

SKILLED LEADERSHIP & REMOTE WORKING IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19



Skilled Leadership and Remote Working in the wake of COVID-19

We are in the midst of the largest and fastest disruption of how people work that most of us have ever seen, and hopefully ever will see. For many this has meant the need to change their physical place of work, their hours, and for some, their role.

The most obvious impact has been the dramatic increase in the number of people working remotely. Households across the country (and world) have morphed into places of work as dining tables turned into workstations, and we mastered Zoom and MS Teams as meetings moved from the boardroom to the lounge room.

What many of our clients are communicating is that they are having difficulty getting some of their staff to physically return to work. While the government's advice remains "if you can work from home then you should work from home" this is a tricky situation for employers, and as more firms look to return to the workplace, this will become a bigger point of discussion.

According to Sydney University, 75% of workers think employers will support future work from home plans, but we will have to wait and see. As we seek to establish new long term ways of working, it seems that, despite what staff may wish, for most, it won't be as flexible as 2020.

This paper looks at how skilled leaders can flourish in a post COVID-19 workplace.



ASSESSING THE ROLE & REMOTE WORKING

Flexibility, by definition, is something that changes over time and has elements of give and take. Flexibility needs to be practical for employer and employee, and should result in a win/win outcome if established and managed correctly.

Workplace flexibility is more than just remote work - flexibility is condensed hours, reduced hours, job share and even job rotation. For this piece we will concentrate on remote working as this is the most relevant area.

Pre coronavirus, the advice was that flexibility should primarily be tied to the job, not the person, though many organisations do not follow this. It is factual that some roles are more suited to remote / flexible than others. As an example you can't pour concrete from home.

Review the Roles: Establish what is possible. Look at the practical nature of each role in the business and assess what is possible in terms of remote working options.

- *For some roles remote work will be impossible*
- *Some roles are not able to be done as effectively remotely*
- *Other roles will be able to be done remotely for parts of a cycle (month, year or quarter) and at times will require on-site presence*
- *A number of roles in most organisations are perfectly suited to remote working on an ongoing basis*

If a manager does not feel comfortable managing people who work from home, that is not a valid reason for a role not being classified as suitable for remote work.

IMPLEMENTING REMOTE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS



TIME TO GET PRACTICAL

Once remote working possibilities have been established for each role, it is time to consider individuals and their needs, wants and rights.

While flexibility should be attached to the role not the person, it is never this black and white. Some individuals are more capable of working remotely than others; this can be dependent on their personal drive, motivation or household situation.

This is where individual discretion needs to be applied and this requires hands-on, capable leadership.

Clarity is important and any flexible arrangements need to be clear in the written terms and conditions. This agreement will have expectations and commitments set out for both employer and employee.

A remote working arrangement needs to be something that is regularly reviewed and refined to ensure it continues to be effective for employer and employee.

Flexibility needs to be just that - flexible - as we do not know what is around the next corner.

PERFORMANCE AND REMOTE WORKING



As work becomes more about what you do and not where you go, the ways we measure our performance will change - being first in last out will not count for anything in 2021.

Performance will be measured more to outputs over inputs, good news for some, less so for others.

People leaders will need to change their styles to accommodate this. The old way of 'leadership by sight', observing effort and seeing people 'clock in and clock out' will no longer be effective. New leadership skills will need to be developed to manage the performance of remote workers.

There is a need for skilled consideration when analysing whether negative performance of an individual relates to remote working or other factors. It is very easy to point to remote working as having an impact on performance but the skilled leader must be careful before making this assumption.

COLLABORATION AND REMOTE WORKING

Effective, efficient and remote?

Collaboration is about teamwork, the old adage of two heads are better than one. As a leader it is more important than ever to encourage your teams to collaborate; it is too easy to become siloed and isolated as a remote worker.

A great team has a collective sense of responsibility and identity, when sitting at home alone this can be easily forgotten. As we lose the natural collaboration that happens in an office environment through casual and formal interactions we need to find an efficient way of compensating for this.

Skilled leaders will develop ways for their teams to collaborate formally, informally and using ways other than endless video conferencing.

Training and development when remote working

Contemporary learning theory tells us that 70% of learning occurs informally on the job. Employees learn the skills for their next role as they observe, copy and learn via osmosis.

There needs to be careful consideration of learning requirements for each role and then an understanding of how this learning can take place if teams are dispersed.

Whilst lots of learning can occur remotely the question will be about efficiency. 'Osmosis learning' doesn't occur remotely and the impact of this lack of education is hard to grasp as much of the learning isn't acknowledged, it tends to happen in our subconscious, and therefore its importance may be underestimated.



MENTAL HEALTH & REMOTE WORKING

In 2021, leaders will need to play a more active role in managing the mental health of their teams, and this is particularly notable for organisations who work remotely.

Remote working has further blurred the line between work and personal lives, and has created new issues as a result. Organisations will need to be mindful of this and establish new ways of supporting employees that have seen significant change to the ecosystem they live and work in.

When we do not physically attend a workplace focus and purpose can be particularly compromised as distractions are many and obvious stakeholders reliant on your work are less visible.

Successful leaders will develop new ways of helping people remain connected, focused and working with a sense of purpose.

- *Check in with colleagues regularly, even if it's just a "hello"*
- *Foster an environment that promotes a team mentality*
- *Find out what motivates individuals and utilise this*
- *Encourage virtual coffees, lunches and other informal socialising*

If in doubt, speak to a mental health organisation about how their professional expertise can support your team and organisation.

APPENDIX:

Time-based flexibility

Flexi time - work a set number of hours per week but have flexibility as to when these are done.

Job share – one or more employees share one role (usually equivalent of one FTE). They will have agreed work times and set days to ensure that the role outcomes are achieved. This type of flexible work arrangement typically suits more junior and administrative roles.

Alternatively, two workers share a single position and decide together when each will work and which tasks each will perform. Two workers have unrelated part-time assignments but share the same budget line.

Compressed working week – the employee works the same total number of hours a week as those that work five days but does so in four or fewer days. Typically, this will mean having one day off and working longer hours on two or more of the days they work.

In some cases, the employee will be paid less, in line with hours worked, and in others, they will remain on full salary.

APPENDIX:

Location-based flexibility

Ongoing location based flexibility - working from alternative formal work sites such as satellite branches or non-formal work environments such as working from home. This will involve working the same amount of total hours as the employee would if they were in the office.

Short term location based flexibility – an employee may have reason to need to work from an alternative site for an extended period of time. Many businesses in Australia have sites in Melbourne and Sydney and will allow employees to work from an alternative site for a longer period of time whilst they move their family.

Seasonal or annual location based flexibility - workers work part-year in one location and part-year in a second location. Most examples of this are related to non-office based roles.

Other ideas for flexibility

Rostered days off - short notice RDOs or duvet days – typically 12 per annum.

Flexible employment contracts – it is an increasing trend for organisations' to have Short and Medium Term Contracts for employees, giving increased flexibility to both parties (and less risk to the employer).

APPENDIX:

Other ideas for flexibility

Flexible Rostering - Split shifts are a common example.

Task-Based Flexibility - This is perhaps the hardest type of flexible arrangement to implement and is an increasingly popular request from the Millennial generation of employees. Task-based flexibility is where employees seek variety in tasks and the chance to pick and choose where they focus their time on any given day.

Unpaid leave - Buying additional holiday and extended maternity and paternity leave are not examples of flexibility.

How does flexibility benefit your organisation?

Our research, discussion groups and the findings of numerous global studies (HP, PWC, USHR, Deloitte, Vodafone) have all reached the same conclusions relating to organisations that offer flexibility.

Tip 1 – Employers don't have to choose between completely denying or accepting a request. Once a request has been made employers and employees can negotiate and discuss terms and come to an agreement to balance both of their needs.

Tip 2 – Always include a regular review period and identify key measurables to ensure the agreement continues to work for both parties.

APPENDIX:

How does flexibility benefit your organisation?

Application - Employees who have worked with the same employer for 12 months are eligible to make a request for flexible working arrangements if they:

- Are the parent, or have responsibility for the care of a child who is of school age or younger
- Are a carer
- Have a disability
- Are 55 or older
- Are experiencing violence from a member of their family
- Provide care or support to a member of their immediate family or household, who requires care or support because they are experiencing violence from their family

Employer Obligation – Employers who receive a request must respond in writing within 21 days advising whether the request has been accepted or refused. If the request is denied, employers must provide reasonable business grounds as to why it has been refused, such as:

- Too costly to implement
- Loss in productivity or will have a significant impact on customer service
- Other employees would be adversely impacted



ABOUT US

The Lawson HR Group is a leading, privately owned group of specialist Executive Search, Professional Recruitment and HR Consulting companies.

We apply innovation, intellect and rigorous methodologies to achieve the desired outcomes for our clients whilst significantly mitigating risk.

The Lawson HR Group strives to reflect values which are represented in our published research papers on diversity, flexibility, risk mitigation and strengths-based leadership.



Areas of Expertise

- Executive Search & Recruitment
- Contractors & Specialist Consultants
- Business Support Recruitment
- HR Consulting

The Lawson HR Group comprises Lawson Delaney, Johnson Recruitment & Brooker Consulting.

Email: support@lawsondelaney.com.au

Tel: 03 9946 7300