



## The Genie is out of the Bottle

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A few weeks ago, I wrote about the need to keep the “human condition” in mind while moving your employees to a remote/home working environment. In the weeks since this pandemic emerged, I have learned firsthand, by advising numerous companies, how employees are feeling and doing in their first experience working remotely. Companies are not only managing through an abrupt change but also preparing for a new normal amidst a lot of uncertainty.

Many companies are in no rush to bring their employees back. Google and Facebook have announced that they would allow their employees to stay at home working until next year. Nationwide Insurance has indicated that its strategy includes a hybrid operating model that will shift employees to a permanent remote working environment, and Twitter confirmed its decision to leave employees at home because the current crisis has proven its business model can function with a home-based culture.

While most employees are eager to open the economy and get some sense of normality, many are not ready to face an office situation and even questioning where they live. A recent Harris Poll survey showed that nearly one-third of Americans are considering moving to less densely populated areas because of COVID-19.

**If there were ever a “genie” that could never be put back in the bottle, this is it.**

The technology to allow people to be productive at home is, for the most part, available and easy to implement. If the contestants on “American Idol” can set up what are essentially broadcast studios in

their homes, by themselves, every employee can do so. Tools like Zoom, Skype, MSFT Teams, Slack, and others make working remotely much more accessible and effective than ever before.

Now, let's circle back to the "human condition." As employers, we need to keep in mind that our people are nervous about being home-based. They may struggle with the new tools and a new way to conduct business, they are concerned about loneliness, and many fear "being out of sight, out of mind." As such, it is time to re-examine the relationship between the company and the employee. We need to ensure that that we are sensitive to employee's feelings and that we support them positively. As I mentioned in a past blog, effective home working is as much about the employee's psyche as it is about the tools. The goal is to keep people happy, secure, productive, and in a "work" mode while sitting in their home office.

While there are more keys to success than can be listed here, some of the most important ones include:

- Ensure that employees have the right tools to be effective at home and the training to use them; including the right amount of bandwidth, subscriptions for collaborative services (Zoom, MSFT Teams, Slack, etc.), and a laptop with an external monitor, keyboard, and other peripherals. Modern state-of-the-art technologies have proven critical to enhanced productivity.
- Aside from attending meetings and other group events, let your employees set their schedules and don't be concerned that they punch the proverbial time clock. Work with them to ensure their job is done correctly and have the confidence they will do what is right to excel. Many times, you will find people are completing paperwork after the family has gone to bed because they need 30 extra minutes in the morning to prep their child for school. Allow them this freedom.
- Compensate people for the use of their workspaces and additional expenses. There is no doubt that employees' bills, such as electricity, water, and others will rise as they stay home. With the savings the company will recognize by reducing real estate, create stipends for your employees.
- Be patient with distractions, and even encourage family participation. One of the most endearing things to come out of the crisis is the fact that we are getting to know celebrities in a much more enduring way. We see our local newscaster or weather reporter in their kitchen with their kids running around. This has given us a better sense of these personalities as people and we therefore care more about them. The same will be said about your employees. Do not be disgruntled if a dog walks into the room during a Zoom meeting. Have fun with the 6-year-old who comes in to tell your employee something important to them. Provide the confidence your employee needs to feel comfortable working in his or her own home.
- Continue to facilitate non-work-related interactions with your employees. Host those virtual happy hours. Involve the families directly with things like story-time for your employee's children and have one of your employees read to them. One company is conducting virtual cooking hours where everyone purchases the same ingredients in advance and the instructor (employees take a turn being instructors) walks them through the process. Family members are invited to participate.

- Promote health and wellness more aggressively than when people were in the office. People may not be getting up as much to move around during the day. Hire fitness instructors to do online group yoga or other virtual classes. Bring in nutrition experts to conduct seminars. Make the sessions interactive and fun.
- Most importantly, do not over-manage your employees just because you cannot see them working out of the corner of your eye. There has always been a tendency to worry whether remote workers are doing their jobs, and the result is often excessive supervision that can have an adverse effect on motivation and productivity. I even knew of a manager who would have all his employees on instant messaging, and as soon as someone's status turned to inactive, he or she would get a call asking why they left their desk. There is nothing more demotivating than over-managing, and it is all too easy to do with remote employees.

The COVID-19 crisis will pass, hopefully, sooner rather than later, but the marks left will be here forever. One of the positive changes will likely be the decentralization of the workforce, allowing for greater productivity, access to a wider group of candidates (location will not matter), reduction of the carbon footprint, and more. The key to success will be the emotional state of the employee. We have a significant role to play in keeping that state positive.