



Briefing: COVID-19

Managing a Remote Workforce

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Managing Remotely & Effectively

Living in enforced change.

The COVID-19 crisis is unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Most people will experience an intense desire for more information and reassurance. Many will experience difficulty dealing with both rational thoughts and emotional reactions in response to having to stay at home, away from others.

Our inner voices continuously talk to us, exaggerating dangers, so we are primed and prepared for all eventualities. This survival instinct does not best serve us however if we are 'over-talking' to ourselves regarding the potential personal, social, financial and economic impacts of COVID-19. We tend to exaggerate, fantasise and catastrophise. In doing so, we suffer worry, anxiety, dejection and misery. It is important not to enter this trap. If you do enter, it is essential to get yourself out again as quickly as possible.

“Good breathing habits help calm the mind and make the body stronger. Engage someone to teach good breathing exercises. Similarly, exercise helps. Maybe the regular team talks could include a few minutes of such team exercises.”

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Areas of personal control.

We have more control over our thoughts than we do of our feelings. Feelings are raw energy, whereas ideas are a rational assessment of options, choices, resources and possible actions. Anxiety is always a waste of energy. If you find you are becoming increasingly anxious, try gathering hard evidence to inform your understanding of the situation. Use your brain productively, rather than for wasteful futility.

Change is especially tricky when we seemingly have few choices. Nevertheless, we always have a choice over how we deal with the consequences of change. The first choice is whether you are going to approach matters from the perspective of 'victim' or 'initiator'. If you interpret events as being done to you (which you don't like and you wish would end), then you give away your power to influence your situation. Consequently, feelings of hopelessness, pessimism, lack of will and the absence of personal responsibility drive your behaviour. In turn, you disengage because your energy becomes sapped.

Alternatively, one can adopt an altogether healthier attitude whereby one accepts events are happening which you did not choose but, that you have power over how to react to it. You can select what behaviours you exhibit and can remember there is hope and humour in everything. If you can do this, then your behaviour will be driven by desire, optimism, purpose and personal responsibility. You will have more energy and engage more as a result.

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Navigating new terrain.

As we all struggle to navigate this unfamiliar terrain, it can be helpful to start each day by asking yourself three questions;

- How can I look on this as an opportunity and not a predicament?
- What can I do today to make the opportunity a reality?
- Is my behaviour, minute-to-minute, hour-by-hour, consistent with making the opportunity a reality?

This exercise helps to quieten the part of your brain that prepares you for the worst. It also begins the process of helping your mind switch from dealing with the imaginary to that which is real, including the fact that you are probably not going to die.

While 'lockdown' persists, many of us have a little more time and a lot more control over how we structure our days. Even for those who do not, due to extra responsibilities such as home-schooling, the above exercise can help to slow a panicked mind at the beginning of each day. The exercise can help in the following ways:

- Makes it easier to relax
- Enables more creative thinking
- Provides a fresh perspective
- Prepares the mind to complete tasks with more care, thought and consideration
- Forces conscious consideration of one's behaviour and whether there are improvements to be made
- Forces careful consideration about the quality, depth and effectiveness of your professional relationships
- Provides time to reflect on the pattern of your working life and other parts of your life. It is an opportunity to question whether those patterns best benefit you, your colleagues, and those people close to you.

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“Encourage staff to write down at the end of the day what they want to achieve the following. This should be revisited in the morning and people should spend a few minutes going back over this and breathing properly. The opportunity to think of all the things and people they owe gratitude for. Focus on the positive.”

Gary Brooks (Director), Shorepark Consulting

Managing time when working from home.

Working from home ('WFH') is not for everyone. Most people go to work for three reasons:

- Survival: Earning money to buy shelter, food and other creature comforts.
- Self-Actualisation: Developing professionally and learning.
- Social: Being with people engaged in a common purpose and enjoying talking, problem-solving and socialising with colleagues.

We usually take the third reason for granted. It will become apparent during this period that it is much more important than most of us realised.

“Its not always easy to foster open communication remotely and emails can just feel just too formal and the tone can often be misunderstood. Remote working doesn't enable the quick conversation. A way to overcome this is by creating a dedicated tool for the informal communication, I like using WhatsApp and allows me to add different teams or people into various groups. It allows for fast communication and comes across more like general office banter.”

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Working in solitude takes getting used to; it requires an individual to form a relationship with themselves and to be comfortable in their own company. It may take months, if not years, for an individual to establish working patterns which enable them to perform to their full potential. That said, there is evidence that individuals who have a practical WFH set-up, actually work longer hours and are more productive than those in a traditional office environment. The critical consideration, however, is just how 'effective' the WFH set-up is for the individual concerned. Many organisations will likely discover that, with proper management, WFH works better than they expected. When normality resumes, they may retain more people WFH than before the crisis.

“I have consistently found that nearly all people working remotely actually work incredibly hard so one more challenge is to ensure that they switch off from work too.”

Nigel Fields (Consultant)





Nonetheless, many workers will discover that it is not for them and will wish to return to an office-based environment. It is unhealthy for us to isolate ourselves for long periods. For some, the strain will prove to be almost impossible to bear. Many will experience difficulty simply because things are different and their routines were a comfort. The daily routine provides discipline. When removed, it is essential to replace it with something which will help one retain a sense of purpose.

“People need to feel they are at work and provide the separation: shower and dress as you usually do for work, have a place to “go to” and “come from”, even if it’s the kitchen table or the shed.”

Gary Brooks (Director), Shorepark Consulting

Self-discipline is vital to effective, high-level performance and a life well-lived. It is essential not to compromise self-discipline when your routines are disrupted. One must invent new habits and monitor one's energy, purpose and direction. The danger otherwise is spending your day in pyjamas, on the sofa, watching box sets and snacking. That way lies madness, not career progression.

“It’s a great opportunity to hone/learn skills: Excel, PPT, in-depth knowledge of the ERP.”

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Managing people who work from home.

If you are a manager of people WFH, put yourself in their shoes (or slippers);

- What might make their day(s) better?
- How are they finding WFH?
- What can you do, in a practical sense, which will help them do their job?
- How can you establish what they want, or need, from you?
- How can you use this time to train them and develop them?

“Everyone should understand what they are accountable for, supported by a clear job description and objectives. Perhaps you could break the working day up to provide this structure, for example; clear orders by 10am, collections calls 10am-3pm, credit checks 3pm-5pm. It is also wise to set daily or weekly objectives, and follow up on them in the daily/weekly calls.”

Gary Brooks (Director), Shorepark Consulting

For many, remaining purposeful and productive over the next few weeks or months will depend on meaningful conversation. People need authentic, direct communication. Whether or not you are their manager, you could be one of those people that can fulfil that need.

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“Any lack of trust will completely undermine remote work good intentions so being transparent will help to build trust for all parties. The Manager needs to be very clear on expected working hours, performance, statuses and updates on priority work etc. Setting up regular one-on-one meetings to discuss with a proper set agenda will really help achieve this and can then share notes after to avoid any potential misunderstandings.”

Nigel Fields (Consultant)

To foster that all important good communication, call all of your team members daily. If there are too many to call daily, call them every couple of days. Don't just email them or text them but call them. Start with those you would be least likely to call ordinarily.

- Ask them how they are
- Ask if they have any personal concerns
- Then just listen

“In addition to the new way of working we have focused on the wellbeing of our staff. Many of them may be furloughed but they are still part of the team and will be returning once reopen. Updates are sent to their personal email and regular contact is maintained to ensure they are not in any distress or struggling

with any medical issues, food, etc... We also have a closed user group on Facebook which all staff have access to. By engaging on so many levels the staff are able to still feel part of their work 'family' and know that when the pandemic is over, they will have their jobs, friends and colleagues to come back to."

Katherine Bailey (Group Credit, Risk & Compliance Manager), Valor Hospitality Europe

Follow-up concern for welfare with a professional discussion;

- How are they managing their work?
- Do they need anything to be able to function more effectively?
- What would they like you to do to help them in how they are working?
- Can they approach this as an opportunity and not as a predicament?

"In order to facilitate this new method of working, the core Finance Team have daily calls with the Finance Director, to enable communication to flow directly from the top. We have then instigated further calls relating to the debtors and how to approach and manage them during this period of change."

Katherine Bailey (Group Credit, Risk & Compliance Manager), Valor Hospitality Europe

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Inventing leadership behaviour.

If you manage a WFH team, it is crucial to demonstrate excellent leadership behaviours. The most important behaviour of all is to *take action*. Many people wait for someone else to lead. Quite often it is the act of the *doing* which matters more than the quality of the *what*. You don't have to do much but, anything you do will be noticed, appreciated and will make a difference. If you think that a given situation requires leadership, the odds are that others recognise it too. People want you to succeed and they will be grateful that you seized the initiative. Usually, they will be ready to follow your suggestions and instructions.

“Those still working full time, who are not hotel based, have all been set up with laptops, monitors, printers etc – anything required to facilitate them with their work. We have even sent some staff home with new phones, as they don’t have internet access at home and therefore couldn’t contact to our network. Enabling them to connect to a ‘hotspot’ via a mobile has been a challenge but also very successful – who says you can’t old dogs new tricks!”

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Managing upwards.

Most directors and senior managers haven't experienced WFH on this scale either. They will also have additional pressure from their superiors, from the market and from their stakeholders. When they request something or inform of a deadline, they may not have considered how new circumstances affect your ability to deliver.

“Setting-up regular one-on-one meetings provides the opportunity to give feedback on work performance and challenges. It also provides support and empowers employees where necessary. If these meetings aren’t scheduled regularly or get rescheduled, it can make remote workers feel out of touch with the company.”

Nigel Fields (Consultant)

For your sake and theirs, it is wise never to agree to something which you cannot deliver or which has an unrealistic deadline. A tactful compromise might be to agree to investigate or analyse the matter and provide your findings by X date or time. Alternatively, if it is just impossible, one should think of alternative action which achieves the same aim and offer these solutions.

Equally, managers that refuse to take account of these new circumstances are merely engaging in wishful thinking. To the contrary, good managers will appreciate their team members' honesty in helping them to understand new challenges. In these stressful times, you may encounter emotional communication styles, however. It is advisable to manage any such interaction with rational responses. Take the time to breathe, to think, and to formulate your answers. Assertiveness is an asset at such times and works best by your staying calm, rational and factual. No-one can argue with the facts. If they try, all you can do is to repeat the points, albeit possibly rephrasing them to see if that aids understanding.

“Tracking work and productivity can appear to be harder and you cannot really know if someone is being underutilized or perhaps not pulling their weight. Managers therefore need to establish very clear KPI’s and expectations as well as follow up regularly to help track productivity and discuss any problems or issues.”

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Reimagining your workplace.

Over the coming weeks or months, a new culture will develop, new ways of working will emerge, and there will be shifts in team dynamics (or workplace politics). The present crisis is an opportunity with your colleagues to build relationships and to improve communications & processes.

“Scheduling a phone call or a video meeting can sometimes be challenging, especially with different time zones. It is incredibly important to be thoughtful of this and so I find using tools to help scheduling calls, video conferences etc is essential. I generally use Outlook for this purpose as it also allows the team or customer to accept decline or move much easier.”

Nigel Fields (Consultant)

How can you exercise initiative while managing risk in an unprecedented situation though?

- 👉 Think before you act
- 👉 Imagine all the possibilities
- 👉 Keep perspective
- 👉 Have contingencies
- 👉 Avoid actions with significant consequences that are not remediable
- 👉 Express enthusiasm and capability
- 👉 Under-promise
- 👉 Identify your dependencies on others who impact your ability to deliver
- 👉 Plan
- 👉 Share responsibility

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“Keep the business engaged, on-side and in step with your thinking and changes in policy.”

Gary Brooks (Director), Shorepark Consulting

Keep in mind that there are four areas in which you have to attend to continually;

- 👉 Managing yourself
- 👉 Achieving tasks
- 👉 Relating to others
- 👉 Tuning performance

Most people usually concentrate on achieving tasks. Now however would be an excellent time to concentrate on the other three areas (which help you to achieve tasks, in any event).

“Now is a great time to focus on how we can reinvent the way that we work. What we thought is necessary is no longer, and with the different methods available to communicate, working remotely has never been easier.”

Katherine Bailey (Group Credit, Risk & Compliance Manager), Valor Hospitality Europe

Supplier and client relationships.

It is essential to review your relationships with suppliers and clients regularly. Consider what you need to do and what you realistically *can* do. Aim to strengthen these relationships as much as possible. To a great extent, it is the quality of personal and our professional relationships which will determine how well we emerge from this crisis.

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“We should assume that such crises will recur, for example this one may have several "humps." There is the opportunity to ensure the credit systems and third-party support are in place as daily operational enhancements and as contingency.”

Gary Brooks (Director), Shorepark Consulting

Identifying positive behaviours to this end may be easier to do while everyone is grappling with changing market conditions, laws and social etiquette. Assess why your good relationships are so;

- Investing time in them
- Honesty
- Tackling problems directly rather than seeking to avoid them
- Offering and accepting support
- Laughing together
- Being at ease with each other
- Trust

Take time to identify and acknowledge any changes which have occurred and re-state or redefine your commercial relationship. Identify any further changes which either of you can foresee and the likely impact on each of you. It is vital to remain realistic and rational; do not make promises you may not be able to keep, do not be overly optimistic but, do not be too pessimistic.



Dance of the debtors.

These circumstances give debtors both new genuine reasons and new cynical excuses as to why they cannot pay. Given the highly sensitive situation, we must consider the most appropriate and effective ways to approach people that owe money.

“The credit control / collection teams need to know expectations and that they have the full backing from senior management. There is nothing more dangerous than everyone on the frontline guessing and making unrealistic demands that will simply cause distress, bad-feeling and upset.”

Nigel Fields (Consultant)

When making contact with a debtor, take time to first ask about their situation and then about their professional circumstances. In such a trying time, people will generally reveal their emotions more readily. It doesn't mean you have to help them; just listen. It is crucial the debtor feels your empathy but, not your sympathy. In this time of great difficulty, this may be the best way you have to build rapport and prepare the relationship for a future positive outcome.

An effective way to achieve the above is to ask 'door-opening' questions:

- 'Go on.'
- 'What happened then?'
- 'What will you do next?'
- 'What other options do you see?'
- 'Can you say a bit more about that?'

Subsequently, you can extract useful information regarding their business and how the current circumstances may impact it. Check whether there is any possibility of smaller payments now or at a specified date(s). If nothing else, determine if there is anything you can do to help them access official support for those affected by the COVID-19 crisis. In any event, be sure to agree on further regular phone calls or emails, so they understand you are managing this in a structured way.

“Right now, focus should be on re-evaluating the credit ratings of debtors, to identify which ones do, and do not, probably have the reserves to survive this shock and the coming recession. Re-rate them. Decide which customers are probably good for payment plans and where you might need to take quick and assertive action.”

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Conclusion.

Current circumstances are far removed from our familiar world and are likely to continue changing at pace. Even when the pandemic ends, its economic consequences will remain with us. Normality will return at some point. However, the realisation that our stability can so quickly crumble will no doubt also have long-lasting effects.

How organisations behave during this time will affect their viability and their reputations enormously. How you manage your team will have similar consequences – on your business performance during this crisis, how quickly you can recover later, and the strength of your team when they return to the office.

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Thank you.

We would like to again thank all of our clients, partners and employees around the world for working with us. We are thinking of you and your loved ones at this time and we wish you all the very best of health. Do not hesitate to contact us if we can help you in any way at all. This is more than just business.

If you have any questions, would like further advice, or more information about how we are handling this crisis to ensure continuity of service, please contact us:

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Sincerely,

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Lisa Baker-Reynolds, Director