



## Working from home: How HR can deal with the daily dilemmas

By [Jo Faragher](#) on 24 Mar 2020



This week many families will begin to juggle schoolwork with remote working

**With schools potentially out for summer, the practical challenges of managing a remote workforce and supporting managers to deal with their own teams have just got even more difficult. From dropped video calls to managing expectations around working with children at home, how can HR professionals cope?**

For HR departments across the UK, Monday (23 March) will have been one of the busiest and most testing days they have experienced in a long time. On top of the existing impact the coronavirus has had on policies, staff sickness and workforce redeployment, school closures mean that hundreds of working parents are now juggling remote work with virtual classrooms and breaking up arguments over the TV remote.

Most employers will have advised widespread working from home from Monday last week, when prime minister Boris Johnson stepped up the UK's response to the spread of the virus by advising against all unnecessary travel. Commuter train and tube services have been cut as office workers set themselves up at home.

As work shifted online, tools such as Slack and Microsoft Teams took the strain; both have reported spikes in the number of new users – Slack's group messaging tool has gained 40% more users since February than it typically has in a whole quarter, according to its CEO. Microsoft said the number of people using Teams on a single day last week was 44 million, compared with a usual peak of around 20 million.

But as workers replaced face-to-face meetings with video calls and email and file-sharing applications became busier than usual, users complained of home broadband systems unable to cope and unreliable connections leading to frustration. Vodafone and TalkTalk reported a 30% and 20% rise, respectively, in internet traffic last week as homeworkers moved online and others binged on TV streaming services while stuck at home.

### **Emergency provisions**

For many HR professionals, simply getting to grips with some of the practical adjustments of managing teams remotely – whether their own or supporting managers, has been a challenge. “We've always considered that we have really strong business continuity plans in place – all of our employees have the hardware and software they need to work away from the office, and many work remotely on a regular basis,” says Claire Williams, director of people and services at software company CIPHR.

“So it's been surprising how many things we've had to make emergency provisions for. There's just a really big difference between working from home from time-to-time, and working at home full-time.” One recurring issue has been employees' office set-up at home, she adds. “Desk equipment is one example – more of our people are realising that their home setup is far from ideal, and they need additional monitors, keyboards, mice etc. Some have even come into the office and taken their desk chairs home with them.”

On Friday, Acas issued guidance for employers about managing remote workers. It urged organisations to be “practical, flexible and sensitive” to employees' situations, and to put any agreed working arrangements into writing so everyone is clear about what is expected. Managers should also consider which tasks can be done from home but not fall into the assumption that certain roles cannot be performed remotely.

The CIPD echoed this advice. Peter Cheese, chief executive, called for employers to “make allowances [for the school closure] and take a flexible approach, especially for people with younger children who will inevitably need more care.

“There may be limited space and limited equipment to manage both parents and children working from home each day. There will be disruption,” he continued.

“Employees should speak to their line managers and HR teams to understand how they can best balance family and work commitments, especially as this stands to be for a prolonged period of time.”

## **Work and childcare**

Williams says she has already had a lot of queries from staff about how they should juggle working from home with childcare. “We have policies in place for business as usual, but this is potentially a long-term situation that we’ll need to adjust to,” she adds. “So we’ve had to kind of think about it in a far more flexible way. Our approach has been: we’ll be asking for a lot of goodwill from our staff over the next few months, so wherever we have the opportunity to show that flexibility and goodwill back to them in return, we have to do that. We’re taking a pragmatic approach, offering employees the option to shift their working hours, or break up their hours, for example.”

But where do employers stand legally when it comes to balancing someone’s work commitments with looking after children? It is not unusual for employers, for example, to demand that working from home days should not be used as a proxy for childcare for preschool children. Does this still hold true? When Johnson announced stricter lockdown measures yesterday, staff were told they could only travel to their usual place of work “only where work absolutely cannot be done from home”.

Beverley Sunderland, managing director of Crossland Employment Solicitors, explains that in more usual business times, an employee’s only real entitlement here would be to take emergency time off unpaid. But these are, of course, not typical circumstances. “Employers in the short-term are being much more relaxed about it,” she says. “They’re happy if joint parents timeshare [one works in the morning, the other in the afternoon, for example], and make things up in the evening. They’re fine as long as you’re available if a client has an urgent question and keep them posted.”

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They also need to be mindful of expectations, she adds. Asking someone to take emergency time off for dependants “while they sort out other childcare options” – something they might have done under different circumstances – is not really an option at the moment because doing so would go against government social distancing guidelines.

## **Getting the balance right**

Managers are also having to get to grips with new ways of communicating with employees they typically see every day. Hannah Prince, a business psychologist at Insights Learning and Development, says it’s important not to overwhelm employees by barraging them with constant communications via different channels.

“One of the best ways to manage this is to generate a few options and vote on it as a team. Giving your team members a voice and empowering them to shape decisions is an important part of creating a healthy team, particularly during difficult times,” she advises. “Have open conversations with each colleague, co-create strategies and flex these strategies as much as needed. You know your industry, work and team best so consider what will be best for your own business, team and location. What tools do you currently use, what could you potentially use and what would be the best fit?”

Prince urges managers to consider alternatives to email, as inboxes will overflow and meanings can be lost in translation. “Only communicating via email is not always the most effective way to work, as sentiments can easily be misconstrued and it’s not the quickest way to share ideas in real time,” she says. “Also remember that individuals are entitled to say, ‘not right now.’ Employees should be able to set their status to ‘do not disturb’ or ‘busy’ so they can be contacted when they’re available, rather than be expected to stay switched on all the time.”

Dan Tesjak, head of EMEA at learning platform company Degreed, says employees have been given the option to order additional tech facilities such as screens so they can build an environment that suits them at home. But it’s not just about the technical support, he explains: “As Degreed’s executive team we have been mindful to continually communicate and ensure that employee’s mental and physical health is the number one priority. Plus our team shares regular updates on the pandemic, our company’s evolving situation, how employees should be dealing with it and the ways Degreed is exploring to support local communities and charities through the crisis.”

### **Making the transition**

Gamiel Yafai, founder of D&I consultancy and coaching company Diversity Marketplace, says the transition to doing absolutely everything online has been an exhausting one. “I’m used to using Skype and Teams perhaps once a month and now it’s constant; one day last week I did video calls back to back for five-and-a-half hours,” he says. “When I work face-to-face with people I space things out or there is time in between to get from A to B. I’m now booking in time between appointments – as a coach it’s important that clients’ conversations don’t start to merge into one another.”

An advantage of getting used to widespread remote working has been learning new things about the platforms he uses, adds Yafai. “You can do break-outs, pair people up, take notes – I’m lucky I have a network of people I can ask questions or share my learnings with. This has never been so important.” And while virtual coaching may feel like certain things would get lost in translation, this has not been the case, he says: “Sometimes it’s more empowering to [coach virtually] as people don’t feel as though they have to hide themselves. You can still get to know each other and ask questions.”

Day-to-day HR activities such as onboarding have also had to change radically. “Where we can, we are onboarding people remotely, and thinking a bit creatively about how we make them feel part of the team,” says Williams at CIPHR. “But for others – where the roles require a lot of face-to-face training or job shadowing, which we can’t do while social distancing applies – we’re having to postpone start dates.” Anyone who is already in the interview process for a role will continue to go through that process, but remotely.

For some roles, interviews have been deferred altogether. “The message to candidates in those situations is, ‘we really would like to continue this conversation but because we’re not able to onboard right now, can we just stay in touch?’,” she adds. “So we’re working on building up a really strong talent pool that means we can kick-start hiring again at the appropriate point.”

## Setting out a structure

Establishing a loose daily routine among teams can help, both in practical terms of getting things done and giving employees some structure at a time when anxiety levels will be peaking. A daily stand-up meeting, for example, is useful for teams to see where they are up to, so tasks aren't missed or replicated.

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“Short core team meetings can help identify progress on projects, plus any blockers and solutions. Blockers may now be things related to our current world of uncertainty with coronavirus, so it's important to raise issues as soon as they come up and not dwell on them,” Prince adds. Don't forget to book in some 'water-cooler' time where colleagues can chat to each other openly without an agenda, she adds, perhaps adding a message board or non-work stream on a tool such as Slack.

A sense of feeling together even though the team is not together could be one way to beat a sense of isolation many workers may feel from being stuck at home. STAS. Prince says the “simplest and most effective thing to do is be direct and ask” employees about how they are feeling, as different people will handle the new situation in different ways. “Remote working can lead to employees feeling the need to justify themselves or prove their worth by slipping into an unhealthy pattern of long hours,” she says.

Williams says that CIPHR's employees have welcomed social interaction. “We've been doing regular formal communications through email, Yammer, and weekly team briefings, but it's the informal communications that people are saying they need to help them feel less isolated and build morale,” she says. “We've seen people taking the initiative – one of our employees started a group chat in Microsoft Teams (which a third of the company has joined), we're making more use of a mobile engagement app called Totem, and from next week we'll be doing a Friday company quiz. There's still more to do, and it's something that we'll be continuing to work on.”

Friday quizzes and coffee chats aside, there may well also be a contingent of employees who are resistant to their new working circumstances. Alex Efthymiades, founder of mediation consultancy Consensio, argues that it's important to practise empathy – the knock-on effect of the coronavirus will have touched every single employee in some way. “Change is really hard for most of us so we need to allow people time to adjust. And this is multiple changes all happening at once – people are suddenly working from home, with a partner and/or kids – there are so many adjustments all at once,” she says. “Coupled with that is the fear of not knowing when this will end, or whether their work is even secure.”

Where managers feel as though there are delicate conversations to be had, these should not be done over email or text message, she adds. “If you are going to speak to someone about a difficult issue do it over telephone or something like Zoom. Consider whether it's the right time now, too – for many people this is the first real week of working from home, many with children. Wait until they have settled into that reality.”

With new developments to come to terms with every day, HR teams face unprecedented challenges in the weeks and months ahead. But Efthymiades is hopeful that the way organisations manage the coronavirus crisis will lead to positive changes, too. “Things that might have led to a conflict or concern a few weeks ago now don’t seem like priorities, and people’s perspectives are changing,” she says. “I think we’ll see more empathy as we come out of this.”