

# Communication at the remote work: a huge challenge for leaders.

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**Abstract.** In today's world, remote work is increasingly prevalent. After the pandemic of COVID-19, a lot of companies adopted a virtual environment, causing a change in workspaces and team management approaches. This immense impact obligated some employees around the world to embrace a remote environment and set up new workspaces in their homes. Consequently, the level model of communication in this new workplace changed as well. These rapid changes were unprecedented, although this model is not new. Within this context, it is common that jobs often require teams and their leaders to work from different locations, having virtual interactions. Without physical interactions, this virtual workspace has ushered in a revolution in leaders' communication. Based on a literature review, this research evidences the main challenges that leaders face to keep their communication to a high standard and how to mitigate their impact. It has discussed how to reduce the feeling of isolation in the company, the quality of mental health, and the shift of culture. The results reveal that, for communication to be improved in the future, leaders must enhance informal communication and promote a balanced workplace.

**Keywords.** Remote work. Virtual teams. Communication. Leaders.

## 1. Introduction

In this day and age, everybody knows someone who works from home. Despite remote work is not a new concept, it has grown exponentially, after the pandemic of COVID-19.

Having their jobs from home, without physical proximity, has triggered a rethink and reinventing by the leaders. This paper contributes to the research literature on remote work and the challenges of communication faced by leaders. Among the diverse difficulties of handling virtual teams, this research debates issues such as the isolation of the company, the quality of mental health, and the shift of culture in a virtual environment. The research question is: What are the main challenges faced by leaders in remote work? The purpose of this study is to describe and put forward solutions to minimize these difficulties.

Aiming to answer the research question, this paper was organized as follows sections: Literature review, Methodology, Virtual communication, Conflicts faced in the virtual environment, and Perspectives of the workplace in the postpandemic future. Lastly, all sources consulted were listed in the References.

## 2. Literature review

Based on profound literature research, sustainable by scholarly papers and books, this section presents concepts of remote work.

### 2.1 Remote work

Remote work is not a new condition. In the United States, for example, remote work originated from the Los Angeles smog crisis in the 1970s, when the need to cut air pollution from cars temporarily (Cappelli, 2021). The author explains many people had to work from home, which led to the term "telecommuting," since the telephone was the only connection to the office at the time. At that time, workers must avoid the traffic, seeking to combat dense smoke emissions in Los Angeles. On the other hand, in Brazil, the first mention of remote work was in 2017, when a specific law was promulgated (13.463/2017). According to this Brazilian law, remote work means the work done using IT sources, outside the company's workplace.

According to Watkins (2013), remote work, with virtual teams, are work groups that have some core members who interact primarily through electronic means and are engaged in interdependent tasks. In

other words, they are truly teams and not just groups of independent workers.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, under a global crisis, many businesses around the world suddenly shifted to a virtual workspace. Cappelli (2021) argues that reports on working from home have been remarkably positive, but are not so much good effects in terms of communication. Additionally, Stanier (2022) asserts that remote work developed from a novelty into an essential part of our lives. Working remotely has its many benefits, but like any other job, it also involves many challenges

### 3. Methodology

The current investigation relates to previous research in academic papers cited on Google Scholar, and also books published about remote work.

This background provided subsidies to build the concepts constructed in this research.

### 4. Virtual communication

Communication is the core of a company. Chiavenato (2023: p.135) states that, for many companies, communication represents the most important resource seeking to achieve their objectives. In this context, if people don't know what the objectives are and how to contribute to achieving them, it becomes difficult for them to work together to seek them in the best way possible.

Overall, face-to-face communication is better than virtual when it comes to building relationships and fostering trust, an essential foundation for effective teamwork. Cakula *et al* (2021) claim that communication using technology-based means is not as effective as face-to-face meetings.

In the same vein, Watkins (2013) affirms that communication on virtual teams is often less frequent, and always is less rich than face-to-face interaction, which provides more contextual cues and information about emotional states, such as engagement or lack thereof.

The kinds of interaction in remote work are usually over email. A recent study by Syracuse's Kristin Byron, showed what people know intuitively or have come to learn that using email generally increases the likelihood of conflict and miscommunication. Without physical interactions, communication can cause confusion.

To solve this gap, Mortensen and Hinds suggest that casual, simple, and spontaneous communication radically reduces conflict when people are working from home. They state that taking advantage of opportunities for informal interactions, taking virtual breaks together, and chatting on the phone while peers both sip tea for instance can improve the

connection with employees. The authors also recommend video calls between offices create a shared space and provide more opportunities for these spontaneous workplace conversations.

Thereby, leaders can expand their communication using these tasks in everyday companies.

## 5. Conflicts faced in the virtual environment

The remote workplace needs even more effective leadership. Saunders (2020) claims that when a person who working from home, the work production doesn't have enough visibility with colleagues and managers than should be in a normal mode. Indeed, remote work has paramount new challenges. Phillips (2020) states that as the proportion and frequency of remote working increases, there is a need to cultivate and nurture traits taken for granted in the office, including processes, camaraderie, and culture. Therefore, managers must develop the important qualities to handle a remote workforce such as trust, respect, and better communication.

Technology has been providing useful tools to help managers to amplify their communication. According to Neeley (2022), digital tools such as zoom, Microsoft teams, Google chat, and slack went from useful supplements to daily interactions with coworkers.

Axtell (2016) affirms that the success of remote work leaders is the virtual meeting. It has emerged as the most important method for teams to stay connected, troubleshoot, and discuss any important issues that come up. He also emphasizes that work environments continue to move outside the office, it's vital for leaders to get virtual meetings right.

If leaders do not plan their remote teamwork, they will face some worker conflicts related: to the isolation of the company, quality of mental health, and resistance to shifting the culture.

### 5.1 Isolation of the company

For many employees, the remote work format is an inherently solitary experience. Feelings of isolation arise for workers due to their lack of interaction with their colleagues. Neeley (2022) claims that immersed in a virtual environment, people are not always clear about where they fit on the team and what they need to do. One issue for managers is when team members start to work remotely, they lose the day-to-day contact that they may have had with other teams, such as talking to a colleague, asking a question inside the room, or just catching up. In other words, when employees work from home, they feel disconnected from their organizations.

Cappelli (2021) reports that distance makes it harder for workers to engage, influencing how they are

perceived. He mentions a saying goes, those who are out of sight may become out of mind too. This issue requires leaders to cultivate a sense of belonging daily. In this context, leaders are the figures to build this sense of belonging.

### 5.2 Quality of mental health

Overall, remote working should be good or bad for people, depending on their personality traits. Neeley (2022) points out that psychological safety is a condition that allows coworkers to take risks and admit mistakes without fear of reprisal or shame.

In the virtual environment, leaders need to dedicate additional attention to their subordinates. Thus, leaders need to dedicate more time to their subordinates in order to promote a balance between work and home activities. Some people do not know how to institute boundaries between work and their home. For this kind of personality, limits between work and home can get blurry. There are workers that work all day, in the evenings, and also on weekends. In this context, there is a lack of a barrier, resulting in exhaustion and frustration in their work.

### 5.3 Shift of culture

Organizational culture is typically defined as the “artifacts, values, and assumptions that emerge through the communicative interactions of organizational members” (Keyton, 2011, p. 28). Therefore, building a strong organizational culture requires authentic leadership. Schein (2017: p. 230) mentions that one of the most powerful mechanisms that leaders, managers, or even colleagues must communicate what they believe, the culture, or care about is the fact that they are systematically paying attention. As with all things in business, the day-to-day operations of a team depend on the attention set by the company’s leadership, however, in a remote workplace, it works the hard way.

In virtual work settings, there is usually an absence of informal communication due to employees’ lack of interaction which was previously conducted in hallways, break rooms, and the like in co-located office environments. The absence of face-to-face interaction in remote work environments hinders employees’ ability to recognize underlying assumptions and finer details of communication (Ahuja *et al*, 2003). In fact, virtual companies don’t even have walls on which to display those concepts.

Ferrazi (2015) argues that managing relationships and intensifying the attention of remote employees is to set an appropriate cadence and build the culture. He believes that encouraging constant cadences, by instant messaging should help workers understand their tasks by other vision. Not just an obligation. Thus, leaders who talk to their subordinates frequently make the relationship closer.

## 6. Perspectives of the workplace in the postpandemic future.

In today’s world, people can work anywhere. Therefore, remote work tends to increase faster. Cappelli (2021) asserts the more virtual we are, the less we see each other, consequently, fewer connections peers will have. In other words, there will be less communication. This scenario arouses the leader’s performance since this is a current and paradoxical issue.

Therefore, must be necessary to find new methods to enlarge the interactions under remote management. The previous research indicated to invest in informal communication, with open channels, where leaders must increase their attention with their teams.

In the future of management, Cappelli (2021) suggests two strategies to improve communication in remote work. The first is a two-tier model, where one set of employees is permanently remote, and the other set is in the office. In the second approach, all or almost all employees have the opportunity to occasionally work from home when they want.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper presented, as previously mentioned, the main difficulties of communication faced by leaders in remote work and how to mitigate these questions. The reference supported that the isolation of the company, the quality of mental health, and the shift of culture required more attention and planning by the leaders. There is a distance in communication between employees and leaders when they work in a virtual workspace.

The findings highlight that the suggestion leaders need to stay more connected about work tasks and maintain constant informal communication. Besides that, in the future, remote work will continue to increase, and embrace the new challenges. Managers need to prepare for these incoming environments.

Our study provides the framework for future studies to assess how leaders enhance a hybrid environment, the most promising scenario.

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