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### Article 17: Running a Business Remotely

An evolution of the traditional workplace has been unfolding for some time and the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this movement to a significant extent. Telecommuting, also known as teleworking, working from home, or remote working, is defined by Wikipedia as 'a work arrangement in which employees do not commute or travel to a central place of work, such as an office building, warehouse or store'. According to Forbes, remote work has become the standard mode of operation for at least 50% of the US population and that percentage is about to explode, whether companies are prepared for it or not, and Upwork have predicted that 73% of all teams will have remote workers by 2028. Under the current circumstances many businesses have been forced to reconsider their operational model and adopt digital technologies to become innovatively sustainable.

#### Benefits of working remotely

Digitisation and connectivity have provided access to just about anything with anyone, anywhere. However, running a traditional workplace business is quite different to running a remote business and requires rethinking in terms of the planning and management approach. There are various flexible options available to implement a remote working practice, in that it can be offered full time, part-time or on a rotational basis within the team. This would largely depend on your business requirements, for example a physical supply chain versus a non-goods business service.

Some of the more popular benefits of working remotely include:

- A more results driven and productive business model.
- Quality focused outputs.
- Reduced financial and operational costs.
- A more convenient and private way to work.
- Working space options i.e. from home, flexible workspaces only paid for when used, or public spaces such as coffee shops.

- Digitization of systems and processes (hardware and software) to manage and track everything online e.g. online invoicing, online payment portals, production dashboards, online document storage.
- Many businesses have transformed to an e-Commerce approach facilitating a remote working set-up.

## Managing remote staff

According to LinkedIn, 82% of workers want to work from home at least one day a week and 52% of workers want to work from home at least three days a week. Many staff would perform effectively under remote working conditions, however some may not. Typically business owners resist allowing staff to work from home due to the fear of losing control and not being able to 'see' what staff are doing. Ideally you need staff that are self-motivated, can take initiative, are able to multitask and solve problems. These are either inherent in an individual, require training and development or reveal that you may need to re-address your hiring practices to attract these talents.

These guidelines can assist with managing your team in a 'new' way:

- 1) Clear expectations, workflow/processes and tracking measures are critical to ensure your team understand what is required of them and how they will be monitored. An effective and updated task management system will also add great value to keeping on top of things. This can be accomplished through an excel spreadsheet or the many available (free or paid for) software programs such as Trello, Accelo, monday.com, Smartsheet, [sweetprocess.com](https://www.sweetprocess.com) and others, click on this link to find more examples: <https://www.freefind.co.za/best-project-management-software-in-south-africa/>.
- 2) Investigate file sharing options such as Google Docs, OneDrive, DropBox, Microsoft Teams or Sharepoint for effective document management, sharing and storage required for the teams activities, tasks or projects.
- 3) Working from home requires a fair amount of discipline and creating a team and individual schedule will assist with focusing on tasks, managing time and operating consistently.
- 4) Regular contact and check-in initiatives are extremely important and can be arranged through virtual meetings/calls daily, weekly, individually or collectively allowing everyone to address any barriers, challenges, questions and progress pertaining to the required tasks. Article 13 in this series, [Basics of Virtual Meetings](#), covers the various virtual meeting platforms that can be considered.
- 5) The regular check-ins are also an ideal opportunity for a 'mental health' check-in and providing any necessary support. As much as flexible working arrangements are preferred and supported by staff, working from home can cause loneliness and high stress levels.
- 6) It is advisable to document a remote working policy which is an agreement outlining when and how employees can work from locations other than the office. It covers all the expectations and responsibilities of employees and the legal rights of remote employees. You can use free templates to help set this up, click on this link for one such example: <https://www.owlabs.com/blog/remote-work-policy>. Ensure that all your staff receive a copy of the policy, understand the contents and have an opportunity to ask questions for clarity.

## Risks associated with remote working

Consider that not everyone is productive at the same time of the day and a traditional 8 hours, 9am to 5pm day may not be feasible for all for remote working. Speak to your staff about flexible hours and how best to approach their workload. This also assists with setting realistic boundaries for working hours, as it is easy to overstep them causing high stress levels and potential mental or other health issues. This also applies to you: switch up your environment (work from another space if possible), make sure you have regular breaks and exercise.

Working remotely also requires that everyone is more diligent in checking emails, voicemails, text messages etc, as well as communicating when they are 'offline'. Creating a consistent schedule helps to implement a balanced daily routine and manage time effectively.

Isolation, as mentioned previously, can cause a severe negative impact on productivity and creating a sense of belonging in the team will go a long way. This is achieved through regular contact, some 'social' online time and keeping the team aligned to the business values and culture.

Keep in touch with all role-players in your business more regularly such as suppliers and customers. Things can go wrong fast and it is best to ensure everyone knows how to engage with you and how operating procedures have changed.

Working remotely can also expose a business to potential cyber- attacks and information breaches, therefore the necessary security measures need to put in place immediately to secure all hardware and confidential data. Article 15 in this series, [Understanding Cyber Security](#), provides more insight and practical steps on this very important matter.

Give it time, it's not always easy and you need to allow time to transition to the new way of working. Be open to feedback and consider any suggestions made from staff, suppliers or customers to improve things.

### **Equipment and furniture to working remotely**

There are a few essential and optional tools required to participate in the virtual work environment. The recommended tools include:

- A **laptop or desktop** computer. This may be the same unit as used in the office, but relocated to the employee's home.
- **Stable connectivity.** The computer needs to be connected to others and at the simplest level, this may be general communications via the Internet. The use of a VPN (virtual private network) will add an element of cyber-security.
- A **cellphone.** Cellphones are nearly ubiquitous with national population coverage approaching 100%. The remote worker may make and receive calls via the conventional cellphone network (from other cellphones, landlines, international calls, premium rate numbers etc.). A cellphone can also be used for messaging applications such as SMS, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Telegram and others.
- A **printer and/or scanner.** If access to alternative printing or scanning options is not available, you may need to invest in a printer and/or scanner, or use the unit from the office. In general, the need for hardcopies is on the decline, and these peripherals may not be required.
- A **conference speaker and webcam.** These are required for virtual meetings and calls to staff, suppliers or customers. If these are not built into the laptop or desktop you are using, you may need to purchase/hire/borrow them.
- A **file cabinet (fire-safe box).** If you are printing documents and need secure storage consider a file cabinet and possibly a fire-safe box.
- A **practical desk and comfortable chair.** You will be spending a considerable amount of time on your equipment, potentially more than usual, so it is advisable to make use of a practical desk and comfortable chair.
- A **dedicated space.** Whether you are working from home or at an alternative work space, ensure that it is a conducive working space free from distractions.

- **Adequate lighting.** Digital eyestrain can lead to temporary or permanent eye damage, so make sure the lighting where you are working is decent and you have regular breaks from the screen.
- Sufficient **stationary.** You need the basic stationary similar to what you may have utilized in the office.
- Some **plants and photos.** These are optional and could help to make your work space more personal and cheerful.
- Given the risk of load-shedding in South Africa, a **UPS** (uninterruptable power supply) will keep your equipment running and minimise downtime while the lights are out. Remember to include your communications device (e.g. fibre router and cordless telephone base station) powered too so as not to miss any important calls.

## Case study for working from home

In some instances, it is recommended to 'test run' the working from home (WFH) concept with your team and then decide whether to pursue it permanently and how best to implement the transition to reduce productivity disruptions as far as possible.

Let's take a look at a working from home (WFH) experiment at CTrip, a 16,000- employee, NASDAQ-listed Chinese travel agency. Call centre employees who volunteered to WFH were randomly assigned to work from home or in the office for 9 months. Homeworking led to a 13% performance increase, of which about 9% was from working more minutes per shift (fewer breaks and sick-days) and 4% from more calls per minute (attributed to a quieter working environment). Home workers also reported improved work satisfaction and experienced less turnover, but their promotion rate conditional on performance fell.

Due to the success of the experiment, CTrip rolled-out the option to WFH to the whole firm and allowed the experimental employees to re-select between the home or office. Interestingly, over half of them switched, which led to the gains from WFH almost doubling to 22%. This highlights the benefits of learning and selection effects when adopting modern management practices like WFH.

Click on the following link for more information on this experiment: <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/working-papers/does-working-home-work-evidence-chinese-experiment>.

There are many other case studies and research to support the success of remote working and learnings to help other businesses transform into the digital working environment successfully.

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