



# Let's get on with it

From guinea pig to trailblazer: what I learnt in my home study

By James Garriock, Executive Director at Insync

Insync is full of talented and self motivated people. They're on site helping clients a lot of the time, so working from home (WFH) is just a natural extension of what we were already set up to do.

The current reality has forced the majority of Australian organisations to implement working from home arrangements (wherever possible), but what does that mean for employee engagement and productivity?

Three weeks ago I sent myself home to find out what self isolation is like for real people with real jobs. Just as I was about to go back to the office we sent everyone home, so I've got a head start on most other house bound Australian workers.

There's no doubt that one person's nirvana is another one's purgatory, so here's what I've learnt, and some research to back it up.

## ✘ Don't

1. Spend your whole day obsessing about C-19. Let's face it, we have evolved as a species to focus on threats – the ones who ignored threats got taken out of the gene pool. That's why you are tempted to keep the news feed and the social media feed on all day. Don't. Just don't. Your evolutionary instincts are working against you here and no good will come of it. You need to get your work done more than ever before; with purpose and with verve and positivity.
2. Comment on what you can see over other people's shoulders. They invited you to a work meeting, not into their house.
3. Let work take over your life. Now that work and home are not physically separated don't let work get in the way of the other things that keep you healthy, namely: sleep, exercise, good eating and social contact. 22% of people who work remotely have trouble "unplugging". Keep in mind that most people have never spent a fortnight working from home in their entire life. We're all learning together.
4. Let your relationships with your work colleagues become all about work. The reason why teams work well under pressure is that members have built up trust and respect for one another. If you don't have casual interactions with your workmates then resilience and trust can be eroded.
5. Micro-manage your team. Remote workers are more likely to be micromanaged, which means managers are focusing on inputs rather than outputs. Rise above, have faith in your team and they'll deliver the outputs and outcomes you need. More than three quarters of people actually say they are more productive when working remotely, so let them get on with it.

## ✔ Do

1. Bring a businesslike attitude to working from home. Get to work on time, wear reasonably businesslike clothes and speak in a businesslike manner.
2. Check in on your colleagues. In a given day you probably spend 15 minutes engaged in what is sometimes known as "informal neighbouring". But more than half of people who work from home report that their colleagues treat them differently. Their biggest concern is that things are being said about them behind their backs. 42% report that they don't get enough support. The deadly combination is for people who are prone to anxiety, live alone, are introverted and perfectionists. If you're one of them, know thyself and force yourself to get in human touch with a colleague every few hours. If you have them in your team then reach out to them regularly.
3. Turn your web cam on, don't just make phone calls. Face to face contact matters, a video call is almost always better than an audio call.
4. Think a little bit about your background. I once held a webinar with 17 different organisations and someone not only left their webcam on, but folded their underwear while watching. I don't think anyone saw my presentation until she'd finished.
5. Move your pets. My colleague has the world's loudest cockatiel – only directors of horror films have access to louder shrieks than this tortured animal puts out every six seconds. High pitched sounds carry more through computer audio than they do when you're in the room with them.
6. Turn off your on-screen notifications. At some point you're going to be sharing your screen and your clients don't need the news that your partner has secured Australia's last toilet roll.

### **The last "DO" on this list is perhaps the most important of all. DO press on.**

Make business decisions, lead with confidence, inspire others, avoid paralysis, keep spending. If we all keep going then the economy will keep going too. Delay is death. If everybody delays their takeaway coffee for two months then our cafes will be wiped from the map.

If there is money to be spent and business decisions to be made, be part of the solution by making them and moving on. Our society and our economy need confidence like never before and that's something we can all be part of.



# 7 facts about WFH

and what you can do to  
maintain engagement  
and productivity



## Fact One

### There's a tendency for remote workers to feel shunned and left out

Joseph Grenny and David Maxfield<sup>1</sup> carried out a study on remote working. 52% of the 1,153 respondents said that they work from home at least some of the time. Many of these participants also said that they feel their colleagues tend to not treat them equally. The study also found that there is a higher chance for remote workers to feel left out. They are also more likely to believe that they are being mistreated by colleagues. They worry specifically about co-workers saying bad things behind their backs, making changes to projects or plans without informing or consulting them, lobbying against them and not fighting for their priorities.

Remote workers report that workplace politics are more pervasive and difficult, and that conflicts are harder to resolve. When faced with workplace challenges, 84% of remote workers said the concern dragged on for a few days or more, and 47% said it went on for weeks or more.

## Our recommendations

- Managers to check-in regularly and frequently with remote employees. Checking in consistently is key.
- Reach out to individual team members regularly to solicit opinions on decisions.
- The study mentioned above showed that a quarter of respondents felt managers who FaceTime were more successful. Hence video conferencing is strongly recommended.
- Communication goes both ways; managers need to be good listeners.
- Accessibility and availability are key for managers to maintain good morale and productivity with a remote workforce.
- Prioritise relationships – encourage teams to form personal bonds, use check in times to ask about aspects other than work, e.g. families and hobbies.
- Managers to be comfortable using technology – use more than the phone and email. Employ conferencing software and services such as Zoom, Skype, Teams, Slack etc.



## Fact Two

### Managers tend to micromanage remote workers

In their research publication on organisational culture and telecommuters' quality of work life and professional isolation, Susan J. Harrington and Julie Santiago have quoted Wiesenfeld, Raghuram & Garud<sup>2</sup>; The manager's sense of loss of control can result in excessive efforts to contact the employee, usually via phone or in person, or monitor the worker's efforts rather than outcomes (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram & Garud, 1999).

## Our recommendations

- First things first – don't worry about employees not working. A vast number of studies show that people tend to put in more hours when they work from home. Eg. Stanford economist Nicholas Bloom found in a study comparing traditional and remote employees that, overall, remote workers did 13% more work.
- It is not realistic to expect remote employees to work set conventional hours, e.g. from 8am to 5pm. Flexible working hours is a major advantage for remote workers so it is natural for them to work non-conventional hours. Having said that it is reasonable to ask remote workers to be accessible for a few hours during standard office hours to overlap with other employees. The output and the number of hours put in (through timesheets) will help to measure their effectiveness and productivity.
- Providing more autonomy is also key. This speeds up the process as team members do not need to ask their manager for sign offs on a constant basis (which could possibly take more time within a remote team). This also helps productivity as remote workers can keep working at non-conventional hours by exercising their own judgement.



## Fact Three

**A big plus for remote workers is that they can concentrate better at home due to fewer distractions, however communication technology can be distracting and disruptive**

76% of remote workers believe that they are more productive because there are no interruptions from colleagues. 69% said fewer meetings made for better productivity.<sup>3</sup>

75% of people who work remotely do so because there are fewer distractions.<sup>4</sup>

Remote work statistics from 2018 show that the majority of people feel there are fewer distractions when working out of the office. Colleagues are obviously a big part of these distractions; 74% of those who responded said they work remotely to avoid colleague interruptions.

The Wundamail State of Remote Work 2019<sup>5</sup> study showed that 15% of respondents found communication technology distracting and 14% felt it was stressful.

## Our recommendations

- Make expectations explicitly clear.
- Plan out tasks and priorities for the team as much in advance as possible.
- Educate remote workers on how to turn on notification preferences.
- Keep communication structured (to a certain degree). Regular 'catch ups' at set times is recommended.



## Fact Four

**Remote workers find it difficult to 'unplug' after work**

22% of remote workers say that they have trouble unplugging after work.<sup>4</sup>

The flexible nature of remote work sometimes makes it difficult for employees to turn off and use their free time. Also, they may often feel a sense of gratitude or indebtedness to their employers in return for being able to work flexibly and remotely.

As a result, burn out and lack of or reduced productivity is a very real risk that employers should consider and try to mitigate.

## Our recommendations

- Use timesheets so that managers can monitor the number of hours employees are putting in.
- Some companies have their employees publish their work hours on collaboration platforms or intranets, and on their work calendars.
- Managers should also keep an eye on correspondence time stamps.
- Ask managers to lead by example with striking a balance between work and personal life.
- Educate employees about the signs and consequences of burn out.
- Hold regular team catch ups just to check in how everyone is doing, which could help employees who are feeling lonely (which exacerbates burn out).
- Leaders to go beyond project updates and work-related conversations. Leaders need to know what is going on with their people beyond just their work.



## Fact Five

### Remote workers don't believe that their manager understands their role in a day-to-day capacity

The Wundamail State of Remote Work 2019<sup>5</sup> reported that 55% of remote workers didn't believe their manager understands their day-to-day role. This finding highlights the effect that a consistent lack of communication and guidance can have on a remote workforce.

Karlyn Borysenko has also written an interesting perspective on the role of the manager, which reveals that 65% of people say they want more feedback from their boss. Karlyn goes on to explain that managers need to provide the structure and guidance that best allows their team to perform on an ongoing basis (excerpt below):<sup>6</sup>

'We've been trained to do this from the time we're small children – we look to our parents, our teachers, our extended family, and our friends to know what to do and what not to do. When you enter the workforce, you can't turn off 20+ years of programming – people want ongoing feedback.

"Someone has to be in charge of providing that guidance and saying it's everyone's responsibility isn't good enough. When something is everyone's responsibility, it's really no one's responsibility. So, it rests on managers to do it."

## Our recommendations

- Managers to check in regularly and frequently with remote employees. Managers to ask employees about their day, their priorities and work plans. Listening is also a skill that needs to be employed.
- Managers to be accessible and readily available as much as possible.
- Think and discuss with employees about how their day-to-day role aligns with the bigger picture and goals of the organisation.



## Fact Six

### Few employees have received workplace flexibility training

Worldatwork carried out a survey on workplace flexibility and found that 88% of respondents said they have not received training on how to be successful as an employee with a flexible work arrangement.<sup>7</sup>

The study also found that on average, organisations only had informal or inconsistent flexible work arrangements that were not widely applied or communicated.

## Our recommendations

- Create and communicate with all employees a guide to working from home that covers topics such as ergonomics, tips on productivity, health, wellbeing and safety etc.
- Ensure employees have the required knowledge and training on critical platforms and software such as Zoom, Skype, Teams and Slack.



## Fact Seven

### Remote workers feel they're ignored and lack support from their manager

The Wundamail State of Remote Work study found that 42% of remote workers feel they lack daily support from their managers.<sup>5</sup> Another study published by Gallup found that 40% of employees who reported that they were ignored also reported that they were actively disengaged with their work.<sup>8</sup>

Of those who reported that their supervisor focused solely on their weaknesses, 22% reported active disengagement. Having that many negative, hostile, or miserable employees severely limits what a manager – or an organisation – can achieve.

### Our recommendations

- Build an online community through virtual team chats and video conferences such as Zoom. Encourage people to share ideas and offer feedback to each other through social media groups. Not only does this help them feel part of a team through active contribution, but when employees can see that managers value them individually, they're motivated to continue in that role.<sup>9</sup>
- Ensure employees' efforts are recognised and valued, but also be specific about your feedback. Employee recognition goes without saying and should be applied in any organisation, but is particularly important for those working at home so they feel valued and visible.
- Use “extreme ownership” to engage and motivate your team members. This can be done by encouraging all employees to own at least one area of the business. This ensures they will try their best to succeed, even if it requires going the extra mile.
- Don't forget to have the “water cooler conversations” even though you aren't physically together.<sup>10</sup> Reach out to individual team members for their opinions or to simply chat about non-work related topics. One way that managers can help facilitate this is to set collaborative tasks and projects to encourage teams to stay connected. It's in our nature to be social, so don't forget the small things.

**Implementing these practices are key to keeping your employees engaged and ensuring they have the most effective remote working experience.**

**As a leader, it's imperative you help your business adapt and properly prepare for this cultural shift. Now more than ever, it's time we get on with it.**

# About Insync

## Insync helps make the complex simple.

We're leaders in integrated experience management, research and consulting. Our purpose is to inspire success. And that's what we've done for over 1,000 organisations in over 50 industries.

We provide evidence, expertise and actionable insights to shape employee and customer experience, ensure good governance and help organisations manage the risks that matter most.

Clients such as CUA, Telstra, Energy Australia, Toll, IOOF, KPMG and CSIRO trust us to deep dive into their culture, experiences and risk processes, and surface with actionable insights that drive real change.

## References

<sup>1</sup> [www.hbr.org/2017/11/a-study-of-1100-employees-found-that-remote-workers-feel-shunned-and-left-out](http://www.hbr.org/2017/11/a-study-of-1100-employees-found-that-remote-workers-feel-shunned-and-left-out)

<sup>2</sup> [www.researchgate.net/publication/228896874\\_Organizational\\_Culture\\_and\\_Telecommuters'\\_Quality\\_of\\_Work\\_Life\\_and\\_Professional\\_Isolation](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/228896874_Organizational_Culture_and_Telecommuters'_Quality_of_Work_Life_and_Professional_Isolation)

<sup>3</sup> [www.timedoctor.com/blog/remote-teams-future-of-work/](http://www.timedoctor.com/blog/remote-teams-future-of-work/)

<sup>4</sup> [www.smallbizgenius.net/by-the-numbers/remote-work-statistics/#gref](http://www.smallbizgenius.net/by-the-numbers/remote-work-statistics/#gref)

<sup>5</sup> [www.readwrite.com/2019/12/05/remote-working-culture-the-facts-business-owners-need-to-know/](http://www.readwrite.com/2019/12/05/remote-working-culture-the-facts-business-owners-need-to-know/)

<sup>6</sup> [www.forbes.com/sites/karlynborysenko/2019/01/04/ten-things-new-managers-need-to-know/#588dc3d86b9a](http://www.forbes.com/sites/karlynborysenko/2019/01/04/ten-things-new-managers-need-to-know/#588dc3d86b9a)

<sup>7</sup> [www.worldatwork.org/docs/research-and-surveys/survey-brief-survey-on-workplace-flexibility-2013.pdf](http://www.worldatwork.org/docs/research-and-surveys/survey-brief-survey-on-workplace-flexibility-2013.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [www.news.gallup.com/businessjournal/124214/driving-engagement-focusing-strengths.aspx](http://www.news.gallup.com/businessjournal/124214/driving-engagement-focusing-strengths.aspx)

<sup>9</sup> [www.furstperson.com/blog/rewards-and-recognition-5-ways-to-show-remote-workers-appreciation](http://www.furstperson.com/blog/rewards-and-recognition-5-ways-to-show-remote-workers-appreciation)

<sup>10</sup> [www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2018/06/11/12-ways-to-keep-remote-workers-engaged-and-productive/#222c1e3f1efa](http://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2018/06/11/12-ways-to-keep-remote-workers-engaged-and-productive/#222c1e3f1efa)