



Making Remote Work Work

How to Work Remotely & Build Teams from Anywhere in the World

Gil Gildner | Baltika © 2019

Work from the beach, the mountains or your house. Work your own hours, as long as you get the job done. Until the Industrial Revolution, doing your job from home was a worker's only option. Now, remote work may well dominate the labor landscape again. Increasingly, firms are allowing employees to work remotely and, with the onset of COVID-19, many companies and workers had no other option. Writing pre-pandemic, Gil Gildner – cofounder of Discosloth, a fully remote marketing firm – explains everything companies and workers need to know about the pros and cons of virtual work and a virtual workforce.

Take-Aways

- Remote work is not new. It was the standard until the Industrial Revolution.
- Advanced technology has enabled remote work's resurgence.
- Remote work lets people work from anywhere.
- Remote work offers companies numerous benefits, and most remote workers love it.
- Remote work may not be the best option for all organizations or all employees.
- To manage remote work as an employer, pick the right people, build team cohesion and set concrete goals.
- To manage remote work as an employee, continue to network, stay flexible, and maintain a daily, weekly and monthly work structure.

Summary

Remote work is not new. It was the standard until the Industrial Revolution.

While many people assume that remote work is a relatively new phenomenon, it has a venerable pedigree. During most of recorded history, remote work – working from home – was the way most people earned their livings.

“The older and more traditional the industry, the more of a problem you’ll find in their acceptance of remote work as a norm.”

The Industrial Revolution changed that for good. As the world – and the world of work – transformed radically, most workers came to spend their days in factories or offices.

Advanced technology has enabled remote work’s resurgence.

As technology advanced, new tools, including the telegraph, the phone and the fax machine, made it possible for some people to work away from their offices. Initially, only a select few managers and employees could spend most of their time out of the office, including those who had to travel to visit various sub-offices or to see clients.

The computer and the proliferation of internet access meant more and more workers could connect from anywhere around the globe. Early remote workers were webmasters who maintained online forums and blogs and freelance writers and graphic artists. Such freelancers always worked remotely, but inexpensive computing and the web enabled their freedom as never before.

“Just because remote work is on the rise, doesn’t mean it’s the new normal or even that companies really know what to do with it.”

As the internet sped up and the cost of laptops fell, remote work became a more feasible option for increasing numbers of workers and employers. Employees could do their jobs from the comfort of their homes, and firms could function in smaller offices while paying less rent. Virtual work exploded when younger people – digital natives – entered the workforce. They could sum up the issue of remote work in two words: “Why not?”

Remote work lets people work from anywhere.

Depending on their positions, remote workers can join a Silicon Valley company, a Wall Street investment firm or a *Fortune* 500 company from wherever they chose.

“Used to be, you’re competing with others in your city. With remote work, you now live in a city of billions.”

Instead of doing your job from a cookie-cutter office, picture yourself on your laptop amid beautiful scenery. If their employers permitted, almost everyone who works at a computer all day long could make this transition. More and more, employees can have rewarding careers as remote workers.

Remote work offers companies numerous benefits, and most remote workers love it.

As they ponder whether to permit remote work, many managers find it offers attractive benefits, including reduced costs, better coverage of time zones, expansion into new markets, a much wider – indeed, worldwide – availability of talent, more attractive employee perks and a richer diversity of compelling new ideas. Another crucial attribute is increasing the normalcy of remote work: Most remote workers love it.

“There are potentially massive upsides and potentially cataclysmic downsides when you’re dealing with a distributed workforce.”

However, remote work is not a panacea or everybody’s dream. Those who don’t love it, hate it. Most freelancers can’t imagine any other way to work, but middle managers often believe that “distributed teams” are less productive and more difficult to oversee.

Remote work may not be the best option for all organizations or all employees.

Remote work is not the path for nearly four million US retail businesses. It is not a viable option for restaurants and factories, which, together, employ close to 30 million people in the United States.

Remote work has significant downsides even in appropriate industries. Remote workers may advance more slowly and earn less money than their in-office peers, so companies should provide ancillary benefits. Because remote workers can’t easily network with other employees, including their bosses and senior executives, being at home may diminish their chances for promotion. They may also feel socially isolated.

Companies can use different methods, tactics and strategies to mitigate these drawbacks. To aid in their remote workers’ professional development, some companies purchase educational programs or materials for employees, or host online programming. Astute companies gather all their remote workers and team members together, in-person, at least once each year, and may sponsor attendance at relevant conferences or conventions.

Establishing a “communication structure” is vital for remote-work success. Each individual on your remote team is likely to have a preferred way of staying in touch. For everyone to work well together, each person must also accept a common communication standard. A remote work rule of thumb is that the “quality of communication” always matters more than the “quantity of communication.”

“Tools only work well if everybody is using them. Otherwise, you’ll soon discover that some team members will be out of the loop without even knowing it.”

Communication can assume multiple forms: visual, auditory, written and electronic. To avoid burdensome complexity, don’t use more than three or four communication platforms. Discosloth, the author’s remote firm, limits communication to “internal email, Google Chat, Zoom and Google Calendar.”

Use chat for instantaneous communications that require a response within an hour. Email works well for issues that require more detailed explanations within a couple of days. Use phone calls or video chats for immediate person-to-person communications. Set up video meetings to address important mistakes or emergencies, and to conduct “in-depth brainstorming.” The fewer remote meetings you must hold, the better.

To manage remote work as an employer, pick the right people, build team cohesion and set concrete goals.

Managers who want to facilitate remote work should consider these factors:

- **Pick the right people** – Assign only those people who demonstrate a passion for remote work. You want energetic, take-charge, motivated people who don’t need to be told what to do. Lazy or overly dependent remote workers will almost surely fail. Pay attention to personality when interviewing applicants. You may overlook people who seem “slightly weird,” and might not mesh in an office setting, but are outstanding remote workers.
- **Don’t expect recruitment to be easy** – You want excellent communicators, employees you would see as desirable under any circumstances. Don’t hire people who are unhappy in their office jobs and hope that working remotely will improve their mood. Hire self-starters who seek compensation according to their productivity.
- **Interview remotely, but don’t hire remotely** – If you must fly finalists in, do so. You can’t read people reliably in video conference interviews. To get worthwhile answers, you must press job applicants, and you can’t do that over Zoom. When you hire remote workers from other countries, anticipate cultural differences.
- **Avoid online hiring channels** – You will not find the best people on Monster or Indeed. Looking for employees via these channels will only subject you to a deluge of resumes. Encourage current employees to refer people they know for open remote-work positions. You may find remote job boards helpful.
- **Adjust your pay scale for different markets, but pay well to retain talent** – You can pay remote workers from less developed countries cheaper wages than most Western workers expect, but how long can you retain them? To avoid employee turnover and to engender greater equity, Discosloth quadruples the usual local salary for its remote workers in less-developed countries.

- **Once your remote team is set up, work hard to build cohesion** – Stress that each remote team member must pull his or her own weight. Your goal is equal productivity and engagement from each member of your remote team.
- **Establish opportunities for face-to-face meetings** – You and your remote workers will communicate frequently via videoconferencing software. But you want to be with them in-person as often as possible. Plan on meeting with each remote worker quarterly, if possible. If not, hold an annual meeting. When possible, bring everyone together to build team spirit and morale.
- **Evaluate remote workers based on their results** – How do you measure the productivity of remote workers who aren't salespeople? Don't base your assessment on the number of emails they generate, the number of phone calls they make or their screen time. Pay attention to results. Tell remote workers you will monitor their performance. Set their work specifications and goals based on deliverables and outcomes, and review them regularly. Remember "time does not equal productivity."
- **Don't worry about managing across different time zones** – Bridging time zones sets up "naturally occurring asynchronous communication." Individual workers can operate separately and combine their efforts through techniques that don't rely on working at the same time on the same thing. Open-source software exemplifies this phenomenon. An efficient open source task maintains "source code" on platforms such as GitHub, where workers can go to contribute. The absence of a set schedule means people simply add their ideas to the ongoing job during the work hours of their choice.
- **Each company needs its own plan for managing remote work** – Don't expect to find a one-size-fits-all remote management plan. What works for a 10-person firm will not work for a *Fortune* 500 corporation.

Most "small to medium businesses" should establish a strong onboarding scheme, including meeting meet virtually with a new employee each day for his or her first two to four weeks with your company.

"To do well in a remote role, a person needs to be extremely well motivated, have a doggedly hard work ethic and have an outsized amount of personal independence and creativity."

Remote managers should use the best communication software, motivate remote workers with such inducements as bonuses and profit-sharing, and make sure remote workers can operate independently.

To manage remote work as an employee, continue to network, stay flexible, and maintain a daily, weekly and monthly work structure.

If you are an employee seeking a remote job, making the transition to remote work, or deciding to remain remote, bear these considerations in mind:

- **To land a good remote job, claim the attention of the person who does the hiring** – Target the remote jobs you want. Don't waste your time applying for jobs that don't match your skills. During interviews, when you list your work skills, also provide compelling information that sets you apart, such as where you've been in the world, how well you function on your own and how you've made money with your own projects.
- **Create structure in your remote workplace** – One of the saving graces of regular offices is the structure they provide. Build structure in your home office. Create a work schedule and stick to it. Don't create time blocks only for work tasks; schedule fun activities as well. You need "real-life humanity" in your day, every day.
- **Maintain your social connections and network** – Don't sit in your office, day after day, grinding away alone with no social contact. Keep networking. Get out to see other people if you can.
- **Independence is the reward for good work** – People who like remote work generally prize their independence. Stay realistic and mindful of your position, responsibilities and tenure. Whether you work remotely or in an office, your level of freedom will depend on how long you've been with your company and how well you do your work.
- **Remote workers must always be flexible** – This is particularly true when you and your remote team members work from different time zones. Be ready to adjust your work times appropriately.

About the Author

Gil Gildner cofounded Discosloth, a fully remote technical marketing firm, and has created web communities around acoustic music, cult movies, BMWs and vinyl records.



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