7 Hidden Challenges of Remote Work — and What Leaders Can Do to Solve Each One

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The shift to remote work has turned the business world upside down, bringing both exciting opportunities and unexpected headaches. As someone who's built and advised remote teams, in addition to currently leading my own, I've seen firsthand the hidden challenges that can catch even the savviest businesses off guard.

In this article, we'll dig into the real issues that remote work brings to the table and how to overcome them. Whether you're a seasoned pro or just starting out, these insights will help you set your team up for success in this new world of work.

Related: A Quick Guide to Managing Your Remote Team in the New Normal

Culture

Remote work challenges organizational culture by reducing casual interactions that build trust and camaraderie. Without these organic moments, employees may feel isolated and disconnected.

To counteract this, businesses should:

- Schedule regular social meetings and virtual celebrations to foster non-work interactions and shared

interests. For larger organizations, host department gatherings or off-site retreats; for smaller teams, arrange weekly virtual check-ins. Use icebreakers or prepared topics initially, and consider hiring virtual event planners to facilitate meaningful connections.

- Encourage leadership to hold regular, informal video sessions where employees can drop in to ask questions, share ideas or simply chat, promoting transparency and accessibility.
- Require video-on for meetings whenever possible, as facial expressions and body language foster stronger connections, improve communication and reduce misunderstandings.

Always being “on”

Remote work can blur work-life boundaries, especially in high performers who often struggle to “log off.” This can lead to stress and burnout that impact employee well-being and productivity.

To combat these issues, business owners must rethink productivity measurement and employee time valuation to foster a culture that recognizes rest and personal boundaries as essential factors for sustained performance.

Employers should:

- Implement clear “start” and “end” times to help employees transition between work and personal time.
- Focus on outcomes rather than hours worked to eliminate pressure for constant visibility.
- Perform regular check-ins evaluating workload and stress levels.

- Respect off-hours communication boundaries. Schedule non-urgent messages for business hours and reserve after-hours contact for emergencies only.
- Ensure employees feel comfortable handling personal matters during the day, without hiding it. Life happens even during work hours, and valuing honesty creates a supportive and productive environment.

Compliance

Remote work across state or country lines creates complex legal and tax implications, imposing additional administrative burdens and often requiring companies to overhaul their HR and legal departments.

To navigate this complexity, aim to:

- Prioritize working with local employees or contractors from countries that have tax treaties with the U.S.
- If engaging employees outside the country, use an Employer of Record (EOR) to manage the process, when possible.
- Leverage Professional Employer Organizations (PEOs) to manage HR compliance, payroll and benefits across states.
- Invest in specialized legal and tax counsel familiar with multistate and international employment laws to ensure compliance and mitigate risks.

Related: I've Managed Remote Teams For 15 Years — Here Are My 3 Most Important Leadership Lessons.

Skills gap

Remote work has revealed significant skills gaps, especially in digital proficiency and self-management, among employees transitioning from traditional offices. These gaps can unexpectedly impact productivity, even for diligent workers.

To overcome this, work to:

- Foster a culture where seeking help is encouraged and normalized, rather than stigmatized.
- Train managers to identify and address digital skill gaps, without judgment.
- Implement targeted training programs and provide resources for self-learning on digital tool usage, virtual etiquette, remote time management and digital communication.
- Establish mentorship programs pairing digitally savvy individuals with those needing support.
- Adjust performance metrics to encourage improvement in digital competencies.
- Manage user access permissions carefully to prevent disruptions in critical systems.

Security

Remote work significantly increases the risks of cyber attacks and breaches, transforming each employee’s home into a potential entry point for threats. This necessitates a fundamental rethink of data security approaches, going beyond standard measures like VPNs and encrypted communications.

To address these challenges, strive to:

- Implement robust endpoint protection on all devices accessing company resources.
- Conduct regular security awareness training tailored to remote work scenarios.
- Adopt a zero-trust security model, using tools like multi-factor authentication for verifying every access attempt across all platforms.
- Invest in advanced threat detection and response systems to monitor distributed networks.
- Develop and enforce strict policies for handling sensitive data at home, including password managers, robust password policies and secure file storage protocols.

Management

Remote work has exposed flaws in traditional middle management, shifting the role from task overseers to coaches and facilitators. In distributed teams, effective managers need to set clear expectations, provide context, foster autonomy and evaluate performance based on results, rather than observable “busy work.”

To support this transition, look to:

- Invest in retraining management teams, focusing on emotional intelligence, virtual leadership and digital collaboration skills.
- Implement management frameworks suited to remote work, such as Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) or agile methodologies.
- Encourage a shift towards results-oriented performance evaluations.

- Promote regular, meaningful one-on-one check-ins to maintain connection and provide support.

Related: Get Clear on These 5 Areas to Better Manage Your Remote Workforce

Costs

While businesses often celebrate savings from reduced office space, nearly every challenge we've discussed comes with associated costs, and it's crucial for companies to understand the full financial impact, which can be surprisingly high.

However, while the initial outlay may be significant, many businesses find that the long-term benefits of a well-executed remote work strategy can outweigh these costs.

Here are some costs to consider:

- **Transition costs:** Productivity adjustments, workflow adaptations and technology onboarding.
- **Technology investments:** Project management tools, collaboration tools, cybersecurity systems and IT support.
- **Data and cybersecurity:** Security systems, employee training and ongoing threat detection.
- **Cultural initiatives:** Virtual team-building activities, online social events and off-site retreats.
- **Training and development:** Digital literacy programs, virtual leadership training and ongoing professional development.
- **Legal and compliance:** Specialized legal counsel, Professional Employer Organizations (PEOs) and Employers of Record (EORs).

- **Logistics and shipping:** Costs associated with sending equipment (e.g., computers, monitors) to remote employees, sometimes with expedited shipping for urgent needs.

The challenges of remote work are opportunities to reshape how we think about work itself. We’re not just adapting to a new normal, we’re actively creating it. The most successful companies will embrace this chance to rethink outdated norms and stay ahead of the curve.

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