced the decision to move ALT's operations away from a long-standing physical hosting agreement with a university to a more independent model in 2018.⁵ The primary motivation for this transition was to ensure that the organisation's base of operations were more closely aligned with its strategic aims and values, and to provide more direct support for members across the UK than a small team based in a single office could offer. Thus, the organisation set out on a journey to close its offices after nearly 25 years and to transform its largely office-based team into a virtual workforce.

The case study is based on a series of blog posts published by staff (Martin Hawksey and myself, with contributions from colleagues) over a number of years as part of a wider commitment to open leadership. One advantage of regularly sharing progress was that it allowed the organisation to learn from other organisations and sectors through an ongoing process of knowledge exchange, exchanging expertise and resources. Whilst this broadens the perspective shared here, there are necessarily limits in its scope.

That said, when setting out on an ambitious organisational transformation it can be difficult to find authentic accounts of how others managed to succeed in similar circumstances and it is even more rare to find some examples of the problems they overcame along the way or insights into things that went wrong. The case study includes extracts from the original blog posts which are intended to provide this kind of opportunity, a chance for learning from others' experiences first hand and reflect.

⁵ ALT, "New Partnership between ALT and Oxford Brookes University," *ALT*, January 25, 2018.

PART 1: THE START OF THE JOURNEY

This first part, from February⁶ and March⁷ 2018, looks back at the physical transition, from when the organisation closed its offices to the first few weeks as a virtual organisation. Whilst the transition was prepared well in advance and everything proceeded as planned, this period was especially high risk and interruption to operations as well as for the workforce were anticipated. This first extract reflects both the excitement of making the transition as well as the impact it had on the team:

The most significant thing that happened for us as a team was seeing the transition project plan come to fruition. We hit all the milestones of making the physical transition, packing up boxes and making sure everyone got their things delivered to their new work spaces (i.e. our homes). We planned for this for such a long time that it felt like a real achievement to actually see the boxes being packed, the office empty and to wave that final goodbye. It felt a bit like moving house as many last minute things needed sorting out and decisions needed to be taken as they arose. We couldn't plan for all eventualities, and the move itself brought to light many small, niggly questions and needs that we could only then consider and deal with.

Once the move itself was accomplished the main focus of the team shifted to operations. Some of the team already had experience of working from home and some virtual working practices were already in place. The organisation had used collaborative tools for a number of years and had gradually fostered a culture of online collaboration and communication. Other elements of working as a virtual team had to be introduced:

The phone system was an interesting challenge. We opted for a cloud service which still gave the organisation locally based numbers and integrated into existing systems. This enabled us to

6 M. Deepwell and M. Hawksey, "An Open Perspective on Organisational Transformation?," *Maren Deepwell*, March 2, 2018.

7 M. Deepwell and M. Hawksey, "Developing Collaboration as a Virtual Team," *Maren Deepwell*, April 4, 2018.

have a virtual switchboard and direct numbers for all staff. The change to the phone system required some changes in the way we operate, for example not being co-located made it more difficult to see if someone was free to take a call and you couldn't just look across the room to see if someone was free, but overall it worked very well.

Despite these kinds of teething problems, the team found that the technology worked well overall and made it easier to begin to change established workflows. Reflecting on the first few days and weeks of collaborating online, one of the team wrote:

Two specific challenges I encountered were being overwhelmed by everything having to be done differently and figuring out what to do when things went wrong. For example, day-to-day processes like filing expense claims or signing documents suddenly turned from something I never thought about to requiring a new procedure. The new services we adopted, for digital signing of documents for example, are easy to use, but still take time to embed into workflows.

During the first month, productivity was lower than usual because it took time to establish new processes and learn how to use tools and platforms. Like many colleagues found during their unexpected move to working from home during the pandemic, under time pressure it is often common practice to just get on with the job at hand instead of establishing robust processes and documenting the individual steps. However in this case, part of the team's objective was to document new procedures and workflows in order to train not only each other but also future employees. This proved particularly challenging in the context of leading the team, as much of the way in which things were now working was new to everyone. Questions arose about specific new systems or problems when something wasn't working as expected. In this particular context, these issues were exacerbated as the organisation decided to make use of a new IT infrastructure as part of moving operations online and was too small to have dedicated in-house IT support.

In order to solve these initial problems, the team started to make use of remote desktop sharing and screen-sharing whilst working synchronously online, and incorporated sharing of problems and solutions as a regular part of weekly meetings, as well as cultivating an increased degree of self-help particularly using online resources. Web services were maintained by third party suppliers chosen during the transition period as were HR services, providing a very cost effective model for an organisation of this size:

In terms of the essential services our organisations need, virtual operations are very cost efficient. Taking into account set up costs like purchasing new equipment there will be savings and it certainly helps that we planned ahead and budgeted accordingly. In the case of infrastructure and tech, we already have a lot of expertise in house (which I think is unusual for an organisation our size) and we have turned that into an operational advantage. We also identified areas such as legal, HR or pensions in which we needed and procured additional expertise.

The key factor in the decision making process of the organisation was to put the organisation's values into practice. Alignment with the four core values of openness, collaboration, participation, and independence ensured that the transition had a more strategic, people-focused outlook, and helped prioritise investment in areas that make a difference to staff and stakeholders.

Looking back, our values played a bigger part in the decision making process than anticipated. In the face of all this change and upheaval, having shared values that remain consistent has been a powerful force for creating stability.

One of the key aims for the team throughout the transition was to provide consistent support for collaboration. Effectively working together online is one of the most challenging aspects of working as a virtual team and the organisation identified this from the outset. For example, as part of the transition plan, the team put in place both virtual and in person

catch-ups for staff, initially offering a blended approach before moving fully online. Interacting synchronously online during meetings and via instant messaging combined with regular asynchronous contact via email and written updates using collaborative documents form another part of this blended approach.

In order to manage the risks involved in the transition, the team only gradually moved working relationships into its new virtual workplace. For example, the team started virtual team meetings months prior to moving fully online to help build the skills and confidence needed to be able to rely on the meetings at all times and under pressure.

The blended approach and a focus on team meetings has been a real win for us. Team meetings provide a sense of stability and connectedness. It's important not to ignore the social aspects of working in a team and something I find very useful is the opportunity to just hang out with others with a non-work agenda and team meetings are a great opportunity to top and tail business with what's going on in life in general.

The organisation set out a commitment not only to work virtually but also to support staff in meeting in-person several times a year. This commitment formed an important part of the vision for the new virtual team in the long term. Without a catalyst like a pandemic to fuel a complete change of pace, the organisation as a whole placed value in this vision of an in-person element persisting over time and this has continued to be the case 5 years later.

The organisation had previously operated a hybrid working model for some of its staff, enabling a minority to work from home some of the time, whilst most staff were office based all of the time. Adopting a fully virtual workplace restored parity and means that everyone adopted the same way of working:

In terms of line management, I find it easier to manage a team that is fully distributed, rather than having some staff work remotely and others office based as we had before. I have always had line managers who I have worked with remotely, so it's something

I have experienced from both sides. Building relationships, providing support and creating a shared vision takes time and effort regardless of how you do it. In my experience, consistency is key. Setting an example through how we work does help, but it takes time to embed all the new processes we have established. So regardless of how busy things get, sticking to regular team meetings and making time for individual catch ups is essential to keep the team communicating and collaborating.

In these first months of working from home, a heavy workload was putting pressure on the team. This required managers not only to focus on practical outputs but also try to pick up non-verbal communication or informal chat to help establish how the newly virtual team was coping. It quickly became apparent that this can be harder when you don't meet in person. For example, making a joke or sharing frustration can be much more difficult to interpret correctly when you don't see someone's facial expression, body language or gestures. The team did find virtual equivalents, for example chat tools can provide a good space for informal interaction, but also felt that things could more easily get lost in translation. This turned out to be particularly challenging for managers:

I make more use of chat or calls to check in or say hi to someone outside of meetings. I'm trying to find balance between working together effectively as a team, providing personal support when needed and keeping space to think.

A key consideration for the team in the first few months in particular, was to establish an effective balance between different communication methods: a new phone system, instant chat and email as well as video meetings platforms. For team members who were office based, the awareness of what's going on that comes with being in the same place was suddenly removed. Although various tools and workflows were established to help replace some of this, there were still a lot of unanswered questions that only became apparent over time. For example, how do you replace glancing over your shoulder to see if someone is busy? In some

instances there are very simple solutions. For instance, you can set your online status to 'I'm at lunch' or add lunch into your calendar. Similarly, you can block out time in your diary, share meeting schedules and so forth. This overall appeared to work well but did require everyone to check calendars before asking a question via chat:

I think it's impossible to replace 'glancing over the shoulder', but using calendars and status updates can help. The challenge I think is how do you normalise something instinctive with something that feels more artificial and mechanical.

The team used this question as a way to reflect on its new, virtual working practices and identified three key elements in changing behaviours : first, instead of focusing on the physical behaviour or action, the team asked why a particular behaviour, like glancing over one's shoulder, was important. In this case the physical action can be interpreted as having a question or needing help. So what is important is not being able to literally see each other, but the need to be available for each other and to answer quick questions. The team found that use of chat tools to make sure an answer or attention can be given when it is needed provides an effective solution most of the time.

Part of becoming an effective virtual team was to reflect on how the team worked together, as a group. Drop-in sessions were organised for example to help share different perspectives, and to get a better sense of how individuals felt about working virtually.

The 'not knowing whom to ask for help' is a good example of how we solved a problem as a team. We discussed it, suggested options and decided as a group to try a new approach. We took joint ownership of both the problem and finding a solution.

Another strategy adopted by the team was to establish a 'show and tell' part of team meetings, dedicated time for showing each other ways in which problems were solved or to share a new tool. These sessions were part of the team normalising new things and feeling more empowered in the process.

I find that even if something new feels artificial or cumbersome to begin with, as long as I can see how it can be useful, it starts to feel more normal quite quickly. Transferring my to do lists to a digital format is a good example of this in my personal practice. Despite the fact that I wanted to make the jump, it took me months of trial and error (and, frustratingly, less productivity) to figure out what works for me and to some degree it's still work in progress. Whatever tool I use, there are times when pen and paper are best.

PART 2: THREE MONTHS LATER

Three months later, in May⁸ 2018, the team started to find its stride operating as a virtual team. Much of what had been planned and prepared for was working and the team started to achieve some of its key deliverables successfully. This early success increased confidence and provided evidence that the organisation continued to meet its objective in this new way of working. With hindsight, it may seem strange to think that this was ever in doubt, but at the time the choice to move an organisation fully online seemed unusual to many and even now, in a slowly emerging post-pandemic world, there are still many who doubt that successful virtual working is viable or desirable. In early 2018, those voices were dominant and the perceived risks of such a transition seemed high indeed. Successfully generating revenue and delivering services was seen to be a significant achievement for a newly established virtual workforce at the time.

When reviewing our progress recently I realised that whilst I was focused on completing the transition, we have also made a lot of strategic progress – including delivering one of the largest events in our calendar. This was our first big event where the entire team was distributed. With multi-day events I think it's hard to appreciate just how much goes into them if you haven't organised one yourself. Even in a digital age various things need to go to print, you've got material and equipment that needs to be delivered and there are some practical things like

8 M. Deepwell and M. Hawksey, "3 Months in ... Hitting Our First Milestones as a Virtual Team," *Maren Deepwell*, May 9, 2018.

getting conference badges prepared. As part of our distributed organisation we now have distributed resources which need some extra logistical planning in order to bring them all together at the venue. One of the challenges now for us as a distributed organisation is we need to develop relationships with additional service providers, either because we are doing things differently or because we are all not in the same place. This takes time and effort which I think should be factored in if you are thinking about moving your organisation to a distributed or virtual structure.

Hitting those important first milestones helped highlight which parts of the team's new virtual set up were working well and which did not. It also prompted the reflection that whilst the organisation's transformation was strategic and welcome and overall it felt inspiring and positive, embedding this level change still takes time.

The team's expectations of what it wanted to achieve in the first year were high and after the first few months of virtual operations it became clear that it took a lot of resources and time to put in place new ways of doing things. The team realised that doing something once wasn't enough. Processes like building new relationships with suppliers and adapting workflows and documenting them all take focus and energy away from day-to-day operations. Whilst essential, and over time they become helpful – initially they were perceived to be a burden because there was no capacity to handle any more novelty. Only once a certain amount of time had passed did the team regain its capacity to put lessons learnt in the early days to good use and to develop and improve processes.

This capacity enabled the team to move into the next phase of becoming a virtual team: doing things differently, expanding support for virtual operations and updating plans. Overall it felt like a positive next step:

We have a lot more scope now to be flexible, to solve problems creatively rather than having to work around them. We've committed to being more agile and I'm discovering what that means in practice for me as an individual, for us as a team and as an organisation all over again.

PART 3: BECOMING A VIRTUAL TEAM

In the following months and years, the team hit its milestones. This last part looks back at moments from the first⁹ year of virtual operations and subsequent strategic developments.¹⁰

From an organisational perspective, the transition was completed on time and on budget, leading into a successful first year of virtual operations. Strategic gains of the transition became apparent over time:

- Freeing up financial resources: Whilst financial efficiency was not a key driver for becoming a virtual team, it was part of the organisation's strategy to spend less of its resources on renting under-utilised office space and costs associated with it. Instead the organisation wanted to invest more resources into the services it provides to its stakeholders. Reviewing accounts a year after the transition, and taking into account one off transition costs, the organisation was able to redistribute between 5 and 10% of its annual turnover. Over time, this began to make a real positive difference to the organisation's resources and enabled the recruitment of additional staff.
- Broadening the recruitment pool: Another example of the positive impact of becoming a virtual team for the organisation was meeting its aim to recruit staff located in different parts of the UK in order to better collaborate with its national community. Recruiting for a virtual team independent of location enabled the organisation to attract a much wider pool of high calibre applicants. As a result, the team became more geographically distributed and thus able to travel to local events and meetings more than before. In contrast to prior to the transition when nearly the whole team was based in one city and the organisation's ability to support remote working was limited, it now supported staff in all parts of the UK, significantly increasing its reach due to the move to becoming a virtual team.

9 M. Deepwell and M. Hawksey, "Virtual Teams: A Special Podcast Edition," *Maren Deepwell*, January 10, 2019.

10 M. Deepwell and M. Hawksey, "Virtual Teams: Strategy Unpacked ... How Being a Virtual Team Is Changing Our Organisation," *Maren Deepwell*, October 7, 2019.

- Reducing commuting and environmental impact: The organisation also considered how being a distributed team changes its environmental impact, in particular relating to air travel. With a team located across the country some travel continued to be required, but efficient use of virtual working helped to minimise travel overall and eliminated the need to commute for all staff. In addition, the organisation greatly reduced its print requirements when moving to a virtual filing system. Some of these changes were by design, others were born from practicalities. Having reviewed operations after 2 years of working virtually, it appears that even with the increased use of technology, the organisation did reduce its impact on the environment overall.

For the team, the first year in particular was a time of change and creativity, with highs and lows that included several staffing changes as the realities of working from home as part of a virtual team sank in. What become more apparent over time was how the transition offered frequent opportunities to learn and evolve the way a virtual team works:

There's so much to share that it's hard to know where to start. Firstly, the excitement about how a transition plan on a spreadsheet has turned into reality, and how the organisation has changed over the past 18 months. Secondly, there're 101 things we have learnt along the way, from how to set up a PO Box as a distributed organisation to how to manage a virtual team and all that that entails. And then there are all the things we have discovered about being a home worker... during summer holidays, family emergencies and when things go wrong. There is never a dull moment, that's for sure.

Reflecting on its first year of working as a virtual team, the team identified many lessons learnt: for example, exploring remote worker well-being was an important topic for the team. Also, aspects of homeworking altered as the seasons changed: during the first winter, as the cold set in, the team noticed changes and discovered some of the upsides of working

from home such as swapping casual clothes for thick jumpers and blankets and having more control over the homeworking environment as well as some of the downsides, such as the cost of turning the heating on for a lone home-worker.

The team's senior staff felt that establishing an open practice of management and sharing the journey of becoming a virtual team felt like an important step forward. By making time to focus on how the organisation is run, staff were able to innovate more and respond more quickly to the new demands of a virtual team. Blogging about working as a virtual team prompted the team to focus on innovating, on improving things even if they were unfamiliar. It also prompted the team to consider some of the things they found difficult about working from home full-time:

Some of us have found it important to compartmentalise workspace and personal space as a remote worker and also how difficult it can be sometimes for others to understand this, for example when family visits for the holidays and your 'office' is also the spare bedroom. Having a dedicated space to work is very important, not least it means you can just go to work each morning and not have to set up anything, and that stability is important for many remote workers. If the spare room is suddenly needed, or your workspace is disrupted by a new pet it is hard to balance the competing demands. You don't want to feel like having your parents sitting in reception all day.

From the outset, the team aimed to establish space at home that was 'theirs' and dedicated to work. As the team moved from the office to the virtual workplace, home had to accommodate the physical dimension of the virtual team. Limited space, caring for pets, the demands of family and so forth really challenged the team's homeworking at times. Even for staff who had disliked working in an office, and for whom working from home felt like a hard won privilege, day-to-day homeworking wasn't easy and the team frequently swapped stories of having to rearrange set ups, moving furniture, changing equipment or adjusting to environmental changes, such as the sun coming in through the window and so forth. When your work space is adjacent to the family bathroom and the main

space to dry laundry as well as the notional spare room, it can be difficult to articulate the importance of the workspace to family, friends, guests & pets.

It is important to note that Internet connectivity (and associated costs), ensuring sufficient bandwidth for the work required (including long video calls for instance), and bandwidth sharing within a household are a factor for virtual teams. Even in urban areas in the UK, reliable connectivity is not always a given and in rural areas connectivity issues can increase.

Becoming a virtual team offers all sorts of opportunities and pitfalls and once you have successfully made the move and found a way to succeed day-to-day, then the real work begins. Once you are there, and you see your team only on screen, you quickly realise that the technology and homeworking set up are only a small part of what makes a team work. Important parts no doubt, but not necessarily the deciding factors that will help your team thrive. For that, you need to foster a positive culture, a team spirit that transcends the limitations of technology and connects your team in a meaningful way and that is what we will discuss in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

Building a virtual team spirit

This chapter focuses on ways to engage a virtual team, managing people who may never meet in person and finding ways to create a positive team spirit. Some of the examples in this chapter include show & tell sessions, team days and activities as well as physical items such as team merchandise, treats and presents.

Before we look at practical approaches, let's consider some of the key questions that determine what team building activities will be the most effective in your context:

- What shapes the way a virtual team works?
- How do you find the right balance between online and in person activities?
- What do you want your team to feel like on a day-to-day basis?

This chapter will explore each of these questions in turn.

It can be liberating to consider these questions outside of practical constraints. The way your team works, how often you can meet or what sort of activities you can make happen may be determined by constraints outside of your control, such as internal policies for example. That said, it is still worth getting a feel for what you hope the culture of your team can be and then work with the practicalities involved.

What shapes the way a virtual team works?

There are plenty of factors that shape the way your team works, most of all the people involved. Whilst you may be recruiting a completely new team, in all likelihood you will have a team that's made up of a mix of new faces and experienced colleagues, some of whom may remember a time when their office still existed (or when they worked in one). It's still rare for teams to be made up entirely of individuals who have never worked in a co-located context. That's an important factor, as everyone's expectation of working in a team will have been shaped by their previous experiences, so it's worth investigating that a little. Get a feel for everybody's experiences and expectations. Ask questions about their most or least favourite thing about their previous workplaces, find out whether they have brought some parts of 'the office' home with them, and get a feel for how working in a virtual team feels for them.

The cycle of a year or a product development schedule may also impact the way your team works. If you work in an academic context, the start of a new term and the arrival of students may have meant a buzz and sense of busyness around the team previously that is hard to replicate when everyone is based at home. Or if you run events or training courses, that, too, could determine the shape to a month or year. Anything that can help differentiate between the days and weeks or mark milestones is helpful to a virtual team, where there is a stronger potential for every day to feel the same. When you are sitting in front of a screen for 8 hours a day regardless of what happens at work, things quickly feel repetitive.

There are likely also different levels of organisational knowledge and familiarity with how things are done in any given team that affects how individuals engage and perform. For example things like how you plan for your holidays, how you take your lunch break, and screen breaks, vary greatly from team to team. In your team it might be perfectly in order not to 'say hello' when you start work every day (for example via instant chat) and to use communication tools such as email for formal communications only, whilst in other teams not typing a greeting into the chat or joining the daily coffee meet up might come across as a snub. The level of online, informal conversation will vary between teams, and different platforms. Some teams rely on a single virtual work environment, whilst others create their own mix of email, productivity and

communication tools. It takes time and effective modelling to induct new colleagues into the way your team works and they in turn will contribute to shaping how things are done over time.

Individual preferences certainly play a role in defining how teams work and this is particularly important when it comes to communication in a virtual team. Leading a virtual team necessitates you spelling out clearly what's required and what's optional when it comes to communication. For instance, if someone hates using Slack, and their preference has a negative impact on the team as a whole because they are not communicating effectively or building relationships then what do you do? How can you prescribe what's expected whilst also recognising that not everyone communicates in the same way?

If you have someone in your team who doesn't communicate effectively, start by finding out the reasons for their behaviour. It might be that they keep their camera switched off because they hate their new haircut or that they do not use the chat channels enough because they struggle with their notification settings. Once you have established the reason why, ascertain that your colleague is clear about your expectations. They may simply not be communicating because they are unaware that it matters if they do or don't. As a manager, you will have oversight that the individual lacks. Be sure to explain what your expectations are, and why it is important to do what's required. If you have a whole group of people who are uncommunicative or if a specific interaction isn't working, take a step back and reflect.

Imagine, you find yourself being the only person who turns up for the monthly virtual escape room social that you have organised. What do you do? Here are some questions to ask yourself, and ideally your colleagues who didn't come:

- What is the aim of the activity and does this activity enable us to achieve our aim?
- Is it scheduled at a bad time or day?
- Can everyone access/use the platform or tool we are using?
- Should more people have a say in what is chosen/organised?
- Is it simply too much/are we overloading employees?
- Is this activity respecting their time away from work?

Whatever factors are causing your escape room social to fail, it is worth investigating. You may end up scrapping the idea all together, but finding out why things don't work when times are good is key to ensuring you are ready for the inevitable difficult patch over the horizon.

Most people get worse at communicating when they are under pressure. This can make it more difficult for virtual teams to function at high pressure times when the communication suffers. Even if you find it easy to build or maintain individual working relationships virtually, group dynamics can be harder to establish as it requires everyone to engage regularly in collaboration and communication as a group.

In *Group Awareness in Distributed Software Development*¹ the authors conclude that 'occasional face-to-face gatherings assist group awareness'. This highlights how a blended approach can be successful, such as seeing each other in person at regular intervals.

The difference between building individual and team dynamics in a distributed organisation is an interesting topic to explore. Any highly performing team experiences teething troubles when moving from the success of achieving at one level to moving up to the next. Things stop working in the way they did before new dynamics can be established and embedded. Getting through a big pressure point together is a good bonding experience to build on and that can be easier to accomplish with an in-person element such as a team day. Over time, these memorable milestones help create a stronger team dynamic. Time is also a factor identified by Hinds and Mortensen²: 'relationships between distant team members become more harmonious over time as teams develop familiarity and shared processes'.

Whether you take a more analytical approach or see team dynamics as messy, shifting and unpredictable with many known and unknown unknowns, over time each pressure situation serves as an opportunity

1 C. Gutwin, et al., "Group Awareness in Distributed Software Development," in *Computer Science, Proceedings of the 2004 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, November 6, 2004.

2 P. Hinds and M. Mortensen, "Understanding Conflict in Geographically Distributed Teams: The Moderating Effects of Shared Identity, Shared Context, and Spontaneous Communication," *Organization Science* 16, no. 3 (May 2005).

for the team to build trust in their processes and plans, and form the habit to rely on each other, solve problems together.

Learning together is a key strategy for building a virtual team culture. Learning in this context can include screen-sharing during a meeting and showing someone else a keyboard shortcut, formal skills training such as learning to use a new tool or platform together or reflective learning during a project evaluation meeting.

Learning in a leadership position within a virtual team is likely to involve building some close relationships you can rely on. Building those kinds of relationships will take time to figure out how you will lead things together, assess each other's strengths and determine how you can support each other when it's most needed. Building those kinds of relationships with trusted colleagues can help increase capacity and resilience in many ways. It also provides you with a safe space to assess how you are coping with pressure and know that someone has your back if the answer is not very well.

Establishing that kind of rapport with your Line Manager, a fellow senior manager or trusted colleague may have happened very organically and informally in a co-located setting. In a virtual setting, it can feel different to ask for help or share problems via text, email or a video chat. Something you may have mentioned on the way to the cafe or at the end of the day in the car park will still need discussing – but when?

Finding time and support for yourself is essential to succeeding in leading virtual teams, and should be part of any vision for a distributed team.

We end up gathering in ways that don't serve us, or not connecting when we ought to.³

Virtual or in person? How to find the right balance

Virtual teams usually work from home permanently, whilst still having touch points throughout the year when they meet in person. Meanwhile, many employers are introducing hybrid working, for example 2 days a

3 P. Parker, *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters* (Penguin, 2018).

week in the office, or 1 week every month. These kinds of arrangements can be hard to make work in practice, and it is helpful to think about what the objectives of a particular team are instead of where employees are located before deciding what model might work best in your context and why. Ringel explores how we can determine when we actually need to meet in-person:

This involves examining the precise nature of the tasks in front of us, our specific objectives, and the weight we attach to the ones that compete, like efficiency, effectiveness, camaraderie, and mental health. Once we determine which parts of our work should be done in person, which should be virtual, and which can benefit from a mix, we can design toward that ideal.⁴

This is an important question which is worth asking yourself or your team in order to reflect on how and why you meet:

- Should this be a meeting?
- Are the meeting goals relationship-based or task-based?
- Could my meeting take an entirely different shape or form?
- What type of meeting will be most inclusive?
- Does my facilitator have the skills and tech setup to pull off a hybrid gathering?

Managing a virtual team is a complex process and instead of focusing on these considerations and a given task's objective, the default in most cases is to create a sense of order by stipulating certain days of the week to be worked in the office or at home or for meetings to be in person, regardless of what is happening. Technology is complicit in this as for example calendar invites for virtual meetings are often an hour long by default. Hence, most online meetings are an hour long as a result.

⁴ R. Ringel, "When Do We Actually Need to Meet in Person?," *Harvard Business Review*, July 26, 2021.

Simply changing the default length of a meeting that your calendar tool uses can shift patterns of behaviour and productivity across the whole team. Try making default meetings 25 min instead of an hour long and see what happens.

Finding the right balance between establishing a sense of order that everyone can understand and offering enough flexibility to meet the demands of a changing workload is an ongoing process.

If you do decide to set up a dedicated time or day when everyone gathers together in person, you could focus on:

- Giving the team time to hang out together.
- Working together on a specific task as a team.
- Having fun and focus on social relationships.

Let's explore what the kind of day might mean to a team and what it involves. To begin with, be clear about whether this is a social day out, a way to show appreciation to a team for example, or whether this is a day to focus on working on something together. Set an agenda to help everyone prepare and get ready to focus on the task at hand. Also, consider the logistics of the day: can you combine the activity with a visit to a client, a meeting on campus or a site visit for example? Does your chosen location have everything you will need to run your team day, including appropriate space, connectivity and facilities? What do colleagues need to bring to fully participate and what individual needs do you need to take into account? In some cases it is difficult to make days out function in an equitable way and even a day or 2 days may take more preparation than anticipated. As well as logistics, plan in time to eat and catch up informally and those pockets of unstructured time that are really important. Going somewhere new together can make the time your team spends together more memorable.

From a logistics point of view, the size of the team is an important factor. The larger the team, the more planning ahead and booking spaces is required. There are many spaces that can be booked for a day or even a few hours, which usually requires planning ahead, and you also need a budget to cover travel and (office) accommodation. Choosing a location

to meet will have a different impact on everyone depending on how long it takes to get there and back and so forth. If a team is distributed across the UK for instance every location means longer travel times for someone. Achieving a balance between the flexibility of homeworking day-to-day and occasional travel whilst meeting in person from time-to-time can be a challenge, and the more notice you can give staff the better. This will enable them to better plan ahead for childcare, school pick ups, pet sitters ,and so forth.

Below is an extract reflecting on a team day I organised in Manchester, UK:

There were three parts to the day: first, the site visit which everyone took part in and which helped the team plan for an upcoming event. It was very useful to have everyone contribute ideas and ask questions on site and it saved the team a lot of reporting back and separate visits. Next, the team spent some time together reviewing a project plan. Everyone does review the plan regularly during team meetings, but it was insightful to do so in person as a team, seeing it projected on a big screen. The team discussed more, asked more questions of each other. That continued when the team spent time together working on different things after lunch. There was an opportunity for building rapport more informally that will translate at least to some degree into our virtual collaboration. Two of the team had not met in person before, so that was an important function of the day, too.

It felt like there was more collaboration and communication when everyone was working together in the same room. For me, this underlined that it's important to recognise there are differences between working as a distributed team rather than in a shared physical space and it also was a reminder to think about virtual teams differently and not just faithfully recreate the physical space online. The day highlighted how much potential these days have.

An unexpected result of the team outing was that gathering together has prompted the team to reflect on how important it is to take some personal

responsibility for ‘finding connection points’⁵: taking time to schedule regular lunches with co-workers, meet clients and getting involved in the community to ensure there is some face to face contact or at least time focused on building relationships. In the context of operating as a virtual team, these activities take on a different significance. They are all about making connections with others an integral part of what the team does as individuals, part of wider professional practice. Managers can set an example and enable others, but to some extent it depends on how much an individual is willing to or interested in being part and contributing to that kind of working culture. Tech-focused solutions, like for example shared bookmarks, can help build a sense of shared space online. Yet, it still depends on everyone contributing, everyone recognising the importance of working in a certain way, and what benefits that has for a team and the organisation as a whole.

The in-person day also helped the team to focus on strategy. The final part of the day included an activity which prompted each member of the team to talk about some key ways in which they have individually contributed to the success of the organisation in the previous year and to listen to what others had achieved. This felt to many like the most powerful moment of the day. It helped everyone realise that whilst they may not all be in the same place very often, they are all part of the same vision. This is a good example of how the best elements of virtual teams work are beneficial to all teams: the shift from a spoken to written culture, empathy for each others’ needs and making concerted efforts to stay connected with one another.⁶

Day-to-day team culture

Many workplaces are characterised by how their spaces are designed and utilised. Everyone has seen pictures of large corporations in Silicon Valley who offer their employees fully stocked kitchens, pool tables and sleeping pods. Most of us will be all too familiar with a less glamorous

5 S. Mautz, *Working From Home Is One of the Hottest Job Skills in America. Here Are 7 Keys to Excelling at It* (Inc.com, no date).

6 D. Noelle, “What Colocated Teams Can Learn from Remote Teams,” *Medium*, June 9, 2018.

office environment of white walls, strip lighting and the hum of open plan office spaces populated by many others. Working in a historic building might be a perk for some, or having a particularly desirable corner office or beautiful view. Whatever your preference, the space matters: location, amenities, architecture, furniture and environmental conditions impact on recruitment, retention and performance at work. Whether you work for a royal society in a landmark in central London, or a contemporary corporate space in Dublin or a small, independent shop in Inverness, these elements help create the character for your workplace, and this is lost to virtual teams.

For a virtual team with employees who work from home, a large part of the character of the workplace is determined by each individual's home and all that entails. This can create a lot of disparity between employees as each individual's circumstances are different from the next, and there is no common frame of reference such as the coffee shop next door or the daily commute. Instead, the culture of a virtual team is defined by factors other than the obvious cues gained from the office building or campuses.

It is important to note here that there is much about managing home-workers that is outside of your control. Different personal, social and economic circumstances will impact on the productivity and wellbeing of all home-workers. In Chapter 1, we discussed how important it is to set out the responsibilities of employer and employee very clearly from the outside, but even with the best contractual framework, things outside of your control can still have an impact on how things run in your team and this is something we will return to in Chapter 4.

Still, when it comes to the day-to-day management of a virtual team, many perspectives focus on the virtual element first and foremost. Working online means that there is a lot of information that can be collected and analysed to generate insights. Putting the team element of your virtual team alongside the technology helps you to focus on the people, not the data. And that opens up thinking about how you can shape the culture of your team in practical ways.

There are many practical strategies for shaping how it feels to be part of a virtual team on a day-to-day basis. Before setting out on

implementing any of these, it's worth asking yourself what you want to achieve.

If you have an existing team that you are looking to develop as a virtual team, take stock of what kind of shape the team is in:

- How would you describe the team culture?
- Are there any existing problems or ways of working you are seeking to change?
- What would you like to see happen?

If you are moving a team to virtual working, it's worth investing in preparing for the move carefully, and to be very aware of what practical challenges you may have to overcome first.

Wherever your starting point, it is worth considering any underlying rules or principles that will shape the way your team works. For example, if everyone is going to be online to start work in a synchronous manner, you could design activities and communication around that. If on the other hand everyone has a few key meetings every week but is doing work independently apart from that, you may need to work to develop communication around key meetings or seek to establish new touch points in the week. You might want everyone in the team to start the week together or you might want everyone to join in for lunch on Wednesdays.

Whatever you aim to organise, carefully consider any logistical and practical barriers as well as perks. What will everyone get out of participating? A great team culture will motivate everyone and that helps make it sustainable, but planning in perks is important, too. This applies in particular to new or changed activities you introduce.

There are a lot of ways to reward teams and many companies offer dedicated offerings for virtual teams, ranging from all year round benefits such as gym memberships, or cinema tickets, to special treats such as a tasting session or an afternoon in an escape room to food and drink based perks through the post. In larger organisations it may be difficult or take a long time to introduce such changes, as there are likely many administrative processes and policies in place that have been designed

for the in person workplace. Whilst you may have easily been able to order coffee and biscuits for a meeting room, it may take some creativity (or structural changes) to find ways to spend the same money on shipping cookies to everyone's home. What you choose to do will depend much on your context and institutional spending policies. That said, it is worth reviewing whether spending policies need to be adjusted to reflect the different demands that supporting a virtual workforce brings with it.

Further considerations might be the environmental impact of the perks you choose, dietary requirements, accessibility and inclusion as well as how the activity will reflect the culture of your team and its members. If you are devolving the responsibility for choosing team treats or perks to others, it might be worth considering putting a policy in place that spells out what criteria to apply when selecting appropriate rewards. Skydiving or clay pigeon shooting may appeal to some, but not be suitable options, so be clear what is in scope and what is not.

Perks can come in many forms, and include options such as CPD opportunities or dedicated time for mentoring or coaching which can provide valuable alternatives to a goodie box delivered in the mail.

Whatever you choose should reflect the occasion and the ethos of your team, and the last part of this chapter explores many practical examples of organising such activities.

USING SHARED CHECKLIST TO FIND BALANCE BETWEEN COLLABORATION AND COMPLIANCE

Working as a virtual team can result in a huge volume of communication. In order to cut down unnecessary individual communications as much as possible, you can, for example, use shared checklists to help monitor regular tasks in areas like payroll, communication or technical maintenance and logs. Completing checklists individually and reviewing the results together can provide space to raise questions and makes many invisible activities visible to everyone in the team. It enables everyone to spend less time on important but routine tasks and frees up communication channels.

Checklists can also help provide some of the monitoring that would be easily accomplished in a co-located workplace, as the examples later

will highlight. It can be disconcerting to lead a team without being able to see people hard at work, making progress. Checklists (or their equivalents) provide a way to gather insight and check on progress whilst giving individuals autonomy to organise their own work. For example, if there is a deadline to complete the checklist by the end of the month, that is a clear sign that things are on track. Some organisations use productivity or project management tools in which everyone updates their progress frequently, and when everyone is able to use these effectively, there can be a huge bonus. However, many teams have a broad range of digital competencies and individual ways of working to accommodate, so that what results is often a patchwork of practice across the team or organisation.

Finding balance between ensuring everyone meets essential deadlines or completes mandatory processes whilst encouraging collaboration is challenging when you have a lot of different individual requirements and work habits to manage. Hence, something like a shared checklist works well in focusing on the essentials in a manageable way. Being able to see an overview of everyone completing a regular checklist makes the process more transparent and shows that everyone is participating. It improves communication in a very time effective way.

In a small organisation or team you can take a more agile, informal approach to shared reiterating checklists: for example you can capitalise on situations when a colleague raises a new issue or questions relating to completing their part of a checklist. You can identify a gap and improve the template for everyone. A quick bit of work can thus result in an immediate improvement thanks to reviewing a checklist together. It also helps stimulate the conversation about things that the team does in their own time, and which can be easily missed or forgotten in a virtual work environment.

There are many examples of how the simple checklist can evolve into more complex approaches to increasing efficiency: from Nudge management⁷ (applying behavioural science to increase productivity) to

7 P. Ebert and W. Freibichler, "Nudge Management: Applying Behavioural Science to Increase Knowledge Worker Productivity," *Journal of Organization Design* 6 (2017): 4.

data driven approaches employed by large organisations such as Google⁸ and product oriented approaches⁹ which resonate in many industries, including edtech startups.

CHECKING IN WITH EACH OTHER

Another strategy for building a greater sense of being a virtual team is to include a check-in activity at some point during the day or week, where the team quickly and informally shares how everyone is doing and how busy they are.

This could be quite a functional exercise, for example rating the day or week out of 10 (10 = the busiest) or using a star system or similar. A more creative approach would be to give everyone the freedom to choose their own scale, be that a colour or phrase or a similar metaphor. A day could be all storm clouds for one ☁☁☁☁ and someone else could rate theirs with three unicorns 🦄🦄🦄.

One issue with a set scale like 1–10 for example is it can potentially become a little divisive. For example, if one colleague says they are a 9, someone else may think ‘how are they a 9!?', in part because in a virtual setting it’s hard to see how hard someone is working. Equally colleagues might feel like a 6, but at the same time feel guilty that someone else is a 9. Using personal scales like emoji or colours can help create a less competitive and more reflective exercise which is less open to judgement. Regardless of what format you choose, the purpose of the exercise is to take a step back and check in with yourself, sharing that with everyone without being competitive and giving the team a better sense of how everyone is doing.

If you give everyone the freedom to choose their own rating system, how individuals choose to rate their week and what scale they apply can also tell you a lot: it reflects their personality or mood, how they integrate with the team and how much of a sense they have of how they’re doing. For managers, it can help to fill the gaps between formal reporting and individual catch ups.

8 A. Wolber, “How to Use G Suite to Improve Team Performance via Intermittent Interaction,” *Tech Republic*, November 8, 2018.

9 T. Loosemore, “Internet-Era Ways of Working,” *Public Digital*, October 12, 2018.

Once you have a strong foundation in the team you can introduce more freedom to ‘personalise’ parts of your regular communications like the check-ins. The better the structures a team has and the more those are trusted, the more freedom a team can have. By modifying it, teams can feel a sense of ownership over the process. Regular checking in can also be a good tool when the team is under pressure. It can help encourage everyone to share how busy they are or what they need support with.

SHARING SUCCESS IN A VIRTUAL TEAM

An important part of day-to-day team culture is finding ways to share success. There is much that gets lost in translation when all communication is digital. Co-located teams have more clues about each other’s moods than distributed teams, and that also applies to sharing things that have gone well and things that haven’t. Leading a virtual team requires managers to be very communicative and build confidence to share both success and failure. Being honest about things that go wrong offers opportunities to show that it does happen and how to deal with it. Leading a virtual team entails listening and acknowledging achievement no matter how loudly or quietly it may be voiced.

Often, writing references, quotes and feedback for others is easier than talking about one’s own achievements. When it comes to sharing something about ourselves, about our own achievements and what we have made happen it can feel completely differently. Qualifying statements, such as ‘I feel that...’ and ‘I may argue that...’ are often added to soften the tone. We add acknowledgement of other people and their work and so forth.

Whether it’s for personal or professional reasons, plenty of us struggle to find a way to give ourselves the credit we deserve and that is particularly true in virtual teams. We can be quick to move on to the next things, never making time to really listen. Mann¹⁰ suggests that ‘fully remote workers are 29% less likely to strongly agree that they have reviewed their greatest successes with their manager in the past 6 months’ because:

10 A. Mann, “3 Ways You Are Failing Your Remote Workers,” *Gallup*, August 1, 2017.

1. Workers don't want to look like they're blowing their own trumpet by sharing their success, which results in managers (and other team members) often not being aware of the great things people are doing.
2. Managers don't want to take up too much of their people's time and so, they tend to keep their 'catch-ups' short.

Whilst I obviously do not advocate taking credit if you don't deserve it, it is important to be able to accurately recognise the importance of your own work and its impact in order to develop more mature, reflective professional practice.

Plenty of brilliant people find it hard to accept praise, argue their own cause or believe in their achievements, and I find the following rules helpful for recognising achievement (your own and others) as a virtual team:

- **Acknowledge contributions:** if something is a shared undertaking, start by giving credit to collaborators and say thank you;
- **Mention your own role:** after acknowledging what others have done, describe your own work, what you made happen, what you have achieved;
- **Reflect on impact:** whether it is good or bad, reflect on the difference what you did has made. It's a useful opportunity to ask for feedback, to acknowledge lessons learnt, to bring achievements into perspective;
- **Accept praise:** genuine praise can be hard to accept, particularly from people whose opinion you value. Some people love being applauded, others don't feel they deserve the credit. Accepting praise is a skill like any other and it is important to remember that sometimes others can see more clearly when we deserve it. If they make the effort to bestow upon you, accept it.

Bestowing praise is harder to do online because a lot of the external markers are missing. When you are co-located, there may be people applauding, or a handshake or even a hug. You can't just invite someone for lunch or buy them a coffee as a thank you when you are hundreds of miles away. Spending dedicated time during which you are fully present is often most appreciated as are creative ways of showing appreciation such as creating some custom badges with playful titles like 'Finance Genius' or 'Team Cheerer'.

Sharing the highs and lows of working helps set a tone for team communications that shapes relationships over time. Virtual working can gather speed over time, as instant messaging, constant notifications and calendar reminders ping without the external distractions that co-located teams may have. So it's doubly important for virtual teams to build in intentional pauses for reflection and sharing.

Virtual team building in practice

This section explores examples of activities that help build a positive virtual team spirit and how they work in practice. These examples are intended to provide a starting point for designing your own activities. Each example includes:

- a short description of the activity;
- tips for adopting this approach for your context;
- prompts for reflection.

ACTIVITY 1: VIRTUAL PIZZA NIGHT¹¹

There will always be times when working as a virtual team can feel like it lacks some of the fun and motivating elements of being co-located. Engaging in some social activities can help your team through those periods. In this example, a virtual pizza night is the focus for some social engagement for the team.

11 M. Deepwell and M. Hawksey, "Pizza and Virtual Team Dynamics," *Maren Deepwell*, September 6, 2018.

The idea of the virtual pizza (or other food) night is to create a way to spend time and engage with each other without sitting at a desk and staring at a screen. A virtual pizza night involves everyone making their own pizza and joining a text chat at an agreed time, sharing images of their food and drinks and chatting. You could design this as a whole team or an opt-in activity, for example the day before an important meeting or a large event, reflecting a time when co-located teams would have seen each other in person. People miss those social occasions that travelling together or being based in the same place can offer, and by planning something around the same time as a co-located team might meet helps everyone read the situation better and delineates it from day-to-day work.

Planning it for the evening and via text chat rather than a video meeting makes the activity feel a lot more social and less like being at work. It's important to make it clear that this is not during normal work hours and is an informal gathering, which creates a space in which it is OK to have a glass of wine with dinner and share pictures of pizza and cocktails as well as cats and dogs.

The tone of the interaction should be quite different from a video-based work meeting and where possible use of text chat would enable staff to use their mobile phones instead of work laptops. Using text chat also felt less intrusive, meaning the team can be present for personal commitments whilst dipping in and out of the activity.

Depending on the size of your team, plan to spend about an hour at the virtual pizza night, which is enough time to enable everyone to make a connection, and have a bit of fun together.

Integrating social activities that don't require everyone to be at their desk or on screen is a great way to create a sense of variety for a virtual team. Jointly listening to the radio is a good example of this (or, if you want to go a step further, setting up your very own online radio station for your team as Reclaim Hosting have done¹²) or you can try out randomised coffee trials¹³ which can be a great activity for large organisations in particular.

12 J. Groom, "Reclaim Radio 2.0," *bavatuessdays*, July 7, 2022.

13 D. Gurteen, *Randomised Coffee Trials* (Conversational Leadership, 2022).

Planning your own virtual pizza night?

Start with these questions:

- What's your theme... pizza, a specific cuisine, ingredient or even colour?
- What can you use to chat that is not 'the usual' channel?
- Any house rules (i.e. make it clear how informal this activity is)?
- Is there a 'last orders' time limit?

ACTIVITY 2: POSITIVE FEEDBACK BY POST

Away from the screen, postcard based activities can be really useful for a virtual team, (provided that the cost of postage is feasible). Positive Feedback by Post is an activity designed specifically for virtual teams. The motivation for designing this activity was that we tend to be attuned and structured around critical feedback and less well accustomed psychologically to positive feedback:

Most people are well-attuned to critical feedback; it is jarring, threatening, and emotional, and as a result, quite memorable. In contrast, it is often easy to let positive reflections on our actions subtly slip us by. Lingering in the glow of praise can also feel uncomfortably immodest. It therefore takes practice to savour moments of positivity and to hold them in your memory.¹⁴

This quote, from a Harvard Business Review article which is focused on a specific tool (the Reflected Best Self Exercise), highlights why positive feedback can be powerful and also that many professionals have little practice dealing with it effectively. If this rings true to you, then you might find the following steps the authors suggest helpful:

- Noticing positive feedback, including creating a space where you can save it, like an email folder or pin board;
- Asking questions, teasing out exactly what it is about what you did that made a positive impact;

14 L. Roberts, E. Heaphy, and B. Caza, "To Become Your Best Self, Study Your Successes," *Harvard Business Review*, May 14, 2019.

- Studying your success (personally I don't like this phrase, but the idea is sound), reflecting on what you did and how/why you succeeded;
- Practising enacting the most positive aspect of yourself, making space in your day-to-day work where you can see the positive impact you have on others, or on the organisation;
- Share positive feedback with others, establishing giving and receiving positive feedback more firmly in your practice.

In a virtual team, positive feedback generally comes, if it comes at all, in digital form. Maybe someone writes an email to thank you, or tweets at you with praise, or maybe it is just a thumbs up in the instant chat. Whatever form it takes, it is often a fleeting moment in a busy day. Positive Feedback by Post was designed to create something very tangible, namely a postcard, to convey positive feedback: it simply involves sending an envelope to each member of the team in the post, enclosing a piece of positive feedback for them.

If you want to extend the activity to the whole team, you can include postcards and printed slips for each team member, and ask them to send those to each other with positive feedback for each person. In a small team of three to five, you might each be able to send everyone else a card, in a larger group you might design the activity so that everyone gets two to three pieces of positive feedback.

Writing solely positive feedback, rather than including constructive criticism like you would for a performance review, can be liberating. Instead of thinking about how things could be done better or what to improve, you simply focus on one positive thing, big or small. You might appreciate someone being very courteous and kind via email or you might value their help solving a problem with a spreadsheet. Once you start thinking about the positives, it becomes easier to articulate them for each other.

If you can, write the postcards by hand. In a virtual team people only rarely receive physical materials, and what they receive is mostly equipment or printed materials, like a tax certificate. Sending and receiving personal mail that everyone knows will contain only good

news is a change from the day-to-day and makes this exercise more powerful.

If your team sends each other secret santa presents by post, and sometimes souvenirs from conferences or thank you presents, it's likely a rare occurrence to get those, so a special delivery like a postcard with positive feedback is noteworthy. Especially for home-workers for whom being at home for the post and parcel deliveries (mostly for other people) is a common feature of work days. Getting something personal makes for a welcome change.

Creating, distributing and receiving positive feedback by post can have a positive impact: it helps the team focus on the positives more and it can be useful to practice receiving positive feedback. It creates an opportunity for only positive feedback to be given and received, which can make the feedback seem more powerful as it's not accompanied by negative feedback at the same time. As well as practising receiving positive feedback, this activity can give teams a chance to articulate something positive to each other and that, too, is worthwhile.

Planning your own postal activity?

Start with these questions:

- Are there any privacy implications sharing address details?
- What are the costs involved (postage etc)?
- Is the activity designed so everyone can participate?
- What do you want the outcome to be?

ACTIVITY 3: MAKING TIME FOR REFLECTION¹⁵

Leading a virtual team can be very challenging. Reflecting on progress and how you feel about things is a big part of being an effective manager and creating the (head)space you need in a busy, digital workplace takes effort. It takes discipline to keep work at bay when it is all too easy to never switch off from the constant stream of information and notifications that working virtually generates. Stepping away from your usual

15 M. Deepwell, "Virtual Team Outtakes: Using Voice Recognition for Reflection," *Maren Deepwell*, November 18, 2018.

workspace can be useful and can help create a sense of balance between a busy team and time to focus.

You can use different tools for different types of reflection: a public blog, a private blog, some drawing/making activities, walks and conversations. Each has value for different reasons. If you are struggling to write down or type everything you have on your mind, try to use dictation instead.

Here are some suggestions to make time for reflection in a virtual team:

Use your mobile: First, using dictation allows you to use your phone rather than a laptop to write reflective posts. You might prefer that, particularly at weekends or in the evenings as it makes it feel less like work. You might find this way of producing a reflective journal much more convenient and comfortable.

If you talk faster than you can type: Dictation works well and you can add a lot more than when you have to write it all down. Your reflections might become longer and more spontaneous because instead of carefully constructing sentences, you speak your mind more. It's a different tone and takes less time than typing the same amount of narrative would have done.

Less self-editing: You might find that the process of talking about your day or week is far more frank than when you are typing, which is an interesting by-product of this way of working.

More like a conversation: You might find dictating much closer to having a conversation or telling someone about things on your mind. You might say more things that you may not have expected, realise that things are important or have bothered you more than you would have done when writing.

Saying it out loud: Reflective writing can feel quite similar to writing a journal. Dictation can really help you practice articulating your thoughts to someone else as well as to yourself. It also improves self realisation. It can help you better reflect because it helps you understand more fully how you feel – to pause and realise, that is how things are in your mind.

Creating your own space for reflection?

Start with these questions:

- What form of reflection feels easiest to you?
- What practical constraints do you have?
- What do you most want from the process?
- What is the biggest obstacle to getting that?

ACTIVITY 4: TEAM MEETING ICE-BREAKERS

Many virtual teams start regular meetings with a short ice-breaker activity. Whether you have a dedicated person who leads the meetings or if the chairing of the meetings is rotated, you might want to give every member of the team a turn to come up with an ice-breaker activity (coming up with one of these is also a great recruitment question). In a team of 10 or less, rotating the meetings can be a great way for bringing everyone's own personality and style to the proceedings.

Here are some examples of the ice-breaker activities colleagues I worked with came up with:

- **Animal corner:** share a picture of your four-legged friends if you have one, or any animal that makes you smile;
- **Favourite recipe:** share your favourite recipe, for example for a particular season, meal or occasion;
- **Musical mayhem:** share a link to a song or piece of music that makes you feel alive! This can create an eclectic mix of songs and also gives a sense of what made the team tick;
- **Movie recommendations:** sharing box set or movie recommendations including links to reviews, personal reviews, and ideas for further watching;
- **Hogwarts House:** use a free online quiz to find out which house each of you belongs to;
- **Emoji weather check-in:** sharing what the weather is like where you are based in emoji form works well during heat waves or cold snaps. You can for example compare who is in the coldest place;

- **Air punch:** share a thought or memory that you go to for virtual air punches;
- **Make someone a compliment day:** similar to positive feedback by post, but via email. Everyone sends at least one other person a compliment;
- **Pictionary Jam:** play round of Pictionary using an online tool or drawing canvas like Jamboard.

Whilst every individual brings their own ideas to these activities, they all only take 5–10 min to complete, are easy to do, and are very casual.

Planning your own virtual ice-breakers?

Start with these questions:

- Do you have any practical limitations or requirements?
- What, if anything, you want to avoid?
- What examples can you share with your team to get started?
- Is there a particular time limit?

Organising in-person meetings for virtual teams in order to achieve a balance between online and in person interaction is a very common and effective way to support your workforce. Earlier in this Chapter, we explored the strategic role of days out of the home office. But what if you are not able to meet in person? How can you create equivalent engagement for your team when everyone has to stay where they are?

The final example in this Chapter takes a deeper dive into what it takes to organise a fully virtual team day, what it can look like in practice, and how to involve your team in the process.

ACTIVITY 5: A VIRTUAL TEAM DAY¹⁶

Depending on the size of your team, you can find different ways to involve everyone in shaping the day and the focus of what it is about.

16 M. Deepwell, “Leading a Virtual Team: Our Team Day Experience,” *Maren Deepwell*, May 25, 2021.

This way, everyone has a stake in the activity and there is less of a danger of individuals just turning up on the day, not ready to engage. Discuss your plans in advance and use a survey or polling tool to choose between different options for formal and informal activities. You might include a strategic component as well as social activities, and ask staff to contribute their ideas. The winning ‘not at your desk’ activity for any given day out might surprise you. It could be something like going for a walk together whilst using text chat and, weather permitting, to do a photo competition of what you encounter.

Whatever you choose to do, Virtual Team Days work much better if there are some tangible elements. Once you have an idea of what activities you are going to do, ideally try to source something for each part of the day. Depending on what items you want to send, you might decide to ship a box to each member of staff or order readymade hampers or boxes, which work better for larger teams. In small teams, it is usually cheaper and more practical to make up a box for each member of the team. To give you a sense of the cost involved, here is an example of a budget for a team day kit for seven staff:

£70 Small gifts
£60 Food and snacks
£70 Shipping and packaging
£200 Total cost

Depending on your budget, that may seem a lot or a little, but in comparison to what it would cost for a team of seven to travel to meet up for the day, the cost is usually lower.

Make sure that you are aware of dietary requirements before planning catering for virtual team days and aim to offer similar food choices for everyone, according to dietary preference. You might choose to go all vegan and also gluten free, if it means that everyone gets the same. Reuse packaging and wrappings to help limit the environmental impact where possible.

Communication is key in the run up to the day, particularly if your team is busy. Make sure to communicate regularly. Treat team days as being away from your desks, and don't check emails or attend external

meetings on the day. That is an important consideration in terms of engagement. If you expect staff to be fully present, then the flipside of that is that normal work doesn't continue during that time.

On the day, a parcel or snacks delivered ahead of time can help get things started in the morning, as it may feel a bit awkward at first and various distractions crop up at the start of the day. When staff are used to working from home and starting their day whilst accommodating competing demands (such as family life), having to join a virtual team day can feel like an extra effort. Make sure that your first activity, such as a team walk, provides a good way for everyone to settle into the day and they can start to enjoy it.

Once your team has settled into having a day together, there should be space and time for working, chatting, eating, and having fun. Whilst it was great to have a whole day as a team, it's always helpful to have some external facilitation for sessions you can all take part in equally.

Even in the best virtual teams, there will be times when you miss seeing colleagues in person. It is important to acknowledge that. However, Team Days can still be amazing when they happen online, and don't have to feel like a second choice. It is hard to make online activities memorable, however it is worth spending extra resources on activities and material things that can help create positive memories for the team.

Planning your own virtual team day?

Start with these questions:

- How much time can you allocate and can everyone take a day off from day-to-day work to participate?
- Is there a budget for the day and are there limitations on what you can spend it on?
- What do you need to get out of the day?
- What do you want your team to get out of the day?
- What, if any, particular situations do you need to account for, for example consider different requirements staff may have when participating in virtual activities and so forth.

One of the biggest successes for someone leading a virtual team is when individuals within the team take ownership of elements of the team culture. Organising activities and interventions *for* people is a necessary step towards this, but ultimately our aim must be to empower staff so that they can actively shape and continue to generate the kind of team spirit that everyone wants.

In every team the signs of that happening are different. You might be able to tell from how the chat feels or the team meetings, you might get a sense of it from feedback or by observing levels of activity and engagement. Whatever the indicators are that you focus on, you can also tell when things aren't working. Like when you are the sole organiser and only participant of 'fun' activities or sending chat messages at the virtual watercooler without ever getting a response.

Creating the right kind of feel in your virtual workplace is a big challenge for any leader or manager and in order to get it right, you need the right kind of leadership. Leading a virtual team requires even experienced managers to adapt their approach, especially if the bulk of their professional experience comes from managing staff in person, and that is what we will focus on in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

Leading a virtual team

Managing people in a virtual team is different from managing people in a physical or hybrid workplace. That doesn't mean that much of the expertise of managers isn't translatable, it certainly is, but there are nonetheless important differences both for a manager or leader and their approach to managing their team.

Examples of creating a virtual team spirit discussed in Chapter 2 highlighted how important leadership is to virtual teams. We looked at ways in which teams can mitigate some of the impact of not meeting in person and what opportunities the virtual workplace can open up. The focus was on fostering the right kind of culture within a team as a whole. Now, that focus is shifting to the relationship between a manager or leader and the staff who report to them.

Whilst there is a long history of homeworking and remote working is common in some industries, it is reasonable to expect that only a minority of professionals working in education and the third sector (or non-profit sector) have long-standing experience of only seeing their manager online. Homeworking during lockdown in 2020 has given more staff a taste of what a managerial relationship in a virtual workplace may be like, but few approaches developed during the crisis are a blueprint for best practice. They do attest to how much was achieved and also opened up people's minds to what is possible when it comes to working away from the office or campus, but very few leaders had capacity to focus on more than fire fighting for much of that period.

This chapter begins by exploring how being located in a virtual workplace changes the dynamics of being a manager or leader, how it may impact on their ability to function and perform, and how to solve commonly encountered problems. The second part focuses on finding the right approach to managing a virtual team for you. Here we examine key questions such as how you can foster trust in a virtual team and manage effective collaboration. The chapter concludes with a case study of managing a virtual team including feedback from staff.

Leading in the virtual workplace

Many managers get to a position of having to manage in a virtual workplace with little to no prior experience of managing a team in this manner, particularly if the organisation has only recently introduced remote working or you work for a start-up company. Even for those who have experience to draw on, the tools and platforms used in one workplace will likely change as you move from one organisation to another, and that can significantly impact on managing a team. Thus, it is useful to take a reflective and open approach when considering what leading people whom you may never meet in person is really like in the long term.

In Chapter 1, we discussed how to manage virtual recruitment, in particular online interviews. Providing everyone involved with as much information as possible and communicating details about the expected dress code, use of virtual backdrops and similar details, ensured interviews could focus on the selection process, not the technology. Establishing effective management approaches at its most basic, requires a similar approach. A manager or leader needs to be proactive about communicating what may be self-evident if you were sharing an office with your team: people can't pick up on clues from body language, facial expressions or personal appearance as readily in a virtual setting, and any information you can communicate to help them understand your expectations are a bonus. If you want one to one line management meetings to be formal, with a pre-prepared agenda and no disruptions, make that clear from the outset. Similarly, if you are happy to chat over a cup of tea whilst pets walk in and out of shot, tell your team that and

you will have a better chance of avoiding common pitfalls. The more you can communicate explicitly and make your expectations clear, the easier it will be for people to understand you and to follow your example and communicate better in response.

Managing staff who have previously worked in an office to work in a virtual team is a common challenge for managers and can be an eye-opening experience. Particularly at the beginning, whether you are managing new staff or you yourself are joining a new team, there can be many obstacles to overcome and that in itself can be unsettling:

- **Technology fails:** Initially, there is necessarily a lot of focus on infrastructure and that can generate a lot of frustration: you/your staff may not be able to log into the work platform, a service or tool may be down, the meeting platform you use could fail, or individual hardware/software could fail. In contrast to an IT failure in a co-located workplace, in a virtual team you are reliant on the very same technology to communicate about and fix the fault. You may find yourself without an Internet connection leading an important meeting from your phone whilst standing in the street desperately looking for a better signal.
- **Endless iteration:** If you like working virtually, managing a virtual workplace is likely to give you a much greater appetite for finding technological solutions to problems. Bringing all operations into the virtual domain and working together with everyone online can create a real sense of opportunity to continually iterate and improve on what you do. Keep in mind that even the most enthusiastic and digitally literate workforce needs time to adjust to change and don't outpace their ability to cope.
- **Communication fails:** The quality of your communication is more important than anything else you do and should shape all aspects of your practice. Regardless of whether it's a chat message, video call, email, phone call or indeed meeting up face

to face, aim to communicate equally well in every mode. Your team has to get through difficult conversations, bad days and unexpected crises online, and may reach out to you in different ways. Your only way to support, guide and manage them is via digital channels.

As we have seen, leading a virtual team doesn't necessarily mean that you never meet in person, and a blended approach with occasional in-person days may provide the best mix. However, the expectation of those meetings can also be a temptation to leave difficult conversations or complex tasks until you meet in person and avoid solving some of the problems listed above. In some situations that may well be the best strategy, but in the long term, it is important to ensure that a virtual team is comfortable with its primary workplace. What I mean is that if as a manager you set the example to your team that all the most important, difficult and enjoyable elements of your work are happening at infrequent in-person meetings instead of online, that dynamic will dominate in the team.

In order to avoid this kind of messaging, it is also worth considering how the tools you use daily as a virtual team can help support working in person. For example, a regular chat tool can continue to be used for communication on the move (provided you ensure that everyone has access on a mobile device). Taking some of the virtual workplace with you into in person meetings is a good way of ensuring that in person days blend with virtual working. Particularly for new recruits, who may not have met colleagues in person before, using familiar tools for communication can provide continuity. For many staff who move to working online from an in person environment, it is assumed that existing relationships or knowledge make it easier to establish an effective virtual working environment. Over time, this can change and virtual working practices become a benefit to working together face to face.

Another change that happens over time is starting to value virtual working more. You might find that you no longer feel like you haven't 'seen' a colleague for a long time when you meet in person. Instead your last virtual interaction 'counts'. Adjusting your mindset in this way makes building relationships a lot easier, because you are not starting from scratch every few months.

TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL COMPETENCY

Whilst factors beyond your control may dictate your choice of technology to a large degree, it is still important to reflect on how different tools are used by your team and mandating what's required and what is optional. Initially you might offer a lot of choice in terms of which platforms, tools or devices to use, if data privacy policy such as GDPR permits, and over time you will determine what is essential for the effective operation of your team and what you leave up to the individual. As well as experience over time, the level of use and engagement with specific tools is important to help you evaluate your approach. For instance, when you use a tool that only a small minority engage with, it won't be as effective, unless it is only required for a specialised function. And there are obvious benefits of having standardisation, such as streamlining the physical purchase of equipment as well as supporting staff with how to use it. The desire for a standardised provision is likely to be the wish of every IT manager, but there are few platforms that truly offer everything that any given team requires and most adopt a patchwork of tools and platforms.

Regardless of what your digital estate looks like, a key part of managing a virtual team is to have processes in place that help you monitor homeworking set ups and how this impacts on wellbeing and performance. This includes providing equipment and risk assessments for new work stations, and it is important to revisit these regularly.

Virtual team working can all too easily descend into an endless stream of notifications resulting in little meaningful interaction and your approach can help set the right balance for your team. Leading a virtual team takes just as much time, effort and energy as it does to lead people in a co-located workplace, if not more, and most of your skills and experience as a manager are translatable into the world of working remotely. It does however requires a different approach and some additional skills, starting with your own digital literacy.

It places unnecessary pressure on even the most experienced leaders when you can't figure out how to share your presentation at a crucial meeting or when you make mistakes sharing documents with your team. Investing in developing digital skills is a fundamental requirement for individuals, teams and organisations who want to work virtually. You may be reading this thinking that it is a given that everyone has sufficient

digital skills to be an effective manager. The recent study¹ *Digital Technologies in Management* highlights that this would likely be an incorrect assumption, describing only 39% of digital technology usage by managers as 'good'. Although digital competencies can encompass different skill sets depending on your context, it remains true that if you can't use the technology that supports your team and organisation effectively, then you are going to find leading people who rely on you using this technology very challenging.

Continually upskilling is part of working in a virtual team and that applies to managers and leaders first and foremost. The more nuanced and effortless your use of technology, the more time you can spend focusing on the task at hand and the better you can lead people.

WELLBEING WHEN LEADING VIRTUAL TEAMS

When it comes to working as a virtual team, the main focus is often (rightly) on the dynamics of the team or the organisation. However, it's also important to ensure that the wellbeing of those who manage and lead home-workers is supported, and by that I mean wellbeing in the broadest of terms.²

One aspect of working remotely that is hard to adjust to for some managers, is having to take greater responsibility for your own wellbeing, and being comfortable communicating this. It's easy to be blind to your own needs, even obvious ones, when there is no one else in the proximity who is looking out for you at work. Unless you live alone, those around you day in and day out might see you as a parent, a carer or a flatmate, and no one with whom you have regular in person contact will necessarily consider your wellbeing at work as part of that picture.

Whilst this is equally applicable to everyone who works in a virtual team, there are additional factors that increase the risks for those with management responsibilities: as a Line Manager for example, you are

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- 1 V. Gerasimenko and T. Razumova, "Digital Competencies in Management: A Way to Superior Competitiveness and Resistance to Changes," *Serbian Journal of Management* 15, no. 1 (2020): 115–26.
 - 2 W. Spinks, "A Survey of Home-Based Workers in Japan: Emerging Health Issues," *Journal of Occupational Health* 44 (2002): 248–53.

likely to have more meetings than those who report to you; similarly, in a leadership position you are likely receiving a lot of informal communications from colleagues alongside formal emails or notifications others may receive.

Here are some examples of situations that can arise in a homeworking context for managers and leaders, how you can take advantage of working from home and also some of the risks to consider:

- **Lack of outdoor exercise:** Many people find that when they start working from home, their level of daily exercise decreases. Activities like walks to the bus stop or from the station to the office would have contributed to the overall amount of moving around, and often a move to working in a virtual team means that these disappear. You may still climb the stairs to your office or walk across the garden to the shed, but for many homeworkers, it takes a more concerted effort to fit in sufficient levels of activity during the day. As well as exercise, many miss the time they had on the commute to listen to podcasts or read a book. The advantage working from home provides is that you have much greater flexibility to exercise than you would have on a commute. Taking the dog for a walk, going jogging or doing yoga is all much easier to accomplish when you work from home. The danger is that work, chores or other commitments can all too easily eat into the time that you would previously have spent in transit, and it takes discipline to establish a routine to protect your time to get outside or get active.³
- **School holidays:** For even established home-workers, school holidays are a challenge and often prove a crunch point. Many parents work extra hard to ensure that no one at work knows that a minor domestic emergency just occurred or that you are trying to occupy a curious child for an afternoon whilst running back to back meetings. Whilst being at home can provide much greater flexibility for parents and families caring for children

3 M. Deepwell and M. Hawksey, "The Serious Upsides of Working in Pyjamas," *Maren Deepwell*, October 1, 2018.

out of school, it can also put extra pressure on you as a manager. It is easy to become distracted when you are surrounded by under fives who are bored and need attention. Finding balance between home and work life is far more difficult to do when you are visibly at home during the holidays. This is where flexible working policies are important (provided that your workplace has those). For managers this is a good opportunity to set an example of using what policies are in place to prioritise different commitments, rather than trying to do it all and to show ways to deal with the reality of working from home.

- **Working when energy is low⁴:** We all have stressful periods at work and sometimes it takes a while to recover from a particularly intense piece of work. Working from home can be particularly helpful at these times. Being able to take frequent short breaks, eat snacks, take a short walk, and even have a nap makes it easier to work at times when your energy is low. Working from home can be wonderfully comforting and supportive when you feel like you are struggling.

That said, there are some real risks attached to being able to cope with working if under the same circumstances you wouldn't have gone to the office to work. Instead, take time off when you need to and advise staff not to work if they wouldn't feel well enough to go to work in the office. In a context in which overworking and work stress are the norm, this may sound counter-intuitive to some, but is a sensible way of ensuring the wellbeing of your virtual workforce is supported long term. It is also a way to try and build awareness of when an off day turns into a pattern of ill health. As a manager, you might be blind to someone's health problems because working from home is making it possible for them to cope and you only see their best side in a short video call. Establishing an effective dialogue with your team about their wellbeing and health is important and normalises sharing when things are not well. Leaders should model

4 M. Deepwell and M. Hawksey, "How We Survived a Pandemic: Part 2 – Music, Spice and Other Things Nice," *Maren Deepwell*, May 29, 2020.

a distinction between using the affordances of working from home as a way to cope with a short-term situation or to recover from a stressful period and taking time off when you are sick and unable to work in order to help the whole team develop a healthy and sustainable approach to working from home.

All of these examples highlight that working in a distributed team offers a greater sense of freedom and empowerment to manage your own time, but also entails more responsibility to look out for your own wellbeing and work/life balance. Over time, leaders of virtual teams develop a greater understanding of how much what is going on in people's personal lives impacts on professional practice and performance. It also gives you a chance to set an example for those around you regarding how you deal with things being out of balance.

Some find working in a virtual team liberating. They value the freedom and independence that comes with it and feel more empowered to do that as part of a virtual team than in roles that tie them to a desk, or require managing an office space. Whilst running virtual operations may take just as much effort, for many it can offer far more scope to improve and innovate than a traditional working environment.

GETTING 1% MORE COMFORTABLE IN THE VIRTUAL WORKPLACE

For many of us, the reality of working from home on a permanent basis is that we have limited control over our working environment. Hopefully you have dedicated space that you can make your own, but you may have a shared office or part of the kitchen table. Wherever your working space is, ask yourself what you could do to be 1% more comfortable.⁵

The idea comes from practices like yoga and meditation. As you lie down in order to relax or sit still to focus, your teacher may prompt you to move, wriggle, to use a pillow or a cushion, anything to try and make yourself a little bit more comfortable.

Most of the time, pausing to consider what you can do to make yourself more comfortable in itself is the most valuable part of that process,

5 M. Deepwell, "How to Make Working from Home 1% More Comfortable," *Maren Deepwell*, January 19, 2022.

and can really help you gain more awareness of what's going on in your physical self.

So, it's worth asking yourself that very question, in particular when it comes to working from home. If you haven't done so in a while and especially if you have recently moved things around, checking in on your work set up from a basic health & safety perspective and reviewing display screen equipment guidance is a good first step.

Many of us become blind to constant factors that make working uncomfortable, like glare, noise, a bad chair, and so forth. Try and look at your setup with fresh eyes. If someone else had to use it for a week, what do you think they might like or find difficult?

What's important here is to take a considered approach to setting up your work space and to pay attention to your own needs and preferences. No one you work with may ever visit or even see your work space other than what is in shot when you have a video call. There are no colleagues to impress, no one will see the mess or comment on family snapshots. It's up to you to create a space that works for you and your home, and that is part of the fun of being able to work remotely.

As well as thinking about making your space more comfortable, it's also worth spending time looking at what your daily routine is. Just like with our homeworking spaces, daily routines are often at least partly outside of our control. You may have to contend with a whole roster of family commitments, prioritise the school run or pick ups, or you may have other regular slots you need to work around. Or, there may be a lack of disruption and a temptation to spend days without break in front of a screen.

Whatever your situation, check in with your daily routine and try to avoid letting it be dictated by circumstance. Take as much control as you can over when to take breaks, have lunch or have quiet periods.

You could use tools like your calendar or your watch to schedule your days, or you could have a regular timetable which includes different elements. In my experience, you are likely to need a mix of:

- Focused, quiet time to work on things without interruption.
- Frequent short breaks away from your screen and divides.

- A longer break sometime in the day preferably with the option of changing rooms or going outside.
- Time for meetings.

It may sound like overstating the obvious, but many home-workers who find that they sit down at their laptop early in the morning and don't really get up again until the end of a very long day, without having moved much or taken a break from staring at a screen. Back to back video calls are one of the worst parts of working online and should be avoided wherever possible. You are going to be more productive outside of meetings and as a manager you can start by scheduling fewer meetings, shorter meetings and insisting on breaks between them.

Creating your own space is also an opportunity to think about the space or setup that's going to work best for you. Given the rise of flexible and home based working, there is a growing list of options for desks and clever storage systems that aren't beige or grey. Some remote and office based workers prefer standing desks and treadmill desks. One of the big advantages of working from home is having the opportunity to create an environment that's going to work for you. In contrast to being office based where you may have encountered restrictions on what you can do to modify your work space, being a home-worker is an opportunity to perhaps say goodbye to that clean desk policy, restrictions on what food you can eat, or the noise you make.

Having a dedicated work space at home and a good routine is a relative privilege and one that makes leading a virtual team easier.

Support from your employer with purchasing office equipment for homeworking (or if you are self-employed here in the UK, you can apply for support with office equipment costs from the Department for Work) should help with making bigger changes, such as buying an adjustable desk, a suitable chair, and other equipment.

And there are other ways to improve your homeworking environment, especially when things are stressful. Many organisations publish openly available resources online which you can dip into during short breaks and some employers also offer subscriptions to mindfulness apps like Calm or Headspace which offer work-focused support.

25 obvious, but effective, ways to improve your working environment

There are a lot of things you can try, and what will make a difference to you depends on the way you work and your personal preferences. Here is a list of 25 things to get you started:

1. a plant.
2. a nice coaster.
3. a new mouse mat.
4. wrist rest/mouse rest.
5. glare protector.
6. photos/pictures/art.
7. lights for different times of day, i.e. a work lamp, fairy lights, a candle.
8. scented candle.
9. diffuser for aromatherapy oils.
10. foot rest (cushion or yoga bolster can work, too).
11. cushioned slippers or shoes (particularly handy for standing desks).
12. find a window sill or high shelf you can use as a place to have meetings with your laptop.
13. headphones that suit your ears.
14. a mouse you like (mine glows in rainbow colours).
15. a selfie or ring light.
16. eye mist.
17. an alarm or similar that reminds you to take regular screen breaks.
18. a water bottle.

19. new flavour hot (or cold) drinks to try such as new herbal teas or coffees.
20. a secret snack stash (healthy or not).
21. music.
22. a mat for your chair/you to stand on.
23. a rock or shell from somewhere you like.
24. cleaning products for your workspace, i.e. eco wipes, disinfectant, screen cleaner.
25. A place for a pet to be... if you can persuade them.

This is one context in which working from home in a virtual team offers much more scope than working in an office or on campus. You are free of policies about having clear desks for example, and able to create your own perfect Geekosphere without judgement from co-workers (Geekospheres are the personal spaces that computer users create around their monitors, using trinkets, toys, mottoes, images, and other ephemera).⁶

Setting up your workspace with material things that are meaningful to you is one way of bringing something personal into working in a virtual team. But there are also much less tangible things we bring with us through our previous experiences. It's worth taking a moment to reflect on your own journey to leading a virtual team:

- What has your experience been to date?
- Have you mostly managed people in co-located contexts, in offices or on campus?
- Have you previously managed staff who were home-based or had flexible working arrangements?
- What was a successful experience of working with a virtual team for you?

6 A. McCarthy, "Geekospheres: Visual Culture and Material Culture at Work," *Journal of Visual Culture* 3, no. 2 (2004): 213–21.

Asking yourself these kinds of questions can offer insight into your strengths as a manager and also highlight areas in which you want to develop. It also helps you to trust your own judgement when it comes to making decisions about managing people in a virtual team, and this is what we will focus on in the next section.

Building trust in a virtual team

A common question about working online is how to manage staff without supervising their work in person. How can you trust things are being done without seeing it, without being there to check and be physically present. The answer is that being part of a virtual team is a two way street. Staff need to want to work remotely, to learn how to do things in a way that works for them and also meets the requirements of the organisation. Everyone in a virtual team should be willing to make the most of the opportunities that this offers, you can't do that for them.

When you work alongside people in person, you get a lot of clues as a manager about how things are going. You probably have opportunities to see people interact, chat with each other, or bend over a computer screen together to solve a problem. When you lead a virtual team, opportunities to gather such information are more limited and less obvious, but they are still present.

Building trust as a virtual team is first and foremost about establishing a baseline of communication, expectation and behaviours that help everyone work better with each other. You can for example use a Code of Practice to set out your expectations of how things should be done. Many virtual teams have something like that, whether an actual document, 'house-rules' or a statement about what they believe in, how they like to work and what their expectations are of each other.

A Code of Practice or its equivalent should cover practical questions like how to report that you are sick, how to safely use two-factor authentication across devices used for work, and how to make use of support for working at home. It can also set out how the team works together, explain schedules of regular meetings, suggest ways to resolve conflicts, and what you expect staff to do in terms of sharing calendars and regular communication. Regardless of what format you use, the important thing is that it

reflects what should happen in practice and that there are consequences when this doesn't happen. Fairly enforcing shared expectations is a first step towards building trust and confidence within a virtual team.

Another benefit of setting out shared expectations clearly is that it enables managers to observe regular patterns of behaviour and to investigate if individuals deviate from that. For example, if you expect to hear from someone regularly every Tuesday and they fail to report in, you might need to investigate. Or if you are used to chatting with someone every morning on Slack, and they don't turn up when they were meant to, that might be a sign that something is wrong. Depending on the type of team you lead, you may not need to supervise people too closely and give them more freedom to do their work in their own time. However, in teams which are delivering a public facing service or have set working times, the more freedom you want to give your team, the clearer you need to be about what your expectations are and the consequences of not meeting them.

It can be helpful to reflect on the duty of care as an employer of home-workers beyond basic health & safety or display screen equipment guidelines, which remain important. For example, employers would likely have policies in place to ensure safe working for individuals who work solo in an office or on site. What would constitute equivalent policies for solo homeworking? During a crisis like the pandemic in 2020 it became a priority to monitor that staff were checking in regularly and/or that someone notices if no one hears from a colleague for a while. In a large team especially it can be easy to miss that someone has gone silent and whilst the pandemic period has highlighted those risks in particular risks relating to homeworking are always present.

Unexpected silences mean more to experienced leaders of virtual teams, especially in small teams. Over time, you develop a feel for the level of activity, chatter and interaction that makes up the daily tone of a virtual team and you can usually tell whether that tone is just right or 'off' somehow. It could be something like too many jokes or none at all, or general silence when someone poses a question. It could be that new member of staff who hasn't yet joined into the watercooler chat or the usual suspects whose voice drowns out all others. The benefit of getting attuned to your own team's voice is to be alert for any changes in that tone that might cause you concern or require you to take action.

Another aspect of building trust is to get a better sense of each other's homeworking context. 'One way to achieve this is to give each other tours of your workspaces. This allows colleagues to form mental images of one another when they're later communicating by email, phone, or text message'.⁷ Another way to approach this could be to ask everyone to share a picture of their workspace, discussing the biggest upsides or downsides of their setup. Working from home exposes who we are much more to our work colleagues than coming to a shared space like an office. Our homes are not shared, corporate spaces, they are personal. Each individual may feel comfortable with different degrees of sharing that personal space with team mates.

Much of the research on virtual teams initially was conducted on IT projects or software company teams as 'the earliest virtual teams were formed to facilitate innovation among top experts around the world who didn't have time to travel'. So it is important to be mindful that those contexts don't necessarily reflect the diversity of today's permanently distributed workforces.⁸

As a manager, particularly if you manage an international workforce, you need to be aware that different cultural and social contexts might motivate different behaviours, and that can seemingly undermine the trust you are trying to establish. What tool you use can also make a difference here. If your video conferencing tool defaults to video being on or off that in itself can shape the expectations of the users. Research into the use of webcams in online learning⁹ is a useful touch point here, as it can help us explore why for example some students prefer to switch their camera off¹⁰ and some don't mind it always being on and consider how this can be helpful in understanding employee behaviour.

7 K. Ferrazzi, "Getting Virtual Teams Right," *Harvard Business Review*, December 2014.

8 C. Thompson and P. Caputo, *The Reality of Virtual Work* (AON Consulting, 2009).

9 M. Finders and J. Munoz, "Cameras On: Surveillance in the Time of COVID-19," *Inside Higher Ed*, March 3, 2021.

10 M. Bali, "Students Talk to Me about Webcams," *Maha Bali*, March 25, 2021.

These considerations from the classroom¹¹ can provide a helpful starting point when thinking about camera policies in the workplace:

For instructors, rather than focus energy on how to manipulate students to turn cameras on, we can concentrate on presenting the course content in ways that students can relate to. Some things to consider are:

- Lean in to the discomfort you may have about teaching online and examine it.
- Consider critical equity issues regarding race, gender and class when establishing your camera policy.
- Learn to trust in your students to be in charge of their own bodies, spaces and learning.
- Find ways to develop your virtual presence to show students that you are invested in their success.
- Offer alternative ways for students to demonstrate their engagement that don't require cameras, such as using the chat function, organising small group discussions and providing an online annotation tool for students to share their views.

The work of teaching requires the development of mutually respectful, trusting and supportive relationships. Respect and trust must extend to understanding students' needs for privacy and the safety from surveillance of their private lives. At the same time, as professional educators, we must attend to student learning and proficiency. But learning and proficiency do not necessarily go hand in hand with a camera turned on.

11 M. Finders and J. Munoz, "Cameras On: Surveillance in the Time of COVID-19," *Inside Higher Ed*, March 3, 2021.

There may be very practical reasons for you to require your colleagues to have cameras on for certain meetings or working together on particular projects, but it is unlikely to be necessary at all times, and giving this some thought and setting out strategies and expectations in advance, ideally in consultation with staff, will help set out policies that work in the long term. Building trust and maintaining this over time is a balancing act between being flexible in order to accommodate the different contexts of a home-based workforce and finding a common way of communicating which all commit to.

What can feel hardest to deal with at a distance is trust breaking down. For example, you might feel someone is not pulling their weight and falling behind with their work. Or a member of staff is not being truthful about what they are doing. One way of approaching such situations is to closely monitor your virtual workforce: from monitoring keyboard strokes to having a camera always on, there are many ways in which you can track what your staff are doing. In many contexts however it is neither ethical nor necessary to supervise staff in such a way; and in my experience, technology can't be a substitute for building trust and engagement in your virtual team.

Unfortunately in my view, in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism,¹² surveillance of home-workers is on the rise. Sava Saheli Singh's film *A Model Employee*¹³ tells the fictional story: 'to keep her day job at a local restaurant, an aspiring DJ has to wear a tracking wristband. As it tracks her life outside of work, she tries to fool the system, but a new device upgrade means trouble'. Discussing the full implications of surveillance practises in the workplace is a complex topic and beyond the scope of this book.

In the context of fostering trust in a virtual team, the key question to ask is whether as an employer or an employee, we are prepared to sacrifice the privacy of our homes in order to work from home. For me, like many I expect, the answer is no and organisations that wish to recruit and retain good staff will respect that.

12 S. Zuboff, "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism – The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power," *PublicAffairs*, 2019.

13 L. Khalilzadeh and S. Saheli Singh, *A Model Employee* (Screening Surveillance, 2019).

There are other ways to manage performance and keep communicating even in the most difficult situations and in the next part of this chapter, we'll be looking at finding solutions that work without resorting to surveillance.

DEVELOPING YOUR APPROACH TO LEADING VIRTUAL TEAMS

As the way we work evolves with new technologies and new working practises, the way we manage virtual teams also develops. This is one of the most interesting aspects of virtual team leadership for me and one which gives you an opportunity to continually learn and develop your own practice.

According to research,¹⁴ the most effective virtual teams are made up of 10 people or fewer. Keeping numbers small helps ensure that individual team members feel responsible for the output of the team as well as makes it easy to communicate inclusively. If you are managing a much larger team the different approaches discussed here are still applicable, but some may need to be adapted to work for a larger group. In order to develop your own approach it is helpful to compare approaches with different size organisations, from small teams to giants like Google.¹⁵ You might find a lot of commonalities even in organisations of very different sizes.

One commonality is how important interaction is for virtual teams, both formally as part of team meetings and informally through things like water cooler hangouts and chat. Having a water cooler chat channel for your team can create fantastic memories of what's happening in the team, such as the morning you all met the new puppy of one of your colleagues.

Leading a virtual team requires everyone to be more intentional when it comes to informal interactions like that. You can't rely on serendipity (and I'd argue you shouldn't for co-located teams either). Providing tools is only part of the equation. You also need to put in place

14 K. Ferrazzi, "Getting Virtual Teams Right," *Harvard Business Review*, December 2014.

15 M. Deepwell and M. Hawksey, "Virtual Teams: Finding Oxygen with Olaf Hubel at Google," *Maren Deepwell*, December 31, 2019.

and maintain the necessary structures and that is something that will develop through experience. Most teams move from experimenting with different formats and strategies to a more regular rhythm of working together. Informal interactions sometimes need to be orchestrated, such as a Monday morning social where your team hangs out just to share non-work related things like things they got up to at the weekend can help provide opportunities to build social connections. Regardless of the size of your team, maintaining good team interaction is both valid and important for every leader.

Google's Project Oxygen where 'Google set out to determine what makes a manager great at Google' has developed into the re:Work website which 'Google and others use to help share and push forward the practice and research of data-driven HR'. This sets out 10 behaviours of 'great managers'¹⁶:

1. Is a good coach.
2. Empowers team and does not micromanage.
3. Creates an inclusive team environment, showing concern for success and well-being.
4. Is productive and results-oriented.
5. Is a good communicator — listens and shares information.
6. Supports career development and discusses performance.
7. Has a clear vision/strategy for the team.
8. Has key technical skills to help advise the team.
9. Collaborates across Google.
10. Is a strong decision maker.

Some of these are more technology company oriented, but if you are leading a large team, these may chime with you and you might find

16 M. Harrell and L. Barbato, "Great Managers Still Matter: The Evolution of Google's Project Oxygen," *re:Work*, February 27, 2018.

exploring the site and comparing your approach to the practices shared here useful.

The more people are involved and the more levels of management you have, then the harder it becomes to get a sense of what good practice should look like and what is happening on the ground. Project Oxygen can be seen as an expression of meeting those challenges and providing output that can be scaled up to the size of a global corporation. The 10 behaviours of good management all read like common sense, but putting that into practice consistently remains a challenge and what might seem obvious at first glance can be more powerful in practice.

For example, scheduling catch ups for everyone at the same time each week might sound like a basic principle, but for many the process of scheduling a moving diary full of meetings in itself is very time intensive. Sending out one repeat calendar invite per person and scheduling weekly catch ups with everyone for the whole year is a win. The regular schedule should also help to create a better rhythm for a team, with specific days each week for different meetings, both informal and formal.

It should help everyone structure their time and that is particularly relevant for managers who struggle to carve our sufficient head space for strategic planning. A clear structure is especially important for virtual teams and it can be hard work to create and maintain that when each week the calendar varies.

Using resources or tools to plan, support, provide structure or carry evaluation for their teams is commonplace, yet the reporting and tools being shared on Google's re:Work site take that one step further being shaped by the data being collected about employees. It can be tempting to imagine that what makes work life tick day-to-day is captured in quantitative data sets and easy to analyse in reports or dashboards. Regardless of whether you share a desk or whether you are an ocean apart, it's important not to rely on data alone but to ensure that business processes reflect the value of spending time with your team, communicating and building relationships.

Another aspect of relying on quantitative data, particularly when what is being measured leads to reward, is highlighted by *Campbell's Law* (developed by Donald T. Campbell), which states: 'the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more

subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor'. Looking at the *Google Manager Feedback Survey* published on re:Work, which is based around 13 quantitative and 2 qualitative questions it is easy to see how employees or managers might manipulate the survey.

Whilst for many large organisations decision making based on 'People Analytics' is becoming a reality, which approach you take should also be informed by your values and your journey as part of a virtual team will chart how you put those values into practice. From an employer perspective you might consider formal policies, financial support and flexible working; as an organisation you could focus on support for staff, professional development and your technical infrastructure; as a leader you will explore the personal dimension of being a home-worker, from mental-health and well being to work/life balance and physical work spaces.

MANAGING EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

There are many ways to develop effective collaboration as a virtual team. One of the most effective is to engage your team in a learning process, for example by inviting them to take part in some online course or activity. There are a host of free and open courses and resources available. Depending on your context, you could leave everyone free to choose their own topic and report back to share three things:

- something they have learnt,
- something they found challenging
- and something they would like to find out more about.

Sharing knowledge and asking for help is a useful exercise for a virtual team, particularly for individuals who may find it hard to admit that they don't know the answer to something. When you are co-located, a common behaviour is to ask something in passing, 'Could I just ask ...' or 'Could you have a look...' are frequently heard in an office. But asking someone for help by chat or email or even in an online meeting is harder for many. Creating opportunities for normalising asking questions and helping each other is a very effective way to solve this problem, and also

gives managers the chance to model the approach. Put yourself in a position where your team can help you solve a problem and you will have a better foundation for managing in a crisis.

A different strategy for fostering collaboration is to change the way you conduct meetings. You could for instance have some ‘device-free’ meetings to encourage individuals to be more present and engage with each other, not being distracted by notifications. Giving others your full attention is important. On the other hand, staring at each other’s video feed is not always the best way to get people thinking or talking. Instead, ‘Meeting around a document’ or sometimes having a walk, an actual one or a virtual wander through a spreadsheet, might be a better way to connect, work, talk together. Here is a checklist for meetings¹⁷ that you can use for meetings regardless of how they happen, which includes techniques specifically relevant for online meetings.

Checklist for meetings

Beforehand

1. Set aims: That is, review progress, check on project X, take a decision re Y.. and share those with everyone taking part.
2. Get ready: get a drink, take a moment out to focus.
3. Communicate: confirm attendance, say hello, heads up if late.

During

1. Listen, listen, listen.
2. Manage/follow the agenda and keep an eye on time. Communicate if time is running out before time is actually up.
3. Be flexible if unexpected things come up, take a breath, say if you need a moment or need to think.
4. Breathe.

17 M. Deepwell, “How to Lead a Virtual Team ... Tips & Tricks,” *Maren Deepwell*, March 18, 2020.

Follow up

5. Keep clear notes of actions and deadlines and communicate these as necessary .
6. If things went wrong, reflect on why, learn from it.
7. Take a break before moving on to the next thing.

*Additional checks for virtual meetings***Beforehand**

1. Say hello via chat or email 5 min beforehand or more if not a regular meeting.
2. Be explicit about how things are going, i.e. is it a stressful day, bad hair day.
3. Vary where you are if possible for different types of meeting, i.e. stand up for informal catch ups or have tea/coffee as you might if meeting in person.

During

1. Describe verbally what you have on screen, i.e. which page of a doc you are on, which other things you have ready to discuss.
2. Communicate about questions, interrupt if necessary if unclear or tech issue – use visual or text clues, i.e. wave hand, raise hand virtually if available, 'I have a Q' in chat...
3. Switch off/minimise screens/tabs to avoid distraction and DO NOT CHECK EMAIL, consider your body language/adjust to be present.

Follow up

4. Stay online for a bit to say bye informally or chat briefly.

When you lose focus in a call, most of the time that's because you lose sight of your priorities: instead of what's important, the conversation

is focused on what's urgent or by what is, metaphorically speaking, the loudest. That could be emails pinging into your inbox or notifications coming into your phone. Or it could be something more personal like a pressing domestic issue.

As a manager of a virtual team, you should ideally focus on what's important, manage what's urgent and have oversight over what's loud or noisy (but part of the day-to-day churn of running the organisation). In practice, as the pressure many managers are under increases, the worse we become at delegating and the more prone to simply 'doing it myself'.

When you are working in a virtual team some of the physical prompts to prioritise are absent: for example, in a traditional setting you may have team meetings in one room but meet the Board or plan strategy in another. In our virtual working environment all meeting rooms are equal – it's up to us then to create a different atmosphere, a different focus.

Similarly, in a traditional setting managers may have closed the door to indicate that they were not to be disturbed. In a virtual team, it's up to you to shut down your inbox, tell everyone that you are busy via chat or update your calendar. It is your responsibility to make that space to focus and have no distractions.

Tools that help capture the evolution of collaborative thinking and which make current and previous thinking visible are fundamental to fostering collaboration in virtual teams. Commonly used tools include Google Docs, Microsoft Teams, Miro Boards, Padlet, Wikis, annotation tools, and more generally technologies that track and create a record of how work has developed over such as Airtable, Asana, Basecamp, Hive, Monday, Trello, and more. Platforms are evolving as our ways of working are changing, and digital competency plays a large factor in managing effective collaboration. Technical distractions such as frequent platform iterations (common on many popular platforms) and changes to workflows meanwhile might act as barriers to effective team work. Whilst you might enjoy trying out a new tool for designing a new workflow, it may alienate others in your team who are still struggling with making use of core functionality.

Screen-sharing and working synchronously is one of the most effective ways to collaborate online, and it presents similar opportunities for

casual questions or informal learning as sitting next to each other. You might spot that someone in your team looks at a spreadsheet at a different rate of magnification than you and hence hasn't spotted the notes you carefully put in the margins. It can be useful to learn more about how someone else works and in turn get comfortable to let someone else see how you work up close. However, not everyone may feel that way and you may find it takes time to establish a common practice of working together on a shared document for example, but it may help your team find far more effective ways to collaborate. A degree of openness is a huge plus for managers of virtual teams, and in the last section of this chapter, we will explore this further.

OPEN LEADERSHIP IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

In my view, technology and management combine in an unhelpful way for leaders of virtual teams. The technology we use for work is designed to give the impression that it is reliable, robust, smart, seamless, and (always) right. Similarly, traditional approaches to leadership are aimed at making leaders look strong, solid, and (always) right. The temptation for homeworking or working online is the same as it is for learning online: everything can seemingly be captured in a tidy dashboard view, tracked and monitored for maximum efficiency.

It can be difficult to find appropriate role models, particularly female role models, who can inspire you in the face of the messy reality of leading an organisation. Open practice can be a useful strategy for overcoming this problem and encourage more leaders to share insight into the day-to-day practice of leading virtual teams, warts and all. If you are curious about this approach, explore the following questions:

- Why take an open approach to leadership?
- How can you adopt this approach?
- What barriers may you encounter?

First, it's important to be clear how the term 'open' is used in this context. Openness means many things to many people, and we need to be mindful of that. In this context, the term open leadership means that professional

practice is shared openly and authentically, for example at conferences or in blog posts. This is distinct from content published by organisations or leaders about their activities or interests for the purposes of marketing or dissemination. Leaders often adopt a voice that is consistent with their organisation and values. Open practice in a leadership position may require you to adopt a different voice, a more personal voice, when sharing or reflecting on your work.

Taking an open approach to leadership prompts you to reflect on what it is really like to do the work you do and share your insights. It is about process as much as it is about failure or success. Broadly speaking, this approach is inspired by Open Education, and particularly Open Educational Practice, which ‘encompasses teaching techniques and academic practises that draw on open technologies, pedagogical approaches and open educational resources (OER) to facilitate collaborative and flexible learning’.¹⁸

In the context of leadership, we can also reflect on the ethos which motivates an open approach. Maha Bali¹⁹ defines Open Pedagogy as: ‘an ethos that has two major components:

- A belief in the potential of openness and sharing to improve learning
- A social justice orientation – caring about equity, with openness as one way to achieve this’.

This definition could be adapted for open approaches to leadership and we could say that Open Leadership as an ethos encompasses:

1. A belief in the potential of openness and sharing to improve leadership.
2. A social justice orientation – caring about equity, with openness as one way to achieve this in a leadership position.

18 L. Campbell, *What Is Open Education Practice?* (University of Edinburgh, 2019).

19 R. Schuwer, “Open Perspective: What Is Open Pedagogy?”, *Year of Open*, April 24, 2017.

If these align to your values as a leader, then this approach might work for you.

As a starting point, your organisation's social media usage policy might help you set out a framework for sharing your practice. Next, establish ground rules for yourself. For example, define what to avoid: discussing people management in relation to identifiable individuals, sharing personal information about co-workers, writing in the voice of the employer/organisation or formally representing the view of the employer/organisation. Be clear with yourself and others what is out of bounds, i.e. what you will not share.

Next, set out your aims, which could include:

- Openly share successes and failures.
- Record current practice as it happens (not writing in retrospect).
- Seeking consent of identifiable individuals.
- Encourage input and feedback internally and externally.
- Publish open practice on your own domain, not the employer/organisation.

Some of the benefits of adopting an open approach may become apparent quickly, others can take time to realise. For example, starting open practice at a time when things are busy provides a prompt for regular reflection you may otherwise lack. It can open up a new perspective into what's happening in your organisation and allows others to get a better sense of what things looked like from your perspective. Much of the power of the approach lies in making regular time to reflect and engage in a critical dialogue, either through your own writing or with colleagues.

You could take this approach and adapt it as a closed project or an internal company blog or even publish it anonymously and much of it would work just as well. And yet, one reason why it's important for a leader to be visible, for the voice to be identified, is that other new or reluctant leaders, who may find that their desire to make a difference and do interesting things wins over their reluctance to have a 'senior' role and all that entails. It is hard for anyone to progress to a leadership position

and it becomes even harder if you cannot identify with anyone you see in one. If as a woman all you see is men or if as a person of colour all you see is white people in charge, then the voices of people like you become even more important. Being visible makes it seem much more possible for others like you to see themselves in a leadership role. Although, as discussed below, having a public identity as a woman or person of colour can expose you to abuse or adverse criticism beyond that which a white man might experience. Everyone's online experience is not equal.

Another advantage of taking an open approach is recruitment. Prospective employees can get insight into the organisation's culture, get a sense of what is happening, and how the values of the organisation are put into practice. It is also helpful for some critical self-reflection when it comes to working for you. Is the reality of the workplace as good as the recruitment page promises? Or are you under-selling the opportunities on offer and the great team spirit in your department? Having a non-corporate, authentic voice can communicate that much more eloquently than any brochure that different views are valued in the organisation.

Whilst there are upsides to taking an open approach, leading a team through open practice puts you in a vulnerable position: one example of this is giving your audience a glimpse behind the scenes. Traditional approaches to leadership and a leader's authority are often grounded in a sense of infallibility, creating a perception in others that those in the lead have all the answers.

When your job requires you to build confidence and to project faith, being open is quite a departure from more traditional models and can take adjusting to, particularly for colleagues in the organisation. This is where things like seeking consent for example are important.

Sharing practice as a leader can bring recognition but potentially also criticism. This is particularly true of sharing work in progress and current practice where there is always a chance that things don't work out as planned. Most of the time things take surprising turns and whilst operations may seem seamless on the surface, that is not always the case behind the scenes. Sharing openly how things don't work out, how situations have changed or what you would do differently next time takes a lot of confidence and discipline. There is great value in sharing what didn't

work, but not everyone is comfortable with that approach – some may read it as weakness, as too informal or as lack of leadership.

Finding the right degree of openness for different aspects of your open practice as a leader is key to managing the risks involved.

There are some important questions to reflect on, both personal and practical, when you are looking to establish an open approach to being a leader. On a personal basis, consider the risks to your online identity and safety. For example, you may establish a place for your private reflections and thoughts, and somewhere for you to publish what you are comfortable with being public. As well as considering how what you write or say may reflect on others, consider your own position. Ask yourself if and how you will enable others to engage with you about your practice, and how you can do so safely. Consider if there are particularly sensitive projects or people who cannot be mentioned and why. If you are likely to attract a lot of attention online, ensure you have support from your organisation and expert advice to help manage this.

Some media might be more conducive to you in your context than others, and you might prefer to try different approaches such as recording podcasts or videos, taking pictures, or making sketch notes. Regardless of the format you choose to share your practice, consider how it is licensed and where it will be stored or archived long term.

If you can adopt an open licence, such as a Creative Commons licence, for online content, you might help other leaders following in your footsteps.

It might be that sharing practice openly through activities like blogging or recording podcasts is simply one step too far or not practical for you. If you are still keen to explore this approach, explore the following questions:

- Audience: how you could increase your audience beyond yourself? You could start with family pets or close colleagues and then gradually consider opening up more of what you share as you gain confidence.
- Identity: if you can't be personally identified, consider if you could establish an open practice anonymously. It doesn't offer all the advantages of being personally visible, but it could still offer value to your development.

- Peer support: find a colleague or a friend with whom to share this endeavour and turn your solo reflections into a conversation.

Open practice as a leader offers many benefits and it offers a way to hold yourself to account. It can be useful to establish for yourself what you value and how you perform against those values as part of your practice. Different from the accountability you have to stakeholders or the person or board you report to, taking an open approach to what leadership prompts you to reflect on how what you do holds up, and shows you a reflection of what kind of leader you are.

Listen as a leader: Feedback from a virtual team

The case study in Chapter 1 focused on what it took to move from the office to the virtual workplace. The concluding part of this chapter explores feedback from the same team 3 years on.²⁰ Throughout this chapter, we have explored ways to build trust as a team and to establish a shared approach to working as a virtual team, noting indicators for success and signals that alter you to things not going well. Inviting individuals to share their perspectives offers insights into the reality of working as part of a virtual team and that is an important lesson for anyone who leads one.

The first question we asked was what was your experience of transitioning to being a full-time home-worker?

Having been self-employed for many years and frequently worked from home, the transition to home working wasn't difficult. My commute was certainly shorter! However, transferring several years of documents to electronic format and adapting to a home based team with less frequent face to face time was challenging. I miss my colleagues! Although we do meet online and communicate constantly, it's still hard to get used to not having a face to speak with in person. Getting used to managing

20 M. Deepwell, et al., "Celebrating 3 Years as a Virtual Team – An #altc Perspective," *ALT*, January 29, 2021.

a family and being home for kids when they're back from school is definitely a plus. The organisation has also made a point of ensuring everyone has flexibility in their work schedules to take time for themselves, which is extremely valuable.

Another member of the team had a different perspective:

I had never worked virtually before. Coming from a teaching background (prior to Covid) I was very much used to dealing with 100s if not 1000s of people a day. I thought it would be lonely but actually at times I could do with some more alone time! The organisation has fostered a close knit, highly communicative and effective team. We talk with each other throughout the day, have regular catch ups and work collaboratively ALL the time. I really enjoy this and cherish it as I know from speaking with friends who have recently had to pivot to online working that this working environment is not always present. Having the physical team meeting days and events (in normal times) brings welcome opportunities to catch up with people and I hope for the team that they are able to return as soon as is safe.

Reflecting on the changes of moving from a largely office-based, hybrid model to a fully virtual model for all staff, we heard:

One of the big advantages is there is greater parity for staff. Before we became an entirely virtual team we were using a hybrid of office and home based staff, which meant that communications between the team were different depending on where you were based, sometimes requiring additional measures to ensure the exchange of information and awareness of what was going on. With a fully virtual team effort is still required for formal and informal interactions, but everyone is in the same boat.

New staff, who joined the virtual team, also shared their perspectives:

Having previously had experience of working at home before I joined, I was very familiar with the concept, and really enjoy

the flexibility that homeworking brings. Having extra time in the mornings and evenings with no commute is so beneficial, especially in these winter months when you can get out for an early walk in the sunshine. I also love being able to wear slippers for the whole working day! Creating your own comfortable environment is a huge factor for working efficiently.

When I joined, it was so refreshing to join an organisation that does working from home so well. I love being part of the team, and we all do our best to try and provide alternative virtual versions of what we each miss from an office environment. I love being able to still celebrate colleagues' birthdays and important events virtually, even though we are spread over hundreds of miles. Day-to-day, it's also always nice to know that someone is always on the end of a chat message to help with a query, or to jump onto a video call with a cup of tea!

Another new member of the team added:

For me, I have to admit coming to work for a virtual team has been life changing. In my last job I had a 3 hour round trip commute down the motorway to work and back. That was so very tiring and quite frankly a real pain and let's not go there about not being able to park when you eventually get there! Being able to avoid all of that commuting hassle is just so much more productive and makes much more sense to me. Although I have had other experiences over the years of working from home before, it was a whole new experience of working for an organisation where everyone works from home. I remember wondering how that would work in practice before I started. I didn't need to worry, mind you as I think we have really got it right in terms of recreating a sense of belonging and fostering online social presence within the team. We are constantly in touch with each other either through messaging apps, email or video calls, we have regular meetups and as we are such a small team we are actually very well connected. These things don't happen by magic though and have been very carefully thought out and planned for, in my experience

you have to be a lot more deliberate in your communications when working at a distance to avoid misunderstandings and we work very hard at this.

To conclude, the team shared the worst and the best bits about being part of a virtual team:

The worst bits... there have to be some

- The most difficult part of working from home for me, is having to provide virtual support in a crisis. When someone is having a really bad day or something unexpected happens, there's only so much I can do via phone and video calls.
- I end up doing more than my usual share of domestic chores as a home-worker.
- I miss hugging colleagues when they need one!
- Being not as active. Little walks to a bus stop, or tram, walking around an office all add up during a week so you have to make sure you don't stay sedentary (to keep off the lbs! Must say I'm no expert at this)
- Funnily enough one of the things I do miss from my looooong drive every day is that decompression time and being able to listen to podcasts guilt free. For some reason I am also really bad about forcing myself to get outside and go for a walk, something I know is really important to do and something I am working on. I also miss being in an office when the banter is going on – I do love a good giggle. Although we do still have our fair share of funny memes across the ether which does help.

And some highlights...

- I really don't miss my 1+ hour long commute and I love the time I have regained for things other than sitting on delayed trains.

- When I have caring responsibilities for my elderly parents, these are easier to fit into my working day from home than they were in an office.
- No commute!! This is a big one as I didn't realise how tiring it was. It also meant I could get rid of my car which is better for the environment. Also I think being able to work from home allows you to keep on top of household chores. For example, during my lunch I can quickly put a load of washing on or wash the breakfast dishes.
- The best bits, well that is a hard question, there are actually so many great things about working from home. It has definitely given me some life balance back and I love how it takes me 30 seconds to get to work in the mornings. I am really lucky in that I have a dedicated home office and don't have to clear everything off the kitchen table at the end of the day. That would make things so much harder to manage. I love our little team, everyone is very thoughtful and so kind and even though we are based all around the UK somehow that distance really doesn't seem to matter.

There's a growing body of literature about working from home, and much of it is written for the individual home-worker, and focuses on the challenges from that perspective. I hope that the snippets above can begin to convey a sense of how rewarding a virtual team can be from the perspective of a manager, and how leading people in this context can offer a new sense of satisfaction for even experienced leaders.

Managing a virtual team offers opportunities to deliberately *not* replicate the established dynamics that govern in-person work spaces. At the best of times, leading a virtual team offers scope for creatively and collaboratively reshaping how we work. Yet what about the hard times, the moments that push you to your limits? In some ways, virtual teams are just like any other and experience the same highs and lows. But are there pitfalls and problems that are specific to virtual teams? What happens years down the line once the initial flush of excitement about working this way has worn off? We will explore these questions in depth in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

Maturing as a virtual team

Some of the most challenging aspects of effectively leading virtual teams only present themselves over long periods of time. In contrast to managing a traditional, office-based workforce, there are a lot of factors at play that you have little or no control over when you manage people remotely, from moving house to the impact on health and wellbeing.

Much of what is discussed in this chapter focuses on the microcosm of working from home long term. In *Out of Office*,¹ Charlie Warzel and Anne Helen Petersen begin with ‘Whatever you were doing during the pandemic... it was not working from home. ... Work became life, and life became work. You weren’t thriving. You were surviving’. Writing in 2021, they assert: ‘This is the dark truth of remote work as we know it now: it promises to liberate workers from the chains of the office, but in practice it capitalises on the total collapse of work-life balance’.

This chapter sets out to explore a different way forward. Whilst the aim is to acknowledge and chart examples of the challenges that can make working from home a bleak reality, each section also suggests ways to cope with them, strategies for avoiding common problems from the outset and ideas for home-workers to establish a positive work-life balance.

To some, this may seem like an overly positive or naive mindset, one that stands in sharp contrast to today’s harsh realities of corporate practices and indeed the inherent risks of the technologies which enable

1 C. Warzel and A. Petersen, *Out of Office* (Scribe, 2021).

us to work from home in the first place. The aim of this book however is not to chart the above mentioned collapse of work-life balance, but to offer ideas for creating alternative ways of working that are based on experience and practice.

In order to create a sustainable approach to leading virtual teams whilst avoiding the harsh future that is already a reality for a growing minority, we have to start by acknowledging that the impact of spending every day at home whilst working can be difficult to anticipate. Consider how many things shape life at home and by extension working from home and how much things can change abruptly and without warning. It may be a new pet, a sudden illness or redundancy that causes home life to change overnight. Or it may be external factors such as a building site or noisy neighbours. Managing a virtual team involves to some degree connecting with the reality of home life of your workforce and all that brings with it. Whilst it is important to maintain a degree of professional detachment and separation between home and work, there are limits to what can realistically be achieved. There will always be situations when not going out to work means that there is no escape from a difficult situation at home and this is one of the most challenging aspects of working from home.

This chapter has two parts: the first part focuses on everyday challenges that individuals within virtual teams experience over time such as establishing a way to work from home that is suitable for them, their personal circumstances and the challenges of being present in the virtual workplace.

The second part of the chapter expands the perspective from the individual to a maturing team or workforce. Here we explore establishing sustainable and healthy ways to support working from home long term, and how to establish strong communication channels and a sense of trust that you can draw on when things go wrong. The part of the chapter concludes with reflecting what we can learn about leading virtual teams from the experiences during the global pandemic. There is much about grace and compassion that we can learn from the experience in order to help virtual teams mature into a way of working that presents a sustainable future for working from home.

Maturing as an individual home-worker

FINDING AN APPROACH THAT WORKS

For many home-workers it quickly becomes normal to be responsible for all things domestic simply by virtue of being at home. That responsibility consumes time and energy that wouldn't have been spent on chores and housework otherwise. In order to find a sustainable approach to working from home, it is necessary to establish a shared understanding of what professionalism of home-workers means to them and those around them.

Particularly during times of high pressure, such as during the pandemic, this may seem like an unrealistic goal. Everyone who works from home has to manage competing demands on their time, and this is especially challenging for parents and caregivers.

That said, there are strategies that individuals can adopt in order to create a different dynamic that works for them and this section explores some examples of the challenges that home-workers may encounter and how to overcome them:

- **Put in place workplace signifiers:** As a starting point, it's important to establish that work has priority during work hours other than during breaks. This may be an obvious point to make, but it can be a powerful one. Signifiers like getting an 'office door' sign or designating a portion of a shared space or even the kitchen table can help with this. Once this has been established, it is easier to increase flexibility to accommodate competing demands. The aim for home-workers and those around them is that the individual chooses the time and is being intentional about having a break instead of being distracted by things that 'need doing'.
- **Shaping your day:** Being in control of the rhythm of a working day is a key habit for virtual work and one that takes effort to establish. It helps to create a sense of control over the homeworking environment. Once you have found it, and you know what balance or routine works for you, communicate it to colleagues, and share what works for you to help each other build similar routines and rhythms to their days.

- **Choose what to notice in your homelife:** When it comes to domestic life, working from home can be an eye-opener.² Witnessing each day at home can bring new insights into what goes on, how much effort goes into every day, and how much happens at home that one would otherwise miss. Each individual context will be different of course, but over time it is essential to get a sense of when it is productive to engage with homelife and when it isn't.
- **Working alongside children:** Respecting boundaries around homeworking can be very challenging, particularly for children. Some employers make stipulations around childcare during working hours, for example requiring staff to have formal childcare arrangements in place to care for children under 14 during working hours. Others take a more flexible approach. For all involved, balancing family time with work commitments is a challenge to which there are no hard and fast answers as much depends on the context of each individual. Being very clear about what policies are in place to support working from home and flexible hours as well as paying attention to the culture within a team is key to finding a successful approach that works for employee and employer.

In practice, it may work perfectly fine for colleagues to be interrupted by children or flatmates. You might decide that bringing pets to team meetings is welcome or that someone you are on a call with is welcome to answer the doorbell. Or you may set standards of what is expected that are entirely different. Whatever the expectations leaders set for a virtual team need to be clearly communicated and practised consistently to help managers and their colleagues in turn set those expectations for everyone around them.

2 V. Groskop, "New Balance: Will Work Be More Parent-Friendly than Ever after the Pandemic?," *The Guardian*, July 13, 2021.

THE CHALLENGE OF BEING PRESENT³

Whether your primary goal is to combat cabin fever and the loneliness of homeworking, or working jointly with colleagues or networks, there are a lot of benefits of being physically located in the same space. As a virtual team, being present and keeping connected is a big challenge. The example of working across different time zones allows us to explore some of the nuances of what it means to be present and how to stay connected.

Many virtual teams work across different time zones. Especially if you have colleagues who are distributed across different continents, or if you are working with widely distributed collaborators or customers, being present is a big challenge. There are many tools that help virtual teams plan and schedule work across different time zones and one of the interesting side effects of this way of working is that suddenly a specific window of the day becomes important simply because everyone is awake at the same time. So you might end up having to have meetings late in the afternoon during school run or early in the morning when usually you would not be working.

Distribution across different time zones adds an additional layer of complexity to remote working and also makes it more difficult to meet in person.

Keeping connected across different time zones is more than a logistical challenge.⁴ Having a meeting with someone who got up at 5 am to speak with you or getting together during dinner or children's bedtimes blurs the boundaries between personal and professional lives. This is especially relevant if you use social media as part of your communication at work. Even if you maintain separate profiles for work/non-work purposes, this doesn't necessarily solve the problem: when someone 12 hours ahead needs to contact you outside of working hours, they may reach out to personal social media accounts. Being visibly online outside of normal working hours in your time zone, can seem like you are simply at work to someone in a different time zone.

3 M. Deepwell and M. Hawksey, "Virtual Teams: It's Good to Keep in Touch Most of the Time," *Maren Deepwell*, July 9, 2019.

4 F. Hannah, "The Firm with 900 Staff and No Office," *BBC News*, July 5, 2019.

Being present and building relationships in a virtual team working across different time zones requires us to find ways of balancing being available with protecting work/life balance. This is something all virtual teams, even those based geographically near each other, need to learn in order to establish a shared sense of achievement and productivity.

Without the visual clues that a co-located working environment brings with it, it can be hard to determine if your sense of how things are progressing and how the team is performing reflects reality. Being in charge of a virtual team can feel like flying blind.

Gaining an overview and a shared sense of progress relies on practical tools such as shared lists and checklists, formal standards or project management approaches, or using dedicated project management software productivity tools to guide your team.

In order to make progress, we need to (1) create a vision which must be clearly understood and supported by everyone in the organisation; and (2) be able to align infrastructures (such as information technology, work structures and processes) with the business goals. No matter what form or structures the organisation takes, these conditions must remain true; even for the virtual organization.⁵

So in terms of developing a culture where staff are focused on visibility and communication you could argue that the changing team dynamic is an opportunity for everyone to engage in a new vision and ensure our infrastructures (IT, processes, structure etc.) are aligned.

In any busy team, or role, there is always a balance to be struck between getting things done and finding time to think about things – and different factors can make it harder to find that balance such as change, things happening outside of work, ill health or heavy workloads.

Signs of not quite finding that balance in my experience are things like not using project plans or to-do lists properly, but instead allowing

5 L. Introna, "Thinking about Virtual Organisations and the Future," in *Conference: Proceedings of the Fifth European Conference on Information Systems, ECIS 1997*, Cork, UK, 1997.

one's inbox to dictate what to focus on. Prioritising what makes the most (virtual) 'noise' instead of what's important is a typical indicator as is arranging to catch up and not remembering what about, feeling stressed and not feeling that things improve when you tick things off your to-do list.

Kindness towards oneself and others is key here. Giving oneself a break is particularly important when things are busy and can be hard to do. And it always helps to go back to basics, like your to-do list, and use the processes you have in place to regain some of that perspective, which in turn makes it easier to communicate what you are doing, progress being made and importantly achievements to colleagues and stakeholders.

The key thing is for everyone, established staff and new colleagues alike, to understand *why* we do what we do. I conceptualise the 'why' as the strategic perspective, the 'how' as reflecting the organisation's values and the 'what' as the practical delivery. In order to create a sense of shared endeavour for virtual teams, all three elements need to be clear to everyone.

PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO 'OUT OF OFFICE'

Many of the tools used in the virtual workplace colonise not only physical space in the home, but also digital devices. Work emails and chat channels are often installed on personal mobile phones, and usage of social media accounts for work often blurs the boundaries between work and being away from work.

Just as being present in a virtual team can be challenging, so is taking a complete break from work and getting away from it all. How do you achieve a sense of being 'out of office' when your workplace is your home or indeed travels with you on your digital devices?

Here are some practical starting points for designing your own approach or providing guidance to your team:

1. **Remove work accounts from your devices:** If you already have separate devices you only use for work, simply switch them off and tuck them away. Otherwise, start to close or remove all work related accounts from your devices, including email, chat clients, access to documents, and so forth;

2. **Turn off all notifications that relate to work:** Notifications can become insidious to our digital presence and engagement. Especially if you are relying on notifications for personal or social interactions, make sure to mute those relating to work. Notifications might come from shared documents, communication channels, calendars or productivity tools, so check the settings for each;
3. **Post an 'out of office' message on social media you use for work:** Many of us use the same social media channels for work and outside of work. Even if you have dedicated work-focused social media channels, consider posting something that signals that you are now away from your desk to help limit work-related interactions whilst you are taking a break;
4. **Pack away your work space or reminders of work:** If you work from home, consider how you can pack away reminders of your day-to-day routine and use your workspace differently during your break. Sometimes it may be enough to just close the door to the home office, but if you are sharing space or considering using your usual workspace for other purposes, spending some time clearing things away can make a big difference. It also has the added benefit of starting afresh when you return to your work;
5. **Change your routine:** Many long-term home-workers develop strong daily habits and routines around work, heading to their desk at the same time each day, making tea or coffee at regular intervals, taking a lunch break or a walk around the same time and so forth. If you are spending your time away from work at home, try to vary your routine to give your body and your mind a change;
6. **Close the laptop... and your inbox:** The virtual workplace can easily creep back into consciousness when you are keeping half an eye on your laptop notifications or checking in with your inbox regularly. Many staff have a sense that keeping an eye on their emails is necessary or even expected. Try to resist

this tendency wherever possible and try to find some distance from work;

7. **Make use of your time off, don't save it:** Time off and away from work is important to our overall wellbeing, physical and mental health. Time away helps us reset, rest and recoup energy.

Most of this advice could be applied equally to all modes of working, but there is a particular sense of urgency when it comes to working from home. When your home is your physical workplace each and every day, creating a sense of distance from work feels particularly important. Taking practical steps to untether from the virtual workplace can help with creating mental space.

Holidays are a positive example of a time when we want a break from work, but there are other times when we may need to create that sense of distance from work for other reasons such as disputes at work or physical or mental illness. During times when we need rather than want a break from work, it becomes very important to have the skills to create that distance and to keep work at bay, instead of allowing it to be present. Developing the skill to be out of the office can help us weather more difficult circumstances.

Maturing as a virtual team

Our focus now shifts from the individual to the wider workforce, as we explore establishing sustainable and healthy ways to support working from home long term, and how to establish strong communication channels and a sense of trust that you can draw on when things go wrong.

HEALTH AND HOMEWORKING IN THE LONG TERM

Studies have highlighted that work-life balance in homeworking is a complex learning process. The first weeks or months are an adjustment period, until the home-workers' experience eventually improves.⁶

6 O. Mallet, A. Marks, and L. Skountridaki, "Where Does Work Belong Anymore? The Implications of Intensive Homebased Working," *Gender in Management*, September 7, 2020.

Once settled in the new environment 75% of home-workers believe that their productivity is higher at home than in the office.⁷ Professional and managerial workers associate hours worked in the home positively with job and life satisfaction as ‘the greater flexibility afforded by working at home helps prevent family responsibilities interfering with work’. However, there are also negative connotations relating to burnout and stress,⁸ as working from home ‘does not prevent work responsibilities interfering with family life’. It is in this way that differential impacts from work intensification through enforced home based working may manifest.⁹

We have already explored some factors of supporting a virtual team in earlier chapters, for example what to consider during recruitment or onboarding. When it comes to health and wellbeing longer term, one advantage for virtual teams is having more flexibility to go outside during work hours more and potentially saving time on commuting that could be used for exercise, meditation and mindfulness. Whilst activity levels might decline due to a lack of commuting or having to navigate around large buildings or campus, long-term home-workers can adjust their daily habits to compensate and even find it an advantage. Avoiding the stress of a long (and expensive) daily commute can be a bonus for virtual teams, who gain back time (and money) by not travelling to the office every day.

For leaders of virtual teams, resources such as the ‘Workplace wellbeing question bank’¹⁰ published by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, provide a useful starting point for assessing home-worker wellbeing. This question bank ‘is a collection of validated questions, which have been developed and used by various organisations

7 O. Mallet, A. Marks, and L. Skountridaki, “Where Does Work Belong Anymore? The Implications of Intensive Homebased Working,” *Gender in Management*, September 7, 2020.

8 O. Mallet, A. Marks, and L. Skountridaki, “Where Does Work Belong Anymore? The Implications of Intensive Homebased Working,” *Gender in Management*, September 7, 2020.

9 O. Mallet, A. Marks, and L. Skountridaki, “Where Does Work Belong Anymore? The Implications of Intensive Homebased Working,” *Gender in Management*, September 7, 2020.

10 What Works Wellbeing, *Workplace Wellbeing Question Bank* (What Works Wellbeing, July 2020).

to measure different aspects of wellbeing’ and ‘includes questions that cover all relevant aspects of wellbeing derived from existing frameworks of wellbeing and work’. There are also validated questions from other sources including the 5-item World Health Organization Index (WHO-5), which is described as ‘a reliable and valid instrument to capture mental health problems such as depression and anxiety’.

For most of the questions in the Workplace wellbeing question bank, there is national data available for you to compare the results for your employees against. You can use these questions as the basis for your own questionnaire, tailoring and adapting it to the needs of your organisation and the specific circumstances of your employees and the sector you work in.

The list of evidence-based frameworks re-visited for this purpose include:

- OECD Guidelines on Measuring the Quality of the Working Environment.¹¹
- Eurofound Job Quality Indices.
- PERMA Profiler¹² and its workplace adaptation.
- CIPD Good Work Index.
- University of Cardiff ‘How Good is My Job’ model.
- UK Health & Safety Executive’s Management Standards.
- BEIS Workplace Wellbeing and Performance Review.
- DWP Framework for Voluntary Employer Reporting on Disability, Mental Health and Wellbeing.

In the aftermath of the pandemic there has been a greater awareness of mental health at work. Platforms that can be useful for managers tackling

11 OECD, *OECD Guidelines on Measuring the Quality of the Working Environment* (OECD, 23 November 2017).

12 J. Butler and M.L. Kern, *The PERMA-Profiler: A Brief Multidimensional Measure of Flourishing* (Penn Arts & Sciences, 2015).

workforce wellbeing include the St John's Ambulance *Mental Health at Work First Aid* course which comes with a self-assessment checklist that is suitable for all organisations, regardless of size.

It is also important to consider how employers can better support mental health at work for people of colour. In its *2021 Race Equity Impact Report*, Mental Health First Aid England highlights racism and racial inequity in the workplace:

- Half of Black Britons say they are as likely to have experienced racism at work as in the street;
- Over a quarter of Black people (29%) say their mental health has been negatively impacted by racism experienced at work;
- Over 70% of ethnic minority workers said they have experienced racial harassment at work in the past 5 years.¹³

In the research for this book, I found little reliable data about home-working in general and even fewer reputable sources about equality, diversity and inclusion for virtual teams. In *Invisible Women*, Caroline Criado Perez highlights that 'failing to collect data on women and their lives means that we continue to naturalise sex and gender discrimination'... we don't collect the required data because 'women are just too complicated to measure'. When it comes to data collection and data models, Perez asserts that 'simple is easier. Simple is cheaper. But simple doesn't reflect reality'.¹⁴ It is easy to see how this argument can be applied into the context of virtual teams. We are not collecting reliable data about a home-based workforce in all its diversity and there are significant data gaps when it comes to identifying what prevents people from working from home in the first place. There are a lot of questions around home-working in the long term that we don't have reliable answers to and this is something we will return to in the conclusion of this book.

13 MHFA England, 'Race Equity Impact Report 2021', *MHFA*, September 27, 2021.

14 C. Criado Perez, *Invisible Women* (Vintage, 2019).

What we can determine for now is that mental health is a key issue for workplace wellbeing as these figures from the Office of National Statistics (*) and Mental Health First Aid England (**) highlight¹⁵:

Approximately 1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a mental illness each year. In 2016, 15.8 million UK work days were lost due to mental illness.*

The largest causes of sickness absence for our country's workforce are depression, stress, and anxiety. Mental illness costs UK businesses around £35 billion every year. This equates to:

- £10.6 billion lost to sickness absence,
- £21.2 billion in reduced productivity,
- £3.1 billion in substituting employees members who vacate their roles due to mental illness.**

Talking about mental health issues at work can be more difficult for home-based workers if for example there is little privacy (e.g., if they work in shared spaces at home). Investing in training such as courses for Mental Health First Aiders by MHFA England can be a positive step towards improving awareness amongst decision makers, and helping staff address challenges and seek support.

Returning to our focus on wellbeing for virtual teams more generally, there is a wealth of advice that managers can use to help individual employees make adjustments to their daily routines from a range of institutions. Even simple tips such as 'getting outside each day even if it's to stand on your doorstep or back garden if you can. If not, have a window open just to allow in some fresh air'¹⁶ or creating a space to unplug and recharge, using screen breaks and annual leave to relax

15 MHFA England, "Race Equity Impact Report 2021," *MHFA*, September 27, 2021.

16 MHFA England, "Tips from Mental Health First Aiders on Supporting Themselves and Colleagues during a Crisis," *MHFA*, April 30, 2020.

and recuperate¹⁷ can be a useful starting point. Practical tools such as this Digital Data Detox Kit¹⁸ can be very effective for virtual teams who are feeling the downsides of being online a lot and can help to reflect on what is a healthy and safe approach to working digitally.

One example when the negative impacts of working in a virtual way come to the forefront is whilst working across different time zones, it's hard to avoid scheduling work outside of everyone's normal working hours. Many people rate employees who work all hours and show 'commitment' by working at weekends and through holidays, but it's important to critically reflect on this approach rather than embracing it. *Working on weekends*¹⁹ explores what's at stake, particularly when you are a manager or in a leadership role, really well.

... there's often a cultural belief that if you're not burning the candle at both ends – if you're not pulling 18 hour days and working on the weekends – you're not trying hard enough. ... Most knowledge workers can muster up to 4 to 6 hours of really productive work a day. After that, you get into make-work; the going through the motions, non-reflective phoning-it-in work that isn't going to rock anybody's world. Likewise, constant interruptions, e.g. on Slack, through random calls, or half hour meetings sprinkled throughout the day, interrupt flow state and dramatically drop productivity and well-being.

Implemented strategies such as displaying information in email signatures such as general availability and preferences around when/how they can be contacted can support staff who have different working patterns including caring for family, home-schooling, and so forth.

If you lead a virtual team, it's part of your responsibility to model the kind of behaviours mentioned in the article and make that part of your culture as a virtual team: respecting different working patterns, not

17 MHFA England, "Unplug and Recharge: Staff Wellbeing at MHFA England," *MHFA*, 23 July 2020.

18 Tactical Tech, *Data Detox Kit* (Tactical Tech).

19 B. Werdmüller, "Working on the Weekends," *Werd.io*, February 5, 2021.

to work all hours, but only productive hours – particularly in these times of high workload.

Another inspiring example of this approach in practice comes from Mary Burgess²⁰ who focuses life work balance (putting ‘life’ ahead of the word work in this term – life comes BEFORE work):

...What isn't such a good thing though, is not being able to turn off that running strategy session in my mind. It also runs when I'm reading in bed before going to sleep, when I'm meditating and when I'm playing video games with my teen. ... I have become compassionately ruthless with myself when I have intentionally created a space for something like reading or meditation and my thoughts start running away. I don't get mad at myself (this is also something I've had to learn how to do). I calmly guide myself back to the activity and resume focus. Sometimes I do that over and over and over.

What this post explores are techniques such as meditation to help you cope with a busy workload and stressful times. You don't have to suffer from Anxiety with a capital 'A' for overly work-focused behaviour to become an issue – and lack of the right life-work balance can quickly contribute to poor mental wellbeing.

Finding balance is hard work that continues each and every day, particularly when there is always something urgent that demands your work attention or your personal attention. Care is work.

All of these issues contribute to the challenge of finding sustainable and healthy approaches to working from home long term. Some of these, individual employees and managers have (at least some measure of) control over, whilst others can be shaped in the wider context of the individual employee and organisational culture.

Negotiating the best possible approach is an ongoing process for virtual teams, and a worthwhile one. Only by engaging with these questions at an individual, organisational and policy level can we hope to avoid a dystopian model of exploitation and loss of work life balance.

20 M. Burgess, "Work Life Balance," *LinkedIn*, February 2021.

Our joint focus must be on the everyday rather than a time of crisis, so that we establish equitable norms of homeworking that are the rule, not an exception.

MANAGING CHANGE AND EMERGENCIES

Building a healthy work culture that supports your team day-to-day will make it easier to cope with the inevitable times that bring change²¹ and emergencies.²²

Initially at least it can be effective to support a shift to working as a virtual team by providing continuity and to retain familiar strategic and operational planning tools. As teams evolve and adapt to operating in a virtual organisation, a gradual process of reviewing what works and what needs to change ensures that the team fully exploits the benefits of new ways of working. In a co-working space when employees can see each other across an open plan office or gather around a table or workstation, training for new business processes or workflows can be more easily facilitated than in a virtual team setting. Whilst formal training can be provided as before, opportunities for informal learning or asking questions are curtailed. Learning new things online is a skillset that employees only gradually develop and even relatively small changes can take longer to implement effectively.

A remote team from a company called Zapier documented²³ the tools they recommend for remote teams as they have grown from 6 to 20 to over 110 employees between 2013 and 2017. Some tools that are mentioned in 2013 include Trello, iDoneThis and Sqwiggle. Trello is a tool that provides plenty of resources that promote it as a tool to support remote teams, including Trello's own Trello for Remote Teams. With iDoneThis 'everybody on the team checks in daily; either in their browser or via email', which is turned into a daily digest or analysed in a report. Another service that was mentioned is Sqwiggle (which was closed in

21 M. Deepwell and M. Hawksey, "Virtual Teams: Moving Parts," *Maren Deepwell*, March 6, 2020.

22 M. Deepwell and M. Hawksey, "Virtual Teams: Remote Crisis," *Maren Deepwell*, October 30, 2018.

23 W. Foster, "How to Manage a Remote Team," *Zapier*, March 18, 2020.

2016, but similar tools are now on the market), providing ‘a persistent video chat room’.²⁴

Troubles increase with the number of ways the initiative differs from current approaches. The more innovation, the more problems. Problems tempt people to give up, forget it, and chase the next enticing rainbow. But stop the effort too soon, and by definition it is a failure. Stay with it through its hurdles, make appropriate adjustments, and you could be on the way to success. Though some ideas are dead-ends, many simply need mid-course corrections.²⁵

Even if you have a lot of experience in managing change, scaling up processes that support everyone in the organisation is a continuous learning process. Taking everyone with you through a process of transformation and staying connected takes on a new dimension when you communicate online. In a virtual context, whether you are managing a gradual change process or you find yourself in a situation when a sudden crisis hits, you are reliant on everyone being able to communicate and use the systems and tools to stay connected and resolve any issues.

In some ways dealing with an immediate crisis, like a technical failure, can be easier as a virtual team than spotting a slowly developing problem. In slowly developing situations the danger is that managers are blind to a situation or employees get disconnected and stop communicating effectively. Miscommunication can quickly escalate a situation online. The risk of a situation like this arising is higher when it comes to managing staff, such as a transition between different managers or a problem with performance.

24 Trello, *Trello For Remote Teams* (Trello).

25 R. Moss Kanter, “Change Is Hardest in the Middle,” *Harvard Business Review*, August 12, 2009.

In this type of context leaders and managers often become coaches and helpers, offering support and reach out in order to restore effective communication²⁶:

I always encourage people to reach out and let me know if anything is on their mind, because I think it's the best way to get insights into how people feel about the state of the organisation. It's important not to let these conversations turn into gossip sessions, but encouraging people to share how they really feel can be a very powerful tool for leaders who are open to hearing it.

Building rapport and trust and finding ways to foster this online is an important part of successfully leading virtual teams. Consistent communication is essential, but in a busy environment that can be easily forgotten.

Managers and leaders also must be able to empathise with and communicate to a diverse team,²⁷ learn about other's communications preferences, styles and expectations; check in regularly to see how the individual is managing and be an open-minded, curious questioner and listener.²⁸

Collaborative tools such as Google Jamboard and Trello meanwhile can help provide a way to manage practical incidents, enabling everyone in the team to get an overview of the necessary information to solve problems. Creating workflows or using tools everyone is happy with is a challenge, not just for distributed teams, and creating a culture of continuous learning at all levels of the organisation is key to long term success for virtual teams.

Effective approaches to communication and productivity or collaborative tools are fundamental to the working of a virtual team. Although ways of working evolve over time, reflecting on a specific critical incident that happened or conducting a pre-mortem, i.e., imagining how a project

26 S. Knuth, "What to Do When You're Feeling Underutilized," *Opensource.com*, 18 April 2017.

27 N. Settle-Murphy, "Easing the Pain of Abrupt Transition, from Afar," *Guided Insights*.

28 W. Berger, *The Book of Beautiful Questions* (Bloomsbury, 2018).

or organisation could fail, and focusing on what impact working as a virtual team had on the situation is a valuable exercise. Start with questions such as:

- How was the incident dealt with and what did we do differently than a co-located organisation or team?
- Were there weak points?
- Lessons learnt for next time?
- What are the implications for staff training and development?

In times of crisis, the desire to monitor more and to have a greater sense of control over what staff are doing can increase. Communicating online may feel slow or cumbersome, particularly when paired with connectivity problems or individuals not showing up. Not being able to communicate consistently increases how precarious we perceive a situation to be. To succeed in times of crisis, fostering trust in individuals is key:

You can do this many ways, including asking where they are with the project, what you can do to support them, what practical steps will move them forward, or what's getting in their way if they are experiencing challenges... . In asking about people, I'm opening the door for them to share what they want (or ask for help if they'd like), but I'm not intruding on the details of what they are doing or why they are doing it in a certain way.²⁹

Leaders or managers need to be able to trust their teams to communicate and to respond in the appropriate way during times of crisis. Trust is paramount for virtual teams and in my view surveillance-like tools can't replace the need to build trust and effective communication with a remote workforce.

29 S. Knuth, "Managers: Do You Donate or Delegate," *OpenSource.com*, August 9, 2016.

WORKING FROM HOME WHILST MOVING HOME

Homeworking provides different challenges for previous experiences, for example dealing with school holidays, or having work done in your house. One such challenge is that of moving home, which is always difficult to organise with working life, but raises different issues for the home-worker. In this section, we will consider the house move as an example of these broader challenges that require different considerations for the home-worker. Moving home is one of life's great disruptors and moving home as a home-worker has upsides and also some challenges.

One of the biggest upsides of working remotely when moving house is the ability to take your work with you, to remain part of an organisation regardless of where you move. This provides significant flexibility and potential security for staff and enables organisations to retain staff for longer and throughout life transitions that may usually require a change in job. It can be a win for the individual and the organisation, and one of the great benefits of remote working.

Moving home as a home-worker also means that staff need to find new accommodation that provides suitable work space and connectivity. In many cases homeworking space requirements may be specified in employment contracts, but it is more likely that there are practical requirements such as a dedicated workspace within the home that will influence home searchers. In addition to the practical requirements of the home, there may be other limitations to take into account, such as whether employees still have to attend a particular workplace in person at regular intervals or whether you can move into different time zones, or across national borders.

Contracts of employment for home-workers usually specify such details, but at least in the UK much of employment legislation has not been updated to adapt to home-workers and the flexibility working in a virtual team offers. This relates to the issues discussed in Chapter 1 in relation to recruitment and selection.

The actual process of working from home whilst moving home meanwhile presents its own challenges and is bound to cause disruption. Moving home and home as a workplace brings with it a new set of risks for virtual teams. In the long term, a diverse workforce moving homes might include anything from an individual changing apartments to an

intergenerational family moving to a fixer-upper in the country miles away from the nearest internet cable, and it is a process in which the boundaries between work and home are negotiated and defined anew.

On an individual level, moving home is a significant and stressful life event and has a long tail of practical consequences. It takes a lot of planning and doing, and requires headspace and time. All of which causes a certain amount of distraction from work. For some, work acts as a welcome break from the stress of moving as it presents more predictable problems to solve. For others productivity slows when they lose their habitual set up and environment. Although we live in a culture where working from home is becoming more normal, most parts of life aren't really set up for it. There is still often an assumption that you "go to work" and moving processes are not designed to prioritise continuity for home-workers.

On a team level, supporting staff who are moving house takes on a whole new dimension. Like so many other aspects of leading people it is a challenge that particularly affects virtual teams, and the disruption can range from serious and prolonged to very minimal depending on the individual circumstances. You can take practical steps to support staff during periods of transition such as providing a mobile Wi-Fi hub, or a flexible work policy that can accommodate moving periods and appropriate policies that cover such eventualities, especially around access to online systems and data security.

For many of us, moving home is an incredibly stressful, uncomfortable and disorientating process, and it requires us to accept that a certain amount of 'chaos' is all around us, both at home (and consequently also at work). It's a useful reminder that every professional, no matter how successful, is a human being first and foremost. We all deserve some kindness and compassion from our colleagues and ourselves, we deserve to give ourselves a break during such times of transition.

Transitions like a house move are part of working from home, as are other life events such as a relationship breakdown or the arrival of a new baby. For a virtual team these times are all the more personal and present as they usually happen in the (home) workplace. There are few situations more stressful for a home-worker than when family or personal relationships break down. This is a challenge for the individual concerned but

also anyone managing a virtual team. You might observe things you would never see or hear in an office context, individuals might share more details of their personal lives than they otherwise would. Even with a dedicated work space, there are times when there is little escape from disgruntled spouses, unhappy teenagers or elderly relatives. Going out to work provides escape from domestic unhappiness (or indeed domestic abuse) that is not available to home-workers.

This is particularly relevant in times of crisis. The case study in this chapter will focus on this in the context of the COVID-19 lockdown and crisis management, but it is worth reflecting on other types of crisis, more commonly experienced and how they affect working from home. This is an area into which more research is needed as most recent research is focused on homeworking during COVID-19 and not more widely.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM WORKING AS A VIRTUAL TEAM IN TIMES OF CRISIS

The final part of the chapter is dedicated to what we can learn about leading virtual teams from the experiences during the global pandemic in 2020/21. There is much about grace and compassion that we can learn from working in times of crisis that can help virtual teams mature into a way of working that is sustainable, a sustainable future for working from home.

In Chapter 3 the case study focused on a maturing virtual team, and this case study expands this perspective to include the experiences of the same team throughout the pandemic.³⁰

As an established team of home-workers, approaching the fifth year of working from home, the experiences of this team form a contrast to many who pivoted online:

When the crisis hit, our team was already working from home, and in that respect we were safer than many others. Also, our organisation was more robust. We already had established processes for working from home and that was a huge benefit.

30 M. Deepwell and M. Hawksey, "How We Survived a Pandemic: Part 1 – No Kind of Normal," *Maren Deepwell*, May 4, 2020.

However, no one had prepared for what was to come next, and I want to reflect on the practical as well as the leadership challenges of leading a team through such a crisis.

To begin with, the team took practical steps to support staff during the crisis, including:

- Extra paid time off, extending Bank Holidays for example;
- Regular, individual check-ins with HR and support staff;
- Diverting funds usually spend on development like attending events to offer;
- Financial support for coaching, mentoring, and counselling;
- Including wellbeing check-ins in team meetings;
- Encouraging staff to share tips for wellbeing, for example links to online meditation sessions, helpful reading, recipes or entertainment.

The team tried to find balance between work as an escape, a bit of 'normality' for everyone and work being a source of social interaction and support. These two things are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they can sit uneasily alongside each other when for example one person wants to try and have a 'normal day' and someone else feels like sharing their personal stories.

Whilst the pandemic presented extreme challenges, balancing the different needs that work can fulfil is also a more general challenge: in a physical office you might find the more chatty, social colleagues making tea in the kitchen together or having a chat over lunch and others may choose to have lunch at their desk, go for a walk or similar. Individuals give each other cues by how they behave, through body language and facial expressions. Online, we have fewer cues, and we all have different home contexts. One person may be grateful to escape a busy family home and focus quietly on their laptop, whilst another may look forward to the social interaction and connection that work offers.

An effective way to find that balance is to combine practical, structural support such as the examples above, with less formal, social interactions and give individuals a range of choices. Without structural support, individuals who are in need, either practical or emotional, might cause concern for colleagues or use informal channels to try and get the attention or support that they need. Equally, only formal support is insufficient to meet all the needs of a virtual team in the long term.

One of the most recognisable features of working from home during the pandemic was the video call, which ‘can be cognitively demanding keeping an eye on the chat as well as listening to what the presenter is saying and looking at their slides’.³¹ Nicole Lee asks ‘Why is video conferencing so exhausting?’,³² exploring factors like ‘non-verbal overload’ and ‘constant gaze’ as reasons video calls can be more tiring than meeting face-to-face. So if you have a lot of video meetings, particularly back to back, here are approaches to try:

- have a phone call instead (which can feel more personal);
- meet around a collaborative document or have a ‘silent meeting’³³;
- screen share something that everyone can focus on instead of video;
- have an audio call maybe with video briefly at the start to wave hello.

If you cannot avoid having back to back video calls, try these approaches:

- have them standing up, either at a standing desk or with your laptop on a high windowsill or shelf;
- keep each one to half an hour or less;

31 A. Page, “Reflections on the #OER20 Conference,” *Anna Page*, April 17, 2020.

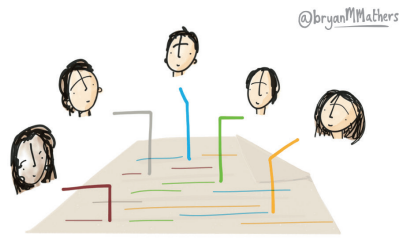
32 N. Lee, “Why Is Video Conferencing so Exhausting?,” *Engadget*, April 27, 2020.

33 D. Gasca, “Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Running Silent Meetings but Were Too Afraid to Ask,” *Medium*, February 19, 2020.

- take regular breaks between meetings, even it is just for 5 min and go and look at something outside or across the room, to give your gaze a chance to adjust;
- check in with other participants at the start, particularly if you know them well. You might collectively agree to change the format.



Meeting around a table



Meeting around a document

Meeting around a document by Visual Thinkery is licenced under CC-BY-ND³⁴

Being one of many faces in a grid of video camera pictures is not a helpful way to visualise what having a productive meeting looks like. You wouldn't just stare at each other across the table if you were to meet in person. Having a visual focus other than those individual feeds, like an agenda document or a shared screen is key to avoiding fatigue.

Video meetings are another example of combining structural and informal elements to find a way that works in the long term. Most scheduling tools for example allow you to set a preferred duration for new meetings, which you can set to 25 min or 55 min for example instead of an hour, leaving yourself at least 5 min between each meeting. Particularly for teams who are distributed across different time zones establishing what a sustainable number of meetings looks like is key. Many organisations agree to keep certain times or days meeting free to allow staff to focus on tasks away from meetings.

You would expect maturing virtual teams to meet less frequently as they establish other ways of working together.

³⁴ B. Mathers, "Meeting around a Document," *Visual Thinkery*, June 9, 2016.

Working from home during the pandemic brought many of the issues highlighted in earlier chapters to the foreground:

Members of the team went from having their own dedicated workspace in a calm home to suddenly discovering this had become a shared workspace with other members of the household. Sharing a workspace, an increase in video calls, homeschooling and childcare meant even established remote workers are also having to rediscover ways to make things work.

Many of the team were not able to easily find a quiet spot for a conversation in their homes during lockdown, which made it more difficult to focus on conversations, particularly in a Line Management context. The team also missed their regular face-to-face team days and the opportunities to meet individuals in person.

Many of the strategies for creating a strong team culture, such as organising social interactions, celebrating birthdays or meeting for a walk and talk via phone came to the rescue in these situations, and emphasised the importance of investing time and energy in these elements of leading a virtual team.

However, even with appropriate policies and practices to support homeworking in place, and years of experience to build on, the team often expressed missing opportunities to connect in person. It became clear that many would not relish a professional life without face-to-face interaction with colleagues.

In the context of (post)-pandemic recovery this may seem like overstating the obvious, but it is an important point to consider when planning for the future. Many organisations have discovered the affordances of working online, closing offices and moving to working as a distributed team and in the short term, the flexibility that can offer is certainly attractive to many. But it remains important to consider the long-term impact of this work culture change. If we shift to working in virtual teams, and if we want this shift to be a positive one, then we need to consider what form of in person interaction we commit to as a team or on an organisational level.

The impact of the global pandemic permeated all aspects of life and this brought with it a shift in perception of the boundaries between work and home:

Eighteen months in, the team felt the continued impact of the pandemic, of self-isolation cases at school and at work, the lack of childcare, transitions and changes at work often whilst being largely stuck in crowded family homes. All that hadn't gotten done the previous year was also catching up with the team and creating a sense of precarity which felt like it was outside the team's control. Many of the team had been fully vaccinated by this time and grateful to be safer from a deadly virus, but continued to have a lot to contend with each in their own way.

Whilst this particular year was a singular context, what does translate into other situations when a team or an organisation is coping with a difficult period and to what extent individual circumstances can blur the boundaries between work and homelife.

During the pandemic it became more common to share more of our personal lives at work, partly because so many people experienced working from home for the first time and partly because global events were affecting all aspects of life. Even for established home-workers, the crisis presented new challenges, and an opportunity to reflect on ways to support virtual teams through difficult times – and also where the boundaries are for that kind of support.

Personally, my view is that the boundaries between work and life are important, even if they blur in certain areas. For virtual teams in particular, this can be difficult, but it is important nonetheless. More organisations, particularly large organisations, are focusing on their employees happiness, for example by appointing a Chief Happiness Officer, who can focus on helping employees overcome challenges at home³⁵ by for example paying for a broken appliance or at work. More responsible employment practice is certainly to be welcomed, but sometimes these

35 The Guardian Pass Notes, "Happiness Officers: Does Every Workplace Need to Hire Someone to Bring the Joy?," *The Guardian*, February 23, 2022.

kinds of initiatives seem to be focused on ways in which companies can make employees more productive, rather than happier and that can quickly become exploitative, instead of balanced.

If there is one thing many of us reflected on during the pandemic, it is how important work is to us and how we can balance making a living with other things that are important to us. In the context of homeworking and leading virtual teams, finding sustainable ways of working and running a successful business includes maintaining and respecting boundaries between work and life and accepting that certain factors that impact on home-workers may be outside of our control. A company paying for a broken appliance might be a life saver but there are likely to be other crises, such as divorce, ill health or increased family care responsibilities that can't be fixed as easily.

If you lead a virtual team, or your organisation employs a large proportion of home-workers, then the earlier discussed organisational structures, including appropriate contracts and employments and terms and conditions are needed in order to provide staff in need with support, financial rewards and other benefits. That may include time off to deal with things at home, or appropriate adjustments to the working pattern and flexibility around meeting deadlines or attending meetings.

Beyond formal support, there are other approaches that can be more flexibly introduced without making structural changes. For instance, you could offer your team a wellbeing day: a formal 'duvet day' when staff don't have to come to work and don't have to use a day of holiday. Staff can take it whenever they need to and can focus on rest, relaxation, or whatever they feel might improve their wellbeing.

Similar to appointing a Chief Happiness Officer, many large organisations now offer as much paid leave as desired instead of a set number of days. Unlimited paid leave is a popular policy particularly³⁶ in the tech and start-up sectors and although it sounds attractive to prospective employees, in practice there are challenges implementing it. One study³⁷

36 A. Wilson, "11 Companies that Have Adopted Unlimited Holidays (and What They Found)," *Workstars.com*, April 29, 2020.

37 B. Gateley, "We Tried Unlimited Holiday for Three Years. Here's Everything that Went Wrong," *CharlieHR.com*, 2018.

suggests that it actually led to employees taking less time off, and another explained how the policy led a company to introduce a minimum holiday policy³⁸ instead. It's a useful example of a policy that is seemingly designed to respect people's work life balance but can have the exact opposite effect.

There is no substitute for fair reward and pay for employees, or for terms and conditions that are appropriate for a workforce who works from home. No action that we take to address an individual's wants is meaningful if we ignore their needs. In the context of working for charitable or not-for-profit organisations, from which many of the case studies in this book are drawn, this is maybe more easily recognised than in the private sector. Many of the strategies and examples discussed in this and the previous chapters explore what is possible when we move beyond meeting the essential needs of a workforce, by which I mean what we can achieve once we reward and pay people fairly to begin with and that the terms and conditions of employment are appropriate to support homeworking.

In this context of looking beyond fundamental needs, the process of maturing as a virtual team becomes one of continuous dialogue between different elements: the individual and the team, the employee and the employer, the home and the home office, the formal and the informal. Being part of this dialogue enables us to gain a sense of a new way of working, a new kind of professionalism and this is what we will explore in the concluding chapter of this book.

38 Buffer, "Unlimited Vacation Didn't Work For Us. Here's What We Have Been Doing Instead," *Buffer.com*, October 4, 2017.

CONCLUSION

For some, working from home and being part of a virtual team is already a reality. For others, the thought of leaving the physical workplace behind is a nightmarish vision of a future in which the boundaries between work and life erode. We don't know yet what the long term impact of the global pandemic will be on the way we work. We do know that at least in the UK working from home during lockdown has opened up the possibility of a more flexible way of working for more people than before. And, I would argue, we are seeing more organisations choosing to close their physical offices and establishing virtual teams. So what does the future of virtual teams hold, in particular for small and medium sized organisations who work in education and the third sector (or non-profit sector)?

In order to explore that question, we have to examine three dichotomies that are at the heart of working as a virtual team: balancing employee wants and employee needs; the boundaries between homelife and work; and ultimately where the responsibility lies between employee and employer.

Employee wants vs. employee needs

Much of what we see and hear about virtual teams online is about the wants of a virtual workforce: photos of goodie bags or snack boxes that get shipped to everyone, perks such as going to a virtual escape room or taking part in online meditation sessions or screenshots of meet ups where every little square on the screen contains someone waving towards the camera with a smile on their face. In a time when 'the great resignation' drives employee retention to the top of many HR department

agendas there is a strong emphasis on meeting the ‘wants’ or desires of employees: ‘rewards, status, competition’.¹

Gamifying employee engagement in order to meet those needs is one way that employers are trying to meet those desires and retain employees. Activities to engage a virtual workforce might include, for example, hosting game shows or trivia quizzes and online game arcades:

If workers say they want to be engaged, then engage them. If they want to feel part of a culture, then invest in your culture. If they want training so they can do their job better, then create training that works. Gamification is the surest way to deliver the resources, tools, training and fun that will continue to bring out the best in these heroes.²

Meeting employee wants in this way can really help improve working culture in virtual teams, but only if employee needs are also met through appropriate policies, structures and reward scales. As discussed in earlier chapters, employers need to adjust their policies to fit a virtual workforce (or accommodate hybrid working) and that may mean that it is more important to contribute financially to the costs employees incur when working from home instead of devoting resources to gamifying employee retention.

It is interesting to note that alongside the gamification of the virtual workplace there are also continued ‘playful’ approaches to hybrid workspaces, including more recreational elements in flexible spaces for collaboration, particularly in the tech industry at large employers like Google³ and Facebook. There is a lot of ‘window dressing’ when it comes to both hybrid and online working, that looks good on social media, but doesn’t actually improve working conditions in ways that

1 S. Bear, “A Little Gamification Can Go a Long Way in Retaining Employees,” *Forbes*, August 9, 2021.

2 S. Bear, “A Little Gamification Can Go a Long Way in Retaining Employees,” *Forbes*, August 9, 2021.

3 J. Partridge, “Google in \$1bn Deal to Buy Central Saint Giles Offices in London,” *The Guardian*, January 14, 2022.

matter. Limitless holiday entitlements are a good example of a policy that seems really attractive on the surface, particularly to prospective employees, but may actually lead to a decrease in the number of days people take off if there are no structures in place to ensure taking holidays is normalised and the culture of the workplace supports this. Similarly, offering perks like free gym memberships isn't meaningful if it is a culture of working all hours and there is no time to actually go and exercise away from your desk. There has similarly been a focus on wellbeing, as we addressed earlier, but access to wellbeing resources is no substitute for addressing systemic issues that cause anxiety or stress in the workplace. Employees may want perks and fun activities but they need fair pay, appropriate support structures and policies that protect their rights as home-workers, including their right to privacy and their right to disconnect.

All kinds of inequalities become invisible when there is no shared space, no visible measure of how much workspace everyone has, or how much uninterrupted time they may have. The structures of the virtual workplace have to address the needs of home-based workforce, so the first step has to be to acknowledge what we don't know particularly when it comes to equality, diversity, and inclusion.

In *Invisible Women* (2019)⁴ Caroline Criado Perez eloquently reminds us what happens when we forget to account for what is not visible, both when life proceeds like normal, and also when things go wrong, like during a global pandemic.⁵ Gender data gaps discussed in her book provide examples of where dialogue is lacking from workplace practices for example in biases in recruitment software. It should be a prompt for us to reflect on how important transparency and openness are for promoting equality. There are many examples of technologies we use for virtual teams that are proprietary and don't permit us to investigate potential biases, much less address them. It's important to consider that women, and by extension anyone who doesn't fit the 'template' is made to adjust in order to fit – even if changing the underlying policies/design/structures would have bigger benefits for all.

4 C. Criado Perez, *Invisible Women* (Vintage, 2019).

5 J. Harris, "Working from Home Has Entrenched Inequality – How Can We Use It to Improve Lives Instead?" *The Guardian*, January 9, 2022.

Research on virtual working encounters similar problems and highlights similar gaps in the data that is available as the gender data gaps exposed in *Invisible Women*. The report on *Mental Health and Race at Work*⁶ for example includes research findings exploring the impact of the pandemic on employee mental health, but does not explicitly refer to factors such as home-life, workspace at home or care responsibilities which seems to be an important data gap.

Whilst work is underway to try and help fill some of these gaps, what we know about the long term impact of more flexible, hybrid and homeworking long-term and at scale is still very limited and often focused on post-pandemic practices.

In a US context, a *Harvard Business Review* article predicts that ‘fairness and equity will be the defining issues for organisations’ in 2022⁷:

Debates that have fairness at the core, whether it’s around race, climate change, or Covid vaccine distribution, have become flashpoints in society. And questions of fairness and equity are emerging in new ways:

- Who has access to flexible work? We’ve seen organizations where some managers allow their employees flexibility while other managers don’t.
- What happens when employees move to locations with a lower cost of living? Should employers lower their compensation even though the impact of their work hasn’t changed?
- Companies are offering new, targeted investments for specific segments of their workforce (e.g., additional financial resources to support employees with children). While these investments are critical to help those employees do their job, employees without children have asked ‘Why are employees who are parents getting something and I’m not?’

6 City Mental Health Alliance, *Mental Health and Race at Work* (City Mental Health Alliance, 2021).

7 B. Kropp and E. McRae, “11 Trends that Will Shape Work in 2022 and Beyond,” *Harvard Business Review*, January 13, 2022.

In 2022, executives will need to address how they are managing fairness and equity across the increasingly varied employee experience.

Boundaries between homelife and work

The second of the dichotomies, or tensions, in this chapter is the boundary between homelife and work. Throughout this book we have explored the implications of working from home in the long term. There is a growing number of laws in European countries including France, Spain, and Portugal that seek to establish those boundaries formally starting with the right to disconnect, but we haven't yet seen similar frameworks established in the UK or the US. In the absence of such laws, organisations rely on their own contracts of employment and also their organisational culture to establish a baseline of acceptable practice. This is a contentious area, as much of the frameworks we use are based on working in the physical workplace and don't adequately reflect the realities of being part of a virtual team in an age of constant connectedness. We need to urgently reform our legal and human resources frameworks in order to protect the rights of employees in the virtual workplace and set out the expectations for employers.

'There was a real sense, pre-pandemic, that digital technology was blurring the lines between work and home, and that's just been turbo-charged', Andrew Pakes, research director of the Prospect union argues.⁸ 'People aren't able to relax or switch off, and that's adding to the psychological pressure'. In the UK, Prospect is pushing for what might seem, to some, like a radical solution to inbox management: government intervention.

Prospect proposed that 'the right to disconnect' be recognised in employment law reform in April 2021, preventing bosses from routinely contacting employees outside work hours or when they are on leave. Labour has also lent its support as part of a package of measures to protect flexible working.⁹

8 A. Pakes, *The Right to Disconnect* (Institute for the Future of Work, 16 April 2021).

9 A. Allegretti, "Workers Must Be Given Right to do Jobs from Home, Says Labour," *The Guardian*, June 18, 2021.

Under the union's proposal, companies with 50 or more employees would be required to negotiate with staff and unions annually on a plan for managing after-hours contact, though implementation would be left up to each employer. However despite growing support, the UK¹⁰ had not introduced this proposal at time of writing.

The pandemic has only accelerated this interest in a right to disconnect. In February 2021, the European parliament called for it to be recognised as fundamental across the EU, pointing to the toll of 'an always-on culture' on work-life balance.

The challenge is how to go about dismantling this culture. Every email received after hours presents workers with a dilemma: answer it, and uphold an unsustainable system – or refuse to reply on principle, and risk potential repercussions.¹¹ Which are real: Office for National Statistics data from before the pandemic shows that people who worked from home were significantly less likely to receive promotions, training or bonuses compared with those who worked in the office.¹² Amid job insecurity in the COVID-19 era, workers may feel even more unable to push back on unreasonable demands.¹³

In addition to these issues, bringing your virtual work into your home has other consequences. Technology, whether we use it to learn or for work, is not neutral and is inherently political and biased. The tools and platforms we use to collaborate and connect gather data about us and the way we work as we work. 'People analytics' for example is becoming big business and we don't have an effective way to legislate for those kinds of practices or even educate our workforces about their digital footprint within their virtual workplace. Google's re:work platform explains the potential of people analytics thus:

10 S. Skelton, "Majority of UK Adults Support Legal Right to Disconnect," *ComputerWeekly.com*, March 11, 2022.

11 E. Hunt, "It Just Doesn't Stop! Do We Need a New Law to Ban Out-of-Hours Emails?," *The Guardian*, June 29, 2021.

12 ONS, *Homeworking Hours, Rewards and Opportunities in the UK: 2011 to 2020* (Census 2021, ONS, 19 April 2021).

13 E. Hafermalz, "Out of the Panopticon and into Exile: Visibility and Control in Distributed New Culture Organizations," *Organization Studies*, April 14, 2020.

When faced with a challenging people issue (e.g., are we losing our organization's highest performers and why?) or an important people decision (e.g., who should lead this new initiative?), the conventional approach is to engage in endless debate based on emotions, instincts and anecdotes. We believe instead that an analytical approach incorporating facts and science can lead to more effective and fair solutions and decisions.¹⁴

This sounds very similar to the kinds of approaches used in education for learner analytics and also brings with it similar kinds of problems around trust and the ethical dimension: Are employees aware of what data is being collected and what it is being used for? Do employees have access to the data? Can employees opt out? If so, what are the implications? Are staff appropriately trained to use the data and spot potential bias?

Replacing 'the office' with working from home brings the domestic reality of life much closer to the surface and for managers that can present a new challenge that I don't think we should leave up to algorithms or people analytics: we need to develop a new kind of judgement for what to see and what not to. When home and work life boundaries blur, as they inevitably do to a greater extent with homeworking, it can feel artificial or inappropriate to revert to formal management approaches and yet there are certainly situations in which you need those formal structures to be an effective manager.

Talking to an employee about a performance review in the middle of a heat wave with a stropky teenager having a tantrum in the next room and a dog barking in the background is a completely different experience to sitting in a quiet meeting room on office furniture. Similarly, it's much harder to deal with an escalating argument between colleagues when you don't have the cues of body language or facial expressions, and when all you do have is an angry voice at the end of a phone.

This becomes even harder when you manage change within a team, or when a bigger crisis arises. You might be fantastic at reading

14 Google, "People Analytics," *re:Work*.

people when you see them in person, but what about a new recruit whom you haven't met in person and who has suddenly gone AWOL? There could be a domestic emergency, or a personal one, they could have had an accident or simply decided to quit without notice. It is hard to imagine that we would want to employ approaches that collect data so intimate as to be able to account for the complex reality of being a virtual team.

There are a lot of issues around people analytics that are beyond what we can discuss here. What is important to reflect on is that as well as the visible part of those practices (for example requiring employees to keep video cameras on, monitoring online activities or communications and collecting data from mobile devices), there are other kinds of information that we share as home-workers, about our personal circumstances, roommates or families and so forth that have the potential to make people analytics more insidious and invasive. As a human being, you learn a lot about the people you work with, and as a home-worker you learn a lot more about someone else's life and home. From example in the educational technology space we have seen that over time, the data collected from learners, their assignments and their engagement, becomes more valuable, and can be commercialised in new (and on the part of the educator maybe) unforeseen ways. The platforms and tools organisations use to support their virtual teams generate a growing dataset about how we work, just as online learning has generated datasets about how we learn. Data from learners has become a commodity and data collected from employees has, too.

This is why we need not only laws that give people the right to disconnect, but also why we need to think about privacy and data in the context of home(life) and work boundaries.

Sharing responsibility for sustainable virtual teams

The last of the dichotomies I wanted to explore in this chapter relate to the different responsibilities employees, employers, managers and organisations must take in building a functioning virtual team. We have seen throughout this book examples where the physical structure and co-location of the office helps people undertake certain tasks, but

in a virtual setting these cues are lacking and so some of that responsibility now falls to employers and employees to ensure it still takes place.

Building on their organisation's larger legal and employment framework, leaders of virtual teams can do much to establish and model an approach that balances the different needs of the organisation and the team, to build a positive team spirit, set an example, and help a team mature. This is the aspect of leading a virtual team that can offer room for creativity and fun, scope for maximising the benefits of not being limited by a physical office space.

Many of the examples discussed in this book highlight the continuous process of negotiation about who has responsibility for what when it comes to working as a virtual team. In the context of the post-pandemic return to the office and increase in flexible and hybrid working, we have started to explore the importance of trust and frameworks for accountability for home-workers. We have explored how during recruitment and selection, employers have a responsibility to set out their expectations, and be as transparent as possible to prospective employees about what is required of them and include that in the interview process. Applicants meanwhile need to reflect on whether they are able to provide adequate workspace for themselves as a home-worker and consider what challenges other commitments might present. When discussing day-to-day working as a virtual team, we explore how organisations can use checklists for example to provide support for accountability and to support collaboration, whilst individuals have to engage and contribute in return. In the context of wellbeing and work/life balance, we discussed finding balance between being present and disconnecting, and adjusting communication accordingly whilst making it clear to individuals what is required and what is optional and why. From joining a virtual team, to moving home or working through a crisis, the case studies highlight that virtual teams work best for everyone when there is an appropriate sharing of responsibilities between the organisation, the manager, the team, and the individual. In order to sustain that kind of equilibrium, all parties have to develop a new sense of professionalism. A new kind of professionalism for the virtual workplace.

A new kind of professionalism

Large scale virtual working, to whatever degree, will challenge many of our implicit and explicit views about what it means to be an employer or employee, in essence what being a professional means in a virtual setting. This book is intended to provide a starting point from which to consider what it means to be professional and how we can (re)interpret this in the context of leading a virtual team. Developing a new sense of professionalism needs to happen on the same three levels that we have explored throughout the chapters: the individual, the team, and the organisation.

Individuals need to develop their professionalism in the context of a homeworking environment and consider what adjustments they need to make in order to sustain their work life from home. This may change throughout different life stages and in response to major life events. On an individual basis, this is an ongoing process of reflection and re-negotiation, and we will learn more about this as we begin to see more virtual teams evolve in the long term. Professional practice in virtual teams requires a greater degree of digital fluency as well as motivation to collaborate and communicate online. A further factor to consider is monitoring and managing one's wellbeing as a remote-worker, and mitigate the impact of being more isolated.¹⁵

The value proposition of having a more flexible working arrangement without commuting is attractive to many, at least initially, but being an effective member of a virtual team requires a commitment from each individual not only to the work they do or the organisation they work for, but how they work.

Virtual Teams need to set out their expectations of themselves and each other as part of their professional practice. Initially, when you first adopt hybrid or fully virtual ways of working, a way to work towards a joint understanding of how you want to work is to ask yourselves questions like 'does this process make sense for a virtual team' or 'is the way we do this the best way to do this as a virtual team' and so on. This kind of reflection helps teams to not simply recreate the

15 D. Sawa, "Extreme Loneliness or the Perfect Balance? How to Work from Home and Stay Healthy," *The Guardian*, March 25, 2019.

in-person office processes, when better or more appropriate methods may be available.

Teams with an established culture benefit from leadership that models behaviours that benefit individuals in the long-term. A core part of this should be regular and clear communication, both formal and informal. You might also model how to establish a healthy life/work balance, such as taking breaks, focusing on wellbeing and making use of paid leave. If your team has a blended approach and meets in person, ensure that these opportunities are inclusive and equitable for all staff.

Importantly, organisations need to reassess their approach as an employer of a virtual or hybrid workforce and go beyond the terms and conditions of employment (although these are obviously an important place to start). If you decide to offer hybrid or virtual working as an employer, be clear as to why you are doing so as this move entails fundamental changes to how your organisation works.

Many of the chapters in this book refer to elements of the employment relationship, from recruitment and retention, to defining responsibilities in the virtual workplace, that change when an organisation changes its ways of working. The organisation should focus first on the needs, and then only on the wants of its workforce and address issues around equity and equality as well as environmental impact and sustainability.

Whilst there is an increasing awareness around the environmental impact of the Internet¹⁶ and technology, there is little research into the digital footprint of the virtual workplace.

Over half of data emissions come from streaming online videos, especially high-resolution videos and on-demand streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. Together, internet video and online gaming are projected to account for 87% of consumer internet traffic in 2022.¹⁷

16 Tactical Tech, *Data Detox Kit* (Tactical Tech).

17 G. Kemiya, *Data Centres and Data Transmission Networks* (IEA, 2021).

This prompts us to question how a move to more hybrid and virtual working impacts these projections and what responsibility employers have to ensure their working practices take the environmental cost of working online or from home into account.

There are a number of factors, including possible legislation and, in the UK and Europe at least, union action; desire to increase staff retention and greater competition to attract knowledge workers, that may drive more corporate responsibility and improved conditions for employees, at least in some sectors like education and the third sector (or non-profit sector).

In the earlier case studies we have seen that virtual teams work most effectively if you are able to achieve a sufficient degree of alignment between individual, team, and organisation. If you have appropriate organisational structures within which teams can define how they work aligned to their goals and with individuals who can both contribute and benefit from their work, then virtual team working becomes a creative and collaborative enterprise.

The affordances of technology are great, but especially the virtual workplace should be shaped around the needs of human beings both in policy and practice. As a leader of a virtual workforce, empathy and awareness of the wider context within which your staff operate are your key assets. A recent FT article¹⁸ highlights the potential disconnect between senior management and their workforce when there is a lack of both:

Almost two years on from the first lockdowns, it wouldn't be surprising if the initial dividends of working from home were fading. The world's vast experiment in Zoom working was conducted at a time when most of us were already immersed in a corporate culture. But new hires will struggle to learn the nuances of the job if they can't interact properly with senior people holed up in luxurious home offices. And leaders find it difficult to know what is really going on if they're not having informal encounters with people outside the executive circle.

18 C. Cavendish, "It's Time to Admit that Hybrid Is Not Working," *FT*, January 7, 2022.

You can learn a great deal from bumping into a junior person in a corridor and having a chat.

This is precisely the kind of situation that we arrive at when traditional office cultures and processes are translated online, the kind of ‘office deficit model’ that is to virtual working what the zoom lecture is to virtual learning. It’s the work equivalent of 500 students listening to a lecturer drone on for an hour, with their cameras switched firmly off and no interaction whatsoever.

What I hope this book has shown is that there is another way, a viable alternative to the ‘office deficit model’. We have seen that leading your team beyond the constraints of the traditional workplace can offer a sense of freedom and flexibility that allows you to define and refine new ways of working that benefits the individual, their team, and the organisation.

Just as we ask questions about the efficacy of virtual learning, so are we asking questions about virtual working: ultimately, we want to know whether working online based at home can be as good as working together with others in person.

The answer to this question is the same for virtual working as it is for virtual learning:

Yes.

Yes, if you invest resources, time and effort into creating effective ways for your organisation to operate as a virtual workplace, it can absolutely work. Yes, if you invest in your policies and processes then recruiting and retaining staff who work from home can work just as well. Yes, if you make an effort to meet your employees needs and also consider their wants, then you will have as happy, loyal and productive workforce as any in person team. And yes, if you develop your skills as a manager or leader and adapt to how you lead people in a virtual team, then you can lead people at a distance just as well as in person.

And yes, there will always be some instances in which it won’t be a good fit and won’t work out, just like in any physical workplace.

No workplace should consider its employees simply as data points. Especially for those of us who rarely interact in person, it is important to keep in mind that we are human beings with human bodies and human

senses that shape how we perceive and interact with the world. Work, like education ‘is fundamentally a human enterprise’.¹⁹ The shift to an online, technology based workplace makes the use of data driven methods of management more feasible, but I would contend that it actually makes the need for human centric, sympathetic methods of management more important, not less.

That is why care is an essential element of the kind of professionalism that is needed to lead virtual teams. Caring for each other is an essential part of what being human is all about. The journey we are on from birth to death is not one we can undertake alone. We are social creatures. We live, we love each other. We connect, communicate and care for each other. No one wants to be surrounded only by machines, no one wants to be cared for only by machines. That is true in all areas of our lives, including the workplace. It comes back to my earlier point, that technology is inherently political and that we need to be mindful of how our use of it shapes the value of labour and the value of labourers.

But we don’t often talk about human beings when we talk about the future of work and how it is disappearing,²⁰ how jobs are being either automated or even don’t exist yet with headlines such as:

65% of today’s students will be employed in jobs that don’t exist yet. Nearly half of American jobs could be automated in a decade or two. 70 per cent of today’s occupations will be replaced by automation.²¹

We need to question this narrative that portrays technological progress and an inevitable march towards human obsolescence in the workplace. Watters writes:

19 M. Weller, “25 Years of Ed Tech: Themes & Conclusions,” *The Ed Techie*, September 5, 2018.

20 B. Doxtdator, “A Field Guide to ‘Jobs that Don’t Exist Yet,’” *Long View on Education*, July 8, 2017.

21 A. Watters, “The Best Way to Predict the Future Is to Issue a Press Release,” *Hack Education*, November 2, 2016.

Now, I don't believe that there's anything inevitable about the future. ... I don't believe that robots will take, let alone need take, all our jobs. I don't believe that technologies are changing so quickly that we should hand over our institutions to entrepreneurs, privatise our public sphere for techno-plutocrats.

It is not the technology that determines whether we can create a sustainable future for virtual teams. It is the human element that needs to determine the future of work and the future of virtual working. A sense of hope and care is what we should infuse this future and this new kind of professionalism with.

Each individual should mean more than a data point on someone's people analytics dashboard. We are all more than that and our professional practice is more than can be tracked in time spent, reports written or support tickets answered. Our leadership, our practice becomes fully realised when we adopt a more reflective and more critical perspective that is informed by our stories, our contexts.

Care is key to us collaborating and communicating as virtual teams in a workplace that is more open, inclusive and equitable for all.

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As CEO of the Association for Learning Technology (ALT), she led the charity's highly successful transition to becoming a virtual team in 2018. With a background in Anthropology and Fine Art and over 10 years experience in an executive position, Maren brings creativity and curiosity to her work and continues to publish blog posts and resources for virtual teams.

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What is it like to manage a virtual team and to lead an organisation from home? How can you not only meet budget targets and KPIs but balance business needs with employee happiness and wellbeing?

Leading Virtual Teams explores current practice in succeeding in a virtual workplace and questions what the future may hold.

In 2017 I set out to find creative and fun ways to work and build meaningful relationships in a virtual team. To find ethical ways to work online, respecting employee privacy and building trust between the organisation and its staff.

This book provides practical advice and case studies as a source of inspiration and a prompt for reflection for virtual teams and their leaders. From recruitment and induction to establishing effective and sustainable ways of working in the virtual workplace for small and medium sized organisations, Through case studies and practical advice this book explores the highs and lows of what it means to work from home long-term and sets out a new kind of professionalism for virtual teams.

