Psychologists' advice for newly remote workers

By Zara Greenbaum March 20, 2020

As employers close offices to slow the spread of COVID-19, here's advice from I/O psychologists on how both managers and employees can work more effectively during this time.

With millions of Americans under social isolation or shelter-in-place orders in an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, employers across the nation are scrambling to establish protocols for remote work. Productive teleworkers will be necessary to keep the economy going as companies strive to maintain business continuity. And, staying engaged with daily work could be an important source of stimulation for isolated individuals. But the lightning-quick transition to a remote-work economy will not be easy for everyone.

"Even if you're a regular remote worker, this is not a normal time," says Ravi Gajendran, PhD, a professor of management at Florida International University. "The first thing to recognize is that work itself may feel different than before."

For one, employees may have children or other family members at home that require attention. They might be worried about their health, the health of their parents and grandparents, or the security of their income. If they're confined to their home, they might feel restless or frustrated. "Leaders need to recognize that employees are going through a lot," Gajendran says. "It's not just work as usual but done remotely — it's work done remotely while dealing with what may feel like an existential crisis."

Throughout this abrupt transition, psychological studies offer insights on how to work from home, both for first-time telecommuters and experienced remote workers juggling new demands. "This is a watershed moment for telework. Its popularity has been growing for years — and the urgent need brought about by this pandemic offers us the opportunity to learn from earlier lessons to continue to work productively throughout the crisis," says industrial/organizational psychologist Timothy Golden, PhD, of the Lally School of Management at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. "It's not a time to panic, but rather a time to harness the lessons we have been learning and to put them to good use."

Here are tips to help managers and employees work effectively while social isolation measures remain in effect.

Minimize distractions

Start by choosing a workspace separated from household noises and activity — ideally a room with a door you can close. Next, work to mentally distance yourself from those disturbances so you can fully engage with work tasks. Golden recommends talking with family members to establish common quiet hours and break periods, as well as what circumstances warrant an interruption of work time.

Of course, the stress around the pandemic can make it tough to stay focused. Be sure to create news- and information-free times to disconnect from the crisis and recharge, for instance by reading a book or taking a walk outside. You might also spend a few minutes at the start of each day thinking about why the work you're doing matters to your clients, coworkers and your organization. "For example, I'm now teaching my classes online," Gajendran says. "This is not only an opportunity for my students to learn, but also a respite from the ongoing disruption in their lives — and a way for them to feel a sense of control."

For those juggling work and childcare responsibilities, Gajendran suggests communicating those challenges to colleagues and supervisors, carving out times when distractions are minimal — such as early mornings or late evenings — to do your most important work, and coordinating with a spouse or partner on childcare duties when possible.

Set goals and boundaries

Set daily goals for tasks you wish to accomplish or project milestones to reach, working with a manager to establish objectives when needed. Consider sharing those goals with coworkers or family members. "Sometimes making public commitments to others about what you will accomplish that day helps hold you accountable," Golden says.

Studies show that remote workers tend to log more hours than their office-based counterparts and experience a blurring of boundaries between their home and work lives. "When you're working from an office, there's a natural start and stop time," Gajendran says. "It's important to have similar boundaries and routines for your remote work."

Aim to stick to the same schedule each day and if possible, stop checking messages and email when your workday ends.

Make a communication plan

Both employees and managers should be proactive in communicating about performance expectations and any difficulties that arise. If you're having trouble executing tasks because of the new work arrangement — for instance, due to a poor internet connection or cellphone signal — let your manager know.

Psychologists also recommend creating a plan for the frequency and mode of communication between colleagues. "One of the most often overlooked aspects for managers of new telecommuters is that they do not work out specific arrangements for when and how communication will continue to flow," says Golden.

If you're sharing information, reports or analyses, email may be the best way to correspond. But if you're working with a team to make sense of complex shared information, schedule a phone call or video conference to discuss. Using synchronous media will likely be faster and less prone to misinterpretation, Gajendran says.

Seek social connection

Telecommuters tend to experience social and professional isolation compared with employees who work in a company office. Those feelings of loneliness will likely be worse now, as "social distancing" measures cut millions of workers off from their in-person social support systems outside of work as well.

"Staying connected to other co-workers, managers and customers is paramount to successful telecommuting," Golden says. "While it might be tempting to think of yourself as an island working from home, telecommuters need to provide a social and professional support system to each other so that the social fabric that occurs in the corporate workplace is replicated as much as possible when working remotely."

Managers might provide opportunities for informal conversation during phone or video conferences so employees can continue to build healthy and supportive coworker relationships. A company may also create a designated online messaging space for coronavirus-related and other chatter, including news and office updates, personal stories and requests for supplies or guidance.

For more APA advice on ways to deal with COVID-19, visit the website.