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EMPLOYEE WORK-FROM-HOME EXPERIENCES

INFORMING LEADERSHIP ACTIONS

A white paper by
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About the author



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“Highly engaged employees make the customer experience. Disengaged employees break it.”

~ Timothy R. Clark

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How people feel about working from home

Steelcase, the provider of architecture, furniture and technology products and services for offices, also study work, workers, and the workplace.

In the 360° Steelcase Global Report – [Changing Expectations and the Future of Work](#) – they share the synthesis of eight primary studies to measure how the COVID-19 pandemic will change the future of work. The quantitative and qualitative studies deployed methodologies based in the social sciences and were conducted in multiple countries, including over 32,000 cumulative participants.

One of the findings was that the experiences people described about working from home fell into five patterns of behavior and attitudes. As the report states:

“It's important to note that it's possible for people to associate themselves with more than one of the patterns. They are meant to be extreme categories that can help us understand the different experiences people have had and what their expectations may be when they return to the workplace.”

Whilst Steelcase provides us with a description of each of the five categories, they do not advise on the actions needed to help the people in those categories. I have taken up that mantle.

In this paper, I have taken each category and provided the description from the Steelcase report followed by what I believe leaders must do right now to improve the experiences these employees are having and what they should do post-pandemic when the need to work from home is no longer required and work in most cases will have a hybrid flavour.

The categories are:

Overworked Caretaker

Home office is a non-stop flow of competing demands

Relieved Self-Preservationist

Home office is the only place I am safe

Frustrated Creative Networker

Home office is a suspension from normal life and work

Autonomy Seeker

Home office is freedom

Isolated Zoomer

Home office is a lonely cage

Overworked Caretaker

Home office is a nonstop flow of competing demands

This person is torn between meeting work responsibilities and managing family needs. Their long, jam-packed day is chopped between meetings, focus work, home-schooling and domestic chores. Exhaustion and guilt are piling up. They take comfort in finally being allowed to show they are parents and not worry if their kids are heard on a call. They miss the office for the opportunity to leave home responsibilities behind and have control over their attention. But they appreciate the flexibility to work from home as needed to manage between their family and work responsibilities more easily.



What Leaders Must Do Now

Leaders must define rules of engagement; lead with empathy; embrace flexibility and provide psychological safety.

What is a meeting?

Determine what constitutes a meeting. What can be conducted via a phone call, text, or email? With the rapid move to remote working, there has been a knee-jerk response to replace every planned interaction that happened in the office with a meeting.

Before every intent to schedule a meeting ask these questions:

- Is this meeting necessary?
- If not, how do I accomplish what I need to achieve?
- If it is, who needs to be there?
- Who can provide input to the meeting without needing to be there?
- Who needs to know the outcomes of the meeting but does not need to be there?
- How am I going to make this meeting as effective and efficient as possible and make the best use of everyone's time?
- Can I circulate the agenda before the meeting and ensure everyone knows what will be expected of them in the meeting?
- Can I distribute pre-reading material?
- Can I ensure everyone knows the intended purpose of meeting and the desired outcomes?

Empathy

Lead with empathy and understand the situation your employee is experiencing and the challenges they are facing. Empathy has always been a critical skill for good leadership, but it is taking on a new level of meaning and priority.

Whilst empathy is always needed, it is an imperative at this time. Everyone is experiencing the pandemic in different ways and will continue to as we enter a new era of work, post-pandemic.

A [May 2021 report](#) from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) stated:

"From March 2020 onwards, prevalence of anxiety and depression increased and, in some countries, even doubled. Periods when the highest rates of mental distress were reported correlated with periods of intensifying COVID-19 deaths and strict confinement measures.

During 2020, the risk factors for poor mental health – financial insecurity, unemployment, fear – increased, while protective factors – social connection, employment and educational engagement, access to physical exercise, daily routine, access to health services – decreased."

Leaders can be empathetic in two ways.

Consider the other persons situation. We often use the term "walk in their shoes." I see empathy as understand how the other person feels walking in their shoes. Ask yourself if I was in their position, "how would I be feeling right now?" "What would I be thinking right now?"

Leaders must not only understand the other person position and perspective but also demonstrate that they care by expressing their concerns and enquiring about the challenges the other person is experiencing. Leaders must listen – really listen. They must offer support and help them find a solution.

Flexibility

Allow employees to plan their 'work' around the other commitments they have and ease the stress of the competing demands. Leaders must ask how best you can support them and alleviate the pressure.

Can you reschedule regular catchups and mandatory meetings for this employee to fit in with their home schedule e.g., around home-schooling hours?

Provide flexible schedules so employees can start and end their day as they choose. Performance must be measured on outcomes and value delivered, not hours at a desk.

There are benefits in providing employees with flexibility and control over their working hours. According to the [Gartner 2021 Digital Worker Experience Survey](#) of more than 10,000 workers from U.S., Europe, and APAC, 43% of respondents said that flexibility in working hours helped them achieve greater productivity.

Psychological safety

Ensure there is an environment of psychological safety in which your employees feel safe to question, challenge, air their concerns without fear of any repercussion or reprisal. Creating this environment is an ongoing process that will take time. It needs to be intentional and always practiced.

Your employees need to feel safe to say they feel overworked and struggling with competing demands. Unless they feel safe, they will not share, and you will not know what is going on until it is too late, and they are burned out.

More on psychological safety in the next category.

What Leaders Must Do Post-Pandemic

Maintain relevant terms of engagement. Seek feedback from employees and make incremental changes as needed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of communication and collaboration.

Continue to lead with empathy and compassion.

This employee has welcomed the flexibility to work both in the office and from home. On a return to the office, ensure this employee retains that flexibility to manage both their home and work responsibilities easily e.g., school drop-offs and pickups, caregiving, family medical appointments etc. Allow them to plan their work duties around their home duties.

In the Gartner survey mentioned earlier, 64% of respondents said they would be more likely to consider a role that allowed for flexible hours than one that did not. Providing flexibility will be key to retaining and attracting talent to your organisation. 59% said they would consider a new position or job that allowed them to work from a location of their choice than one that did not.

Leaders should consider options other than home or office that could provide flexibility that does not incur a long commute. Employees could be encouraged to use spaces such as the local library, co-working spaces or satellite offices that are near to home. This

would give this category of employee the ability to “*leave home responsibilities behind*” but make it easier to manage those responsibilities as needed.

Relieved Self-Preservationist

Home office is the only place I am safe

This person's main concern is not COVID; it's their psychological safety. They feel their company is creating a hostile work environment and working from home has been a welcome respite from an organization they feel does not appreciate them. They're less anxious and more productive, able to focus on work, rather than managing relationships. Working from home gives them a more human experience that allows them to work in a space that is their own.



What Leaders Must Do Now

Leaders must be intentional and work relentlessly to remove toxicity from the organisation; build an environment of psychological safety; and appreciate and recognise employee contributions.

Toxic culture

This experience needs immediate attention. There is a toxic working environment, and this employee has welcomed working from home as they feel safe. This is not acceptable.

I am assuming that you are not the cause of the hostile work environment and that you are a leader with an intent to remedy the situation.

The first thing to be done is to make sure that the issue is acknowledged at the top of the organisation. The reparation of a toxic culture must start there.

Leaders must take the feedback they receive from employees seriously and act accordingly. The worst thing you can do is ask for open and honest feedback and then do nothing.

In a survey conducted by [Monster](#), 90% of the respondents said they had been bullied at work. There are many types of bully that create a hostile environment such as the mean-spirited prankster, the jerk, the saboteur, the constant critic, the gossip, and the gatekeeper.

Monster found that 51% of respondents were bullied by their manager and 39% were bullied by their co-workers.

A report from [The Glass Hammer](#) revealed that 71% of employer reactions, and 60% of workers reactions were more harmful to the targets of bullying.

Leaders must develop a formal code of conduct that:

- Explains what bullying is and the affects it has on individuals and groups
- Raises awareness of everyone's responsibility if they are a victim of bullying or observe it taking place
- Make the penalties for non-compliance clear
- Declares a zero-tolerance policy

Leaders at every level of the organisation must lead by example and intervene when bullying is seen or reported. Bullies must be confronted immediately and dealt with accordingly.

You could bring in an external resource to help assist with identifying the root causes of a toxic culture. Whilst it should be the role of HR to create a safe environment for all employees, many employees do not trust HR. The statement in wide circulation across social media platforms "HR is not your best friend" is indicative of the lack of trust.

These figures from a 2021 study by [Elements Global Services](#) are damning.

- 2 in 3 workers don't report issues to HR because they don't think action will occur
- 49% of workers who neglect to make reports to HR do so out of fear of retaliation

If this is prevalent in your organisation, then investment in a third party to assess the culture, identify the recurring patterns and produce a plan to help dismantle and repair the toxic behaviours could be a wise decision.

At the end of the day, you must deal with the perpetrators of a toxic environment. It is not a time to be passive, weak or in denial. These people poison your work environment and cause disconnection. Give them an opportunity and support to change their behaviour, and if they don't, move them on.

Psychological safety

This employee's main concern is their psychological safety. Timothy R. Clarke, author of [The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety](#), describes it as:

"a condition in which human beings feel (1) included, (2) safe to learn, (3) safe to contribute, and (4) safe to challenge the status quo – all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished in some way."

Leaders must create an environment where:

1. everyone feels a sense of being connected and belonging
2. everyone feels safe to ask questions, give and receive feedback, experiment, and make mistakes
3. everyone feels safe to contribute, participate, and make a difference
4. everyone feels safe to challenge and ask, "why do we do it this way?" "What if we tried this?" or "May I suggest another way?"

If your employees cannot feel these things, fear will shut them down.

Leaders build psychological safety by creating the right climate, mindsets, and behaviours within their teams. Leaders are role models and reinforce the behaviours they expect to see from their team. At the core of these behaviours is trust and mutual respect.

Unappreciated

This person does not feel that their organisation appreciates them. The organisation and its leaders must recognise the efforts of employees. Employees must know that they are valued, and leaders must show appreciation for employee contributions.

People should be recognised for their achievements, exhibiting desired behaviours, going above and beyond expectations. I wrote about feedback and recognition in this [article about the employee experience](#).

Recognition and appreciation can take many forms from the public 'thank-you', a celebratory dinner or monetary rewards. Whatever form it takes it must be timely, specific about what is being recognised, authentic and of value to the recipient.

Leaders can also create a culture where feedback and recognition of employees is a common behavior within teams. Team members can recognise the efforts of other team members and show their gratitude for their contribution. Peer-to-peer recognition strengthens teams, energises, motivates, and makes the workplace feel more inclusive and human.

What Leaders Must Do Post-Pandemic

Leaders must continually work to ensure a culture that is free from negativity and harm. There is no place for bad attitudes and behaviours, bullying, fear of failure, dysfunction and confusion, never-ending gossip, and drama.

Leaders must continually seek employee feedback and act upon what they hear. They need to really listen and follow through with actions that create real change.

Psychological safety takes time to build but moments to destroy. Leaders must be vigilant and act when employees speak or behave in a way that does not support a safe environment. Leaders must intentionally and continually work to create a space for honest and open conversation.

A regular action by leaders must be positive reinforcement of behaviours they wish to see more of and recognition of employee endeavours. Leaders must continually encourage and positively reinforce peer-to-peer recognition of employees for who they are and what they do.

Frustrated Creative Networker

Home office is a suspension from normal life and work

These individuals are conflicted about returning to the office. They spend most of their day co-creating, coaching, persuading and connecting the dots — work done much better in the office, especially with larger groups. But although they desire the benefits of the office, they don't think it's safe to return. They have quickly adapted the use of digital tools, but they crave more — virtual meeting technology is still too limited for creative collaboration and informal, spontaneous connections across silos. COVID has been a huge challenge when they suddenly found themselves cut off from in-person interactions that drive their work. With limited tools and a lack of experience in making them work, they have shifted focus to more individual tasks done more easily from home.



What Leaders Must Do Now

Leaders must provide a plan for a safe return to the office; allay the uncertainties and concerns; provide authentic communication; invest in leading edge communication and collaboration tools; provide effective training on use of digital tools and encourage collaboration, creativity, and connection across the hybrid team

Address the concerns

These employees have a desire to return to the office for *creating, coaching, persuading, and connecting* but don't believe it is safe to return. They are conflicted and concerned.

Leaders must acknowledge the concerns of these employees and address them. There may not be a clear return-to-office strategy or plan in place, but leaders should communicate what actions are being taken to start the formulation of that plan.

The communication should include the considerations that will be taken into account during the planning which includes employee safety. Leaders must assure every employee that their health and safety is a priority.

The plan should include how you are going to:

- Ensure employee safety, mental and physical wellbeing.
- Ensure safe distancing between employees and visitors.
- Manage vaccinated and non-vaccinated employees
- Safely manage the flow of people in and out of the workplace.
- Plan for collaboration spaces, meeting rooms and hot desking, and the technology to support.
- Reopen facilities - all at once or a staged approach.
- The new work operating model – hybrid, fully office, remote first etc.
- Support for remote workers.

Provide channels for employees to ask questions and seek clarification. Capture frequently asked questions (FAQs) and answers and make them available to all employees.

Return-to-office plan

Before you start to formulate your return-to-office plan, it is a good idea to take a pulse check of employee sentiment. If you don't, you could be in big trouble. Find out what your employees want. How many want to return to the office on a fulltime basis? How many want to work remotely all the time? How many want the flexibility to work between the office and other locations? Make sure you manage expectations and communicate that not all preferences may be met but the intent is to deliver on as many as possible.

Once you understand the sentiment you can align that with business needs and objectives. Can you support employee preferences and still deliver on business goals and desired outcomes? If not, what are the adjustments that will need to be made?

Employees will appreciate that you have reached out with the intent to accommodate their work preferences as best you can whilst recognising that there may have to be some compromise.

As the plan starts to formulate communicate progress. Where decisions are being made, communicate the 'why.' One of the most powerful aspects of communicate regarding change. Why are we doing this? Why is it needed for us as an organisation? What are the implications if we don't do this? We often overlook the why and launch into what we are going to do, and how we are going to do it. This leaves employees confused and uncertain as there is no imperative being communicated.

Communicate authentically

You must communicate authentically. Remember this is uncharted territory. There is no playbook or rulebook to guide you. There will be bumps in the road, mistakes made and obstacles to be overcome. Do not think your employees expect you to get everything right first time. If you explain that this is a journey that everyone is on together and that we will work through the challenges together, employees will be empathetic to your position.

When mistakes are made, communicate what happened and the actions to be taken. When there has been little or no progress since the last communication, say so and the reason why. When there are decisions to be made that have never been made before and associated consternation, communicate that. When progress has been made, and there is a reason for celebration, shout that from on high.

When you are not authentic, employees will see right through it and decide that you are not authentic is many other things that you do. This is your reputation as a leader at stake. Your employees are adults, and you should treat them as such. Keep having the conversation and keep everyone involved, and the bumps in the road will feel like potholes rather than chasms.

Digital tools

At the start of the pandemic, most of us resorted to the use of Zoom and Microsoft Teams. We quickly adapted but the frustrated creative craves more.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic and the need for employee to work remotely, digital communication and collaboration tools have evolved and continue to do so. The virtual meeting technology, the tools for spontaneous connections across silos and the creative collaboration tools these creatives crave are on our doorstep.

Zoom became an overnight leader in video solutions with the onset of the pandemic. It was not long before we were all complaining of Zoom fatigue. [Zoom](#) has continued to work on innovations and enhancements to try and stay at the forefront of the industry.

Zoom has added Conferences to Zoom Events so you can organize multi-day and multi-track events in one format. Zoom is adding event lobbies, chat, networking, sponsors, surveys, recordings, and analytics and says hosts and attendees can customise experiences based on background. Zoom has also announced its Video Engagement Center (VEC), a video contact centre that allows an enterprise's customers to be intelligently connected with Customer Service Representative (CSR) experts. Imagine the difference when a customer can show the CSR what is happening rather than just tell them. Zoom Whiteboard is Zoom's newest virtual hub that allows for asynchronous

collaboration. It is introducing Live transcription and automated translation features for more accessibility and inclusivity.

Zoom has implemented other inclusive and hybrid-specific solutions such as Hot Desking and Zoom Rooms Smart Gallery. Zoom says Hot Desking will allow employees to reserve desks and spaces in offices and will include an interactive map and easy authentication. Zoom Rooms Smart gallery uses AI to create individual video feeds of in-room participants. This solution is unique in that it brings inclusivity to those who are working remotely.

There are many more improvements Zoom has made and like Facebook, has partnered with Oculus with virtual reality experiences. Facebook has unveiled [Horizon Workrooms](#) allowing employees to create an avatar, collaborate with others on a whiteboard, stream what's on their laptop, take notes and interact with co-workers who video conference into the virtual room — all while sitting at their real-life workspace.

Google has been working on [Project Starline](#) - a technology project that combines advances in hardware and software to enable friends, families, and co-workers to feel together, even when they're cities (or countries) apart.

Imagine looking through a sort of magic window, and through that window, you see another person, life-size and in three dimensions. You can talk naturally, gesture and make eye contact.

Microsoft's offering – [Microsoft Mesh](#) – enables presence and shared experiences from anywhere – on any device – through mixed reality applications. The new platform is the result of years of Microsoft research and development in areas ranging from hand and eye tracking and HoloLens development to creating persistent holograms and artificial intelligence models that can create expressive avatars.

The other game changer for remote workers is the virtual water cooler. Virtual water coolers are online spaces where remote colleagues can gather for casual conversation. They can also be used for collaboration and brainstorming but the main premise behind them is recreating the spontaneous connections across silos that the creatives are seeking.

Virtual water cooler solutions include [unremot](#), [Jamm](#), [Donut](#), and [Tandem](#). There are many more.

The tools available to remote workers and hybrid teams are no longer limited. Leaders must be aware of the latest developments and determine what would best service their organisation and teams.

Leader must also make sure that there is effective education for every employee to know how to make best use of these digital tools.

The perceived limitation of tools for creative collaboration and informal spontaneous connections across silos is a thing of the past.

What Leaders Must Do Post-Pandemic

Ensure all employees feel safe whether they return to the office fulltime, continue to work remotely fulltime, or split their time between the office and a remote location.

Keep checking in on how employees are feeling and repeat the pulse-check to see if they are satisfied with the working model provisions. If they are not, determine what actions can be taken. Keep reminding everyone that this is a process, not a project, and subject to continual incremental improvements.

Ensure everyone understands the plan for work post-pandemic and where to ask questions, obtain clarification and find answers.

Keep communication open, honest, and authentic.

Keep abreast of emerging technology to maximise the communication, collaboration, creative and spontaneous experiences across teams.

Autonomy Seeker

Home office is freedom

Thrilled to work at their own rhythm, without someone constantly looking over their shoulder, this person feels just as productive at home as before, if not more. They feel a greater sense of wellbeing at home, where they can look out the window, sit in different postures, cook healthy meals and weave in activities that help them recharge and relax, such as hanging out with their pet. They especially enjoy the level of control they have in designing their own work experience to curate a schedule that braids together life events and work events.



What Leaders Must Do Now

These employees have welcomed the chance to work from home all the time, feel less micromanaged, and a freedom to create a schedule that combines work and life events in a manner that optimises their experience.

Leaders must ensure these employees have everything they need to remain productive working from home. They must also ensure the mental health of these employees who may feel liberated, but also experience loneliness and isolation.

Enabled

Connect your employees with the technology they need to be productive whilst working from home. If your employee has aged hardware and no access to appropriate software, and audio issues, you are setting these employees up for failure.

Leaders must ensure every employee has access to the tools they need to be the best they can be wherever they are working from. This is particularly important for the remote worker whose productivity should not be adversely impacted because they are not in the office.

Some organisations have a budget available for all their remote employees to acquire the tools they need to ensure their workspace is as fully functioning as it can be. Leaders must consider how they fund the needs of remote workers. Whilst equipping remote employee has a cost, but this can be offset by reducing the technology needs in the traditional office. Other organisations provide a one-time stipend to allow remote employees to purchase their own technology.

Leaders must consider items such as:

- Computer set-up – multiple screens / monitors
- Headsets
- Webcams
- Microphones
- Lighting
- Robust Wi-Fi
- Technical support

Careful consideration must be given to the provision of technology for remote use. If employees can purchase their own equipment, this gives IT support and security issues to deal with. It can help if organisations create standards for laptops, software, headsets, webcams, microphones etc. which employees purchasing their own equipment must adhere to if they want technical support and access to the organisation's network.

It is crucial to embrace technology that connects in-office workers with their remote colleagues and enables equity and inclusivity. Everyone should be able to contribute regardless of their location. See section [Digital Tools](#).

Check-in

For many remote workers who find working from home brings a greater sense of wellbeing, leaders must be cognisant that there could be a honeymoon period. After time, they could start to feel isolated and suffer due to the loss of social interaction, nuance and community which results in lower productivity.

Leaders must check-in on a regular basis with all their employees regardless of location. However, they must be aware of the impact working remotely on a permanent basis may have on some employees. They should reach out and ask how their employees are faring. They should take note if there is a change in language or a change in behavior that may indicate that something is wrong.

If an employee chose to work from home on a permanent basis, they may feel a loss of face if they now admit to wanting to return to the office if even on a part-time basis. As a leader you must assure your employees that whatever their choice, it is not locked in, and can be changed. Your priority is the mental and physical wellbeing of your employees. Period.

If your employee is the 'true' autonomy seeker then no action by you may be required. If they do need a change in their working arrangement work with them to find the best solution. Guide and coach them, allowing them to find the answer that will meet their needs.

What Leaders Must Do Post-Pandemic

Continue to ensure that remote workers are enabled to be productive and connect with their colleagues wherever they are located.

Check-in on a regular basis with every employee and ensure they are both mentally and physically fit to perform as best they can.

Isolated Zoomer

Home office is a lonely cage

This person lives alone without any self-imposed boundaries to keep to a healthy work schedule. They'll return to the office when they trust their employer has taken necessary precautions. They value the office because it offers a way to separate work and life. Days are spent on back-to-back Zoom calls, and despite constant interaction, they feel disconnected. They miss daily social interactions with their colleagues — a major reason they come to the office. Relationships and their support system at work make it easier to navigate challenges.



What Leaders Must Do Now

Help these employees keep to a healthy work schedule; communicate the measures to be taken to provide a safe return to the office; connect these employees with their colleagues; enable a support system for all worker regardless of location.

Healthy work schedule

Many employees working from home, find it difficult to delineate the working day from the rest of the day. Each becomes blurred with the other. This can be especially hard for remote employees who live alone. Just as there are no colleagues around to invite you take a break and get a coffee, go for lunch, and leave for the day, there is no-one at home to do the same.

Leaders must assist these employees to find the right work-life balance. This is the distribution of their time between professional and personal life. A poor work-life balance negatively impacts your employee's health and wellbeing. Leaders must encourage employees to create boundaries between work and their personal life.

One recommendation I make to people especially if they do not have a home office, is to find a place in the home that you will designate as 'the office.' Make it sacrosanct. Do not use the space for anything else but work. Imagine that when you approach this space you are approaching your desk as you did in the office. Work begins. When you leave this space, you are leaving your desk. Work ends. Do not return to this space (your 'desk') unless it is urgent.

Plan an activity that takes place at the end of the working day to delineate it from the rest of the day. This activity is the marker indicating that work has ended. The activity could be a workout, walking the dog, or watching a movie. If you have something to do or somewhere to be at the end of the working day, you are more likely to actually sign off and stop working.

Get your employees to set themselves a work schedule and stick to it. This schedule will tell everyone what hours you are available and be reached. Plan other activities around this schedule. Get some exercise, read a book, do some cooking, do an activity that you find enjoyable such as a hobby. If your employee finds that their schedule is not aligned with the rest of the team and they are having to log on earlier or stay logged on later, then this could be the time to change the schedule and have working hours that make them available that align with the team.

Leaders must communicate that longer working hours are not an expectation when an employee is working remotely. Communicate how important it is to your employee's wellbeing and let them know you support them putting limits around their working hours. When you notice an employee working long hours, check in with them to ensure they are not struggling to switch off and suffering high levels of stress.

As a leader you should lead by example and make wellbeing your own priority. Share with your team how you set the boundaries between work and your personal life, and your team will follow.

Return-to-office plan

These employees want to return to the office once they are assured that the necessary precautions have been taken to ensure their safety. Leaders should allay any concerns these employees, and others, have by communicating what is known and what is unknown about the return to the office.

Communication should be authentic, transparent, and consistent. See section [Address the concerns](#).

As the return to office plans are formulated, progress should be shared and discussed with employees. See section [Return-to-office plan](#).

Connection

This employee, despite constant interaction, feels disconnected. As their leader, you must find ways in which to make them feel connected. Regular check-ins and effective

communication are important for connection but with this employee there is more that you need to do.

Encourage all your employees to talk to each other instead of relying on emails and build an active community. Personal contact helps build connection. Make sure everyone, regardless of where they are located, have access to the same information. Keep them all in the loop about what has happened and what is happening.

Schedule some time in meetings to talk about subjects other than work. This can take many forms and you will need to find the one that works for your team. Don't pick one that results in eye-rolling. You could start a meeting with a check-in from each person about what they did last weekend or are planning to do next weekend. You could play a short game such as two truths and a lie, video charades or hold a virtual scavenger hunt. Mix it up so that you have activities that appeal to everyone in the team.

Whenever it is possible, schedule 'live' team meetings where employees can get together face-to-face. Consider scheduling quarterly, bi-annual, or yearly team meetings where every gets together and interacts.

Invest in technology that enables virtual and spontaneous coffee-breaks such as [spontaneous.li](#), [LEAD](#), [WaterCooler](#), [CoffeeConnect](#) or [Cafecito](#). There are many more platforms like these, so do some research.

Support system

This employee wants the relationships and support system they had in the office. As their leader, you are an integral part of the support system with consistent, clear, and concise communication; regular check-ins; empowerment and trust; support and guidance; coaching and mentoring.

You can also encourage other members of the team to be an effective part of the support system. Assign a buddy to each member of the team who can touch base on a daily (r other regular) basis to see how the other person is doing. The support system becomes more easily accessible and comes to the employee rather than them having to reach out and find it.

You may leave it more fluid and not assign a buddy but ask everyone to reach out to each other on a regular basis and check in on each other's wellbeing. Educate everyone to know what to do if they think that a colleague is having issues. They do not have to deal with the issue, but help the other person get the right help and support.

What Leaders Must Do Post-Pandemic

All employees must be encouraged and supported to maintain a healthy work schedule.

Leaders must regularly check in on the wellbeing of every employee.

Leaders must be aware of proximity bias and placing higher value on an employee they can see in person over one who works remotely. Everyone must be treated equally regardless of where they work otherwise there will be disconnect.

Find innovative ways to keep the team connected and engaged.

Conclusion

The Steelcase researchers have provided some key insights into the experiences and attitudes of employees who have been forced to work from home.

Whether they are still at home or have returned to the office, they have learned from what they have been through and are looking for their organisations, and leaders, to create a better workplace than the one they had before the pandemic.

Working from home is not a one-size-fits-all experience and every leader in every organisation needs to understand the challenges and adversities their employees face.

This paper is aimed at giving insight into many of those situations and how leaders can work toward providing a better experience for their people.

The leaders focus must be on challenges of isolation, connection, engagement, work-life balance, flexibility, wellbeing, and cognitive social experiences.

Leaders who possess emotional intelligence, lead with compassion and empathy, empower, and provide autonomy, and build high-performing teams, will be well placed to overcome the challenges.

