viewpoint

Coping with COVID-19...
How can multinationals help keep employees happy and healthy working at home?

For most countries, we are at least a month into the coronavirus (COVID-19) lockdown – even longer for those in the Far-East – and employers and employees alike are having to adapt to the new normal, creating a routine based fully around home working. While there has been much written about how to keep productive and healthy during these unusual times, it never hurts to keep thinking about and discussing employee wellbeing. After all, we are all in the same situation and need to find a new routine that is healthy for our physical and mental health.

There's no doubt that battling coronavirus is one of the greatest challenges the world has ever faced. Entire countries are coping with extreme pressure put on their healthcare services, governments are changing policy daily and everyone in society is having to alter the way they live. And, of course businesses must be agile and adopt new ways of operating in order to protect the health of their workforce. Working from home, once the exception, has now become the rule.

Pre-coronavirus, many employees would have been extremely positive about working from home, imagining not only increased productivity but also having more time for themselves and avoiding the daily commute.

It is, however, a very different feeling when it is enforced and full time and, in many cases, done without much notice. With many countries now on lock down, suddenly home is not a longed-for sanctuary, but a place where many feel isolated and trapped.

While it has never been more important to follow government and healthcare advice and stay at home, it can be difficult, especially when juggling work with looking after children and making sure elderly and vulnerable relatives are ok, while trying to stay fit physically and mentally.

Without doubt, the entire world is in unchartered waters, so what can employers do to support their remote workforce and how are employees themselves coping?

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Coping with isolation

While social distancing is, of course, required to contain the spread of the coronavirus, there is a risk that prolonged distancing and isolation can have a negative long-term impact on health. The US Health Resources and Services Administration[1] cautions that loneliness can be as damaging to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, while feelings of isolation and loneliness can increase the likelihood of depression, high blood pressure[2] and death from heart disease[3].

There is also evidence that suggests the more isolated people feel, the less likely they are to help both themselves and others. For example, a study conducted in Germany[4] found that, among a group of 60-year olds and over, increased loneliness was associated with lower rates of flu vaccination. A separate study in Taiwan[5] found a feeling of closeness with neighbours to be associated with the intention to get a vaccine, or to wash hands more frequently.

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And a similar study[6] of vaccination rates in Hong Kong following the swine flu pandemic in 2009 found districts with higher rates of vaccinations also had higher rates of 'social capital', a measure of the extent to which people in a community have social networks and are willing to help each other.

These studies emphasise how important it is not to leave people feeling isolated. Across the world there are videos of people going to great lengths to stay connected, whether that is singing on balconies, setting up remote exercise classes or video calling loved ones.

Encouraging employees to check in (virtually where possible) on elderly relatives and take time to help those in need can help reduce anxiety among those worried about their loved ones.

Employers also have a significant role to play, not only in helping reduce feelings of isolation among their workforce, but also in helping the wider community. Encouraging employees to check in (virtually where possible) on elderly relatives and take time to help those in need can help reduce anxiety among those worried about their loved ones.

For those used to interacting with others daily as part of their working life, working alone can be isolating. Mental health charity MIND[7] suggests that if people are worried about loneliness, they should think about things they can do to connect with others. Employers could allow their staff to use company phones and computers to get in touch with relatives and friends if they don't have their own equipment or are worried about additional phone costs.

Encouraging employees to listen to podcasts or radio stations during the work day can also help recreate the noise people might be used to in an office environment.

Allowing staff time off to volunteer (if time allows) or encouraging evening and weekend volunteering could also help employees isolating create a sense of purpose and lead to "a rush of euphoria and the release of endorphins... the effect is coined a 'helper's high.'"[8] And when you think of the positive impact this would have on society at this time, this could be great for the mental health of employees – in the UK, over 500,000 people signed up to be National Health Service (NHS) volunteers within 24 hours of the scheme launching.[9]

However, it is important to bear in mind local government advice when it comes to volunteer schemes to ensure that your employees can stay safe while helping others.

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Staying physically and mentally healthy

One of the challenges with working from home is when to stop working and start personal time, as the space is metaphorically and physically blurred. A study from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in the UK found that a third of staff believed that working remotely meant they could not switch off in their personal time and nearly a fifth likened the constant connection to the office to being under surveillance.[10]

As Stephanie Russell, Principle Lecturer in corporate education at Anglia Ruskin University, said: "A good manager will set signals for reasonable working hours, including telling an employee when to stop working, if they are getting lots of out of hours work."[11]

For those who don't often, or ever, work from home, doing so can be stressful. According to Cary Cooper, Professor of Organisational Psychology and Heath at Alliance Manchester Business School, anxiety levels will be high for employees not used to working from home and will also be exacerbated by concerns over the virus.[11]

Collaborating with colleagues

Remaining collaborative with colleagues can be tricky when working remotely, but there is an increasing number of tools which allow regular audio and visual contact.

While it may be tempting just to call someone on the phone (and stay in pyjamas) seeing colleagues makes people feel a lot more connected and still a part of the team. Stephanie Russell, Principle Lecturer in corporate education at Anglia Ruskin

University, explains; "the advantage of using video conferencing is that the non-verbal body language communication can be seen, which adds richness to any social interaction."[11]

Glenn Dutcher, assistant professor at Ohio University, who has studied the effects of telecommuting on creativity and productivity, believes people still need to share ideas to remain creative. He suggests that teams set reminders to speak with colleagues, email or video call at certain times of the day, making sure this becomes part of the norm.[12]

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Some tips for staying physically and mentally healthy while working from home

- **Where possible, have a dedicated working space:** this will help to avoid distractions if you have family at home and enable you to close the door when the work is done. Don't set up your workspace in front of the TV but do have some background noise if that helps you feel less lonely.

- **Set the alarm and get dressed:** make a distinction between what you'd wear to work and what you'd wear for an evening in front of the TV. This will help you feel more present in your work.

- **Set boundaries to your working day and structure it:** it is too easy to be 'always on' when there is no physical commute away from the workplace.

- **Hydrate and eat well:** keep yourself fuelled properly. Self-care and keeping the immune system healthy is a priority at any time, but especially now.

- **Connect with your colleagues:** don't wait for a formal meeting to interact and try to use video call rather than email as much as possible. Managers should check in with teams regularly to share information and find out whether they need support and guidance.

- **Treat your partner like your colleague:** if your partner or flatmate is also working from home, treat them like a colleague for the day. Have a coffee together, meet up for lunch but be firm about your boundaries. Noise cancelling headphones may be your best friend.

- **Keep moving:** if you're on a call, stand up and walk around so you're getting the physical breaks your body needs.

- **Get some fresh air**: go out into the garden, open the window and go for a walk if government guidance allows it.

- **Find some virtual exercise:** there are hundreds of online exercise classes both pre-recorded and live. Whatever it is you like doing – you'll find it.

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Does home working reduce productivity and staff turnover?

A two year study by Stanford Professor Nicholas Bloom investigated the impact on productivity of working from home among China's largest travel agency, Ctrip.

Ctrip was chosen as the Shanghai HQ was extremely expensive to run and because employees had long commutes to work as they could not afford to live in the city centre (which also meant employee turnover was very high).

The study divided 500 employees into two groups: a control group who continued working at the company's headquarters in Shanghai and a volunteer work from home group who, among other conditions, had to have worked at the company for at least six months, have a good broadband connection and a private room in their home to work from.

The results of the study showed a productivity boost among the telecommuters equivalent to a full day's work. They were not late to the office, didn't need to leave early and they found it less distracting and easier to concentrate at home. They took shorter breaks, had fewer sick days and took less time off.

The researchers also found that staff turnover decreased by 50% among those working from home.

The company saved almost $2,000 per employee by reducing the amount of office space they needed. Interestingly, however, more than half the volunteer group changed their minds about wanting to work from home 100% of the time as they felt too isolated.

The results of the study showed

Staff turnover decreased by 50%	The company saved almost $2,000 per employee	Productivity boost among the telecommuters	Half the volunteer group felt too isolated

Looking after children while working from home

In the UK alone, there are nearly eight million families[13] with at least one dependent child living in the household. As of Monday 23 March, the vast majority of working parents now have their children at home during the day as educational establishments are closed to all except a few. Estimates in the United States suggest 54 million children[14] have been sent home from school, as 45 states plus Washington DC close schools for the next few weeks. This is extremely challenging for those now having to juggle working from home with being a full-time parent, schoolteacher and play friend.

There is a significant role for employers here. Employers could see this as an opportunity to communicate an updated (even if temporary) flexible working policy for parents, letting them know that they don't have to do the traditional 9-5 hours they are used to but can fit work around looking after their children. This will be especially important for parents of young children who can't be left alone and won't be able to use digital learning tools.

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What does the future hold?

While we can't predict with any certainty when the COVID-19 pandemic will start to tail off and the world will begin returning to normal, it's safe to assume that it will have a lasting impact. There are already signs that the environmental benefit of a world not travelling is substantial. NASA pictures show plunging air pollution over China[15], while Venice is seeing a return of fish to its canals without boat traffic. Given the immediate environmental benefits, could we see global organisations start to review their business travel needs following the pandemic?

This period is also an interesting experience for so many people working from home. While organisations may have been reluctant to let employees work from home in the past due to concerns around productivity levels, this could now change. As Glenn Dutcher from Ohio University says[16] "for the employees who have wanted to prove to their supervisors that they could effectively telecommute, here is the chance to do so." This may also be an opportunity for businesses to reassess their expensive office space and allow for some increased flexibility among their workforce.

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It is safe to say that there has never been a greater number of people working from home at the same time. For so many, it will be a completely new experience, made more challenging by anxiety over the virus and the need to look after children and / or older relatives. Employers themselves also face huge challenges in balancing the need to maintain productivity and morale with protecting the health of the workforce and revenues.

Of course, this unprecedented situation affects us all, but with technology, compassion and flexibility employers can help their employees overcome the challenges we are all facing.

This period, while largely unpredicted and definitely unasked for, could end up being one of the biggest social experiments in our lifetimes, as everyone attempts to adapt to a "new normal". While worrying, it's also an opportunity for both employers and employees to form new, positive habits and lose some of those bad habits we all formed in our pre-COVID-19 lives.

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