Can You Trust Remote Employees?

| Remember, no one size fits all!

By **Yoram Solomon,** Innovation Culture Institute™ LLC

We didn't ask for the Covid-19 pandemic. We didn't ask to work from home. But, in March 2020, it was forced upon us. At the time, it didn't look like there was going to be an end, and this was going to be "the new normal." Today, many companies have returned to work at the office, but we also learned the benefits of working from home for the company and its employees. Should we go back to the office full-time? Should we work remotely full-time? Should we deploy a hybrid mode? And, in the context of this article, should you *trust* employees who work from home? Or, even better, what *can* you do so you can trust them?

What Does the Data Say?

A spring 2022 survey of 25,000 American employees showed that 58% of them were offered by their employers the option of working from home full-time (35%) or part-time (23%) and that 87% of those offered such option accepted it. This varies, obviously, by industry, where the computer industry was the highest (89%) and the production and food preparation industries the lowest (29%). No doubt, remote work is highly contextual.

Other statistics show that the number of Americans working from home was 6% in pre-pandemic 2019, went up to 41.7% in 2020 at the height of the pandemic, and is now down to 26%, but expected to increase (intentionally). By 2025, more than 36m American employees are expected to be working remotely.
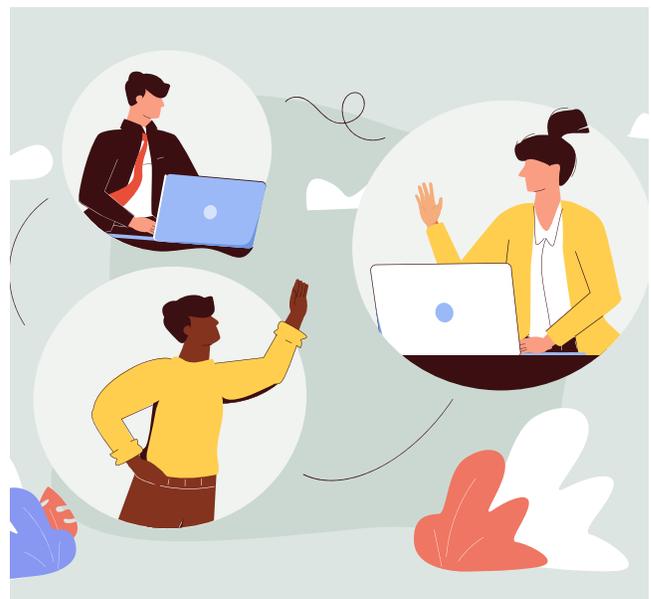
Some surveys showed that working from home increases productivity, while others show a decrease in productivity. Again, the impact on productivity would be highly contextual. Many employees believe that working from home increases their work-life balance (75%), reduces absenteeism (56%), improves morale (54%), and increases their engagement (62%).

Is Remote Working Right for Everyone?

There is no point in making a *general* determination of whether companies should continue (or move toward) working remotely, in a hybrid way, or from the office, as the answer is highly circumstantial and depends on specific employees and specific tasks. When making that determination, we should consider the following:

Submit Your Articles

- Remote work is not appropriate for any job. It's not suitable for production and food preparation employees, pilots, drivers, soldiers, police officers, etc.

- Not every person can work from home. The distractions are often more than the employee can handle, resulting in reduced productivity and possibly even reduced job satisfaction. Some people (for example, extroverts) need in-person human interaction to be productive, while others (introverts, for instance) might appreciate and thrive working alone remotely.

- There have to be the proper environmental conditions for working from home that should equal those in the office, including the workspace, ergonomics, lighting, noise level, etc.

- Some jobs require constant teamwork, while others may not require collaboration at all. A book editor, for example, doesn't work within a team. If teamwork is needed, it could be adversely affected when team members work separately from their respective homes. There will be no constructive conflict which is so vital for productivity and creativity, and the reduced amount of interaction time, as well as the intimacy of such interactions (email vs. face-to-face), would be reduced, negatively impacting *trust* within the team.

We Are Strengthening Individualism

A comment worth making is that we increase individualism when we allow or support working individually from home. The ongoing individualistic trend will only accelerate. One study showed that individualism in values and practices have increased in English-speaking countries by 60-69% over a 51-year period. Since empathy (the opposite of individualism) is a key component of trust, increasing individualism would reduce trust and drive employees to feel that the world revolves around them. The transition to working from home makes employees more concerned about their own welfare, working conditions, and work-life balance, sometimes at the expense of what they contribute to the company. That further increases individualism.

Tracking and Monitoring Remote Employees

In a LinkedIn poll I conducted, I asked the question, "Can employees be trusted to work remotely?" Out of 62 responses, 63% replied that employees can be trusted without limitations, and 24% said that employees can be trusted to work remotely *only if monitored*.

Technology evolution accelerated during the pandemic, like during any crisis or war. But not only tools that enhance productivity were developed. Tools allowing managers to monitor and track employees working remotely were also created. Those include tools that track email communications, keyboard, and mouse activity, and even use embedded cameras and microphones (which brings the privacy issue). More and more companies started offering such products because more companies have demanded and deployed them.

The problem with those monitoring and tracking tools lies in the 6th law of trust: trust is *reciprocal*. When you trust someone and you *show* them that you trust them, they will behave in a responsible way. In fact, if they believe you trust them more than they deserve, they have two options: either discourage you from trusting them as much (which they will rarely do), or work hard to live up to the level of trust you demonstrate you have in them. At times, you may have more trust in them than they have in themselves. Either way, when you trust them *and* show them that you trust them, you will increase their trustworthiness.

But the opposite is true, too. When you distrust them and show them that you distrust them, or don't show them that you trust them, they will behave in an untrustworthy way. I've seen YouTube videos where employees demonstrate hacks to get around such monitoring software installed on their computers.

The bottom line is: if you can't trust your employees, and it's not because they are untrustworthy, then you *cause* them to be untrustworthy. And if you don't trust them because they *are* untrustworthy, you hired the wrong employees. Your problem is not whether you can trust them remotely. It's whether you can trust them at all.

Submit Your Articles

How Can You Trust Remote Employees?

This article should not discourage you from considering remote work as a company or an employee. It should encourage you to consider the following and take these steps to make it work well:

- **Remember that no one size fits all.** Remote work is not appropriate for all jobs, at all times, and for the entire company as a whole.

- **Remote work is not appropriate for all employees (regardless of their jobs).** Make sure you assess the employee's ability to work remotely and that it will not reduce their productivity or job satisfaction. Consider training employees on how to effectively work remotely and provide them with the tools and work environment required for that purpose. Consider a trial period not only for the company, but also for the employee to find whether remote work is, well, working for them.

- **Compensate for the reduction in time and intimacy of interactions between employees.** Schedule enough time for interaction regularly and in a predictable (rather than ad-hoc) manner—drive interactions to take place in person (maybe on a particular day of the week) or at least over a video call. The ability to read body language and observe the consistency between body language and content increases trust. Email and written messages force the recipient to read between the lines and make

assumptions, which reduces trust. Even when the job can be done remotely with minimal team interaction, consider (1) a weekly team meeting or video call, (2) a weekly supervisor-employee one-on-one call, (3) a short daily *brief* call in the morning, and (4) a short daily *debrief* call in the afternoon. Don't allow too much time to pass between interactions. Trust declines between them.

- **Change the communications strategy.** Consider information as *static*, and communication as *moving* information from one person to another. Make information *available* and *accessible* to team members, but communicate only what's *necessary* for the other person to know now. Don't push what they don't need to know, or they will spend all day reading your messages. It's enough that all the information they need is available to them when they want it.

- **Use empathy.** Managers must consider what things feel like from the employee's perspective, and employees must consider what things feel like from their manager's perspective. When you don't consider what things look or feel like from the other side, you are not empathetic to them, and their trust in you will decline.

- **Don't monitor employees.** If you don't trust them because they are not trustworthy, then you have the wrong employees. But if you monitor them, showing them that you don't trust them, they will justify that distrust.

• • •

Yoram Solomon, Ph.D., MBA, LLB, is the author of *The Book of Trust®,* host of The Trust Show podcast, founder of the Innovation Culture Institute™ LLC, and facilitator of the Trust Habits™ workshop. He is a regular speaker at SHRM events.

🌐 in

▶ **Would you like to comment?**

Submit Your Articles