

Remote Workers Aren't Lazy – They Need Empathy. Here's How to Build Emotional Resilience in a Remote Environment

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Although it may seem new since the pandemic, remote working has been around since the 1960s when approximately 4.7 million Americans worked from home. Those numbers fluctuated between 1960 and 2020 (never dipping below 2.2 or rising above 4.7 million) when things took a dramatic shift once the pandemic hit. As of 2021, it's estimated that more than 27.6 million Americans call home their place of employment.

Before the pandemic, which normalized work-from-home scenarios, so-called freelancers were often viewed with considerable skepticism. Seen as lacking in professionalism and productivity, the clichéd belief was that freelancers showed up to work in their PJs and goofed off all day.

Many in the gig economy have long argued that their productivity is higher due to reduced stress due to a shorter commute, less oversight and office politics. Absent those factors, people can do what they're paid to do and, moreover, strike that much-coveted but often elusive work-life balance.

For better or for worse, the pandemic changed how we work and even live. Indeed, working from home offers flexibility that commuting to an office doesn't. However, it also comes with some unforeseen challenges, such as isolation topping the list.

Adapting to a large portion of the team working remotely (sometimes in different countries), organization leaders manage their team members' productivity differently than when their team members were in an office or a cubicle away. Among the differences is managing and fostering emotional resilience.

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Dissecting emotional resilience

The term "emotional resilience" isn't some 21st-century buzzword bingo. Emmy E. Werner, PhD, a German developmental psychologist, wrote the study, which followed the lives of 698 children in Hawaii.

The 40-year-long study looked at the long-term effects of living in chronic poverty with parents whose education didn't go beyond the eighth grade. Of the 698 participants, 201 were raised in constant strife, which included alcoholism of one or both parents, mental illness and/or divorce. These children were classified as "highly at risk."

However, of note was that one-third of the children from this high-risk group grew into competent young adults who exhibited resilience, eventually thriving in adulthood.

Werner discovered that supportive relationships and individual temperament played significant roles in fostering resilience. Werner's work was pivotal in shifting the focus of psychological research from risk factors to understanding how individuals overcome adversity.

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Applying the Kauai study to today's workforce

Dr. Werner concluded that people considered emotionally resilient are better at managing their emotions, even during times of high stress, and able to stay focused on solving problems. Given this, emotionally resilient employees are less likely to get bogged down by stress while maintaining productivity and engagement.

Given how much the world has changed from the 1960s to today, it's safe to assume the majority of the current 27.6% of remote workers wouldn't have chosen this arrangement, and yet they, like those who have chosen to work from home, have adapted to their "new normal." Without the organic social interactions of an office environment, many remote workers may feel emotionally disconnected from their team and leadership, resulting in less productivity and diminished self-confidence. This is why emotional resilience is more critical than ever.

Buffer is a social media scheduler that also provides analytics. In 2021 and again in 2023, they surveyed people who work from home.

The 2021 survey of 2,300 people revealed that while 97% loved the flexibility of working from home and would recommend it, 27% found it difficult to unplug, 16% struggled with collaboration and another 16% were lonely.

By 2023, Buffer had increased the number of respondents to 3,000 people. Sixteen percent more respondents had learned how to unplug, and the percentage of those who had difficulty communicating and collaborating dropped by half. The numbers of those who experienced loneliness remained unchanged, and worse, 21% resorted to reclusiveness, leaving the house seldomly.

And these numbers make sense. In remote settings, where

communication can feel impersonal and focused more on tasks than comradery, remote workers are challenged to prioritize emotional well-being above managing work outputs.

As it happens, emotional resilience isn't something employees should be expected to develop on their own. More often than not, intentional support from leadership, including clear communication, empathy, and a focus on team connection, is what remote workers need to feel supported.

Related: Remote Work Is Here to Stay. It's Time to Update the Way You Lead.

So, what should a leader or department head do?

Leaders who practice empathy in the workplace foster trust and improved communication, which invariably leads to increased productivity and happy employees.

There are many things heads of organizations and departments can do proactively to minimize the loneliness and disconnected feeling many remote workers experience.

Consider having regular and informal check-ins that go beyond work-related tasks. Inquire about your staff members' well-being and be prepared to engage fully. These one-on-ones can help your team feel supported, which is crucial in a remote environment.

Everyone on your team must take breaks, but it's particularly crucial for those working from home. Prioritizing downtime can go a long way to avoiding workplace burnout.

Consider ways to recreate the sense of community in an office. Virtual team-building activities and recognition events can help build camaraderie and reduce feelings of isolation.

Above all, staff members require safe, open forums where they can express themselves without retribution. Consider anonymous feedback channels or surveys to ensure everyone feels comfortable voicing their thoughts.

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Emotional resilience: Bringing it full circle

Dr. Werner's Kauai Longitudinal Study revealed that supportive relationships and individual temperament played significant roles in fostering resilience. The inverse is true as well. Although temperament plays a role in resilience for many, equally important is the support of interpersonal relationships in those who don't have the same innate coping skills. By anticipating this and being proactive, you can reduce remote working burnout and increase productivity while at the same time instilling trust.

<https://www.entrepreneur.com/leadership/how-to-build-emotional-resilience-in-a-remote-environment/480495>