



ESTABLISHING AND ENGAGING A REMOTE WORKFORCE

Chris Dyer & Kim Shepherd

Who Can Work From Home?

As businesses open up, lockdowns lift and vaccine roll-outs continue, the workplace shows signs of returning to a new 'business as usual.' With some offices adopting hybrid office/remote working models while others make the complete shift to one or the other, you need to understand what type of employee will thrive in a fully-remote work environment and what kind of support to offer those who may miss a full-time office setting.

Not everyone can work successfully from home. If your company had a large number of employees start working from home in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, you probably discovered that it was easier for some than for others.

Kim had a similar experience when Decision Toolbox went remote. The company had 37 employees in 2001. Though all said they were onboard with working from home, for some it wasn't ideal; it was a situation to accept partly because in the months immediately following the 9/11 attacks, jobs in the recruitment industry became scarce.

Kim had a conversation with each person, probing to find out whether each was prepared for the transition, and what the company could do to facilitate it. Some of the questions were, 'Do you need to be around people in order to be fulfilled?' and 'Do you have a quiet space at home where you can work undisturbed?' Following these conversations, four people chose to leave the company.

Both of us have worked with people who thrive working remotely, and with people who just aren't a good fit. There isn't a single formula for knowing which person is which, particularly as you are screening candidates. As Chris says, 'I can't tell you what poor candidate for remote work looks like, but I know one when I see them.' Still, there are some characteristics that seem to help people succeed. You can use this information to help existing employees develop their 'remoteability' or to evaluate candidates before hiring them.

PERSONALITY TYPES

You probably know people who walk into a room and command it, whether through physical size or charisma. These individuals won't be able to do that in a remote model and, if their self-confidence relies heavily on that ability, they may become frustrated. Their charisma may come across in a Zoom meeting, but we're inclined to think that it won't, at least not to the same extent as it does in an in-person meeting.

Another type you may know is the person who takes pride in knowing all the gossip, from office politics to personal information. Perhaps they sit near the water cooler, or they're very good at the gossip game. The transition to remote will change the dynamic. We're not saying that remote employees don't 'dish the dirt'. In fact, [writing in Psychology Today, Jennifer Haupt](#) cites a study demonstrating that workplace gossip can be positive. Gossip allows people to get things off their chest, instead of holding on to negative feelings. Haupt argues that it also encourages cooperation, relieves stress, fosters self-improvement and provides a valuable reality check.

A [Fast Company article](#) by Stephanie Vozza makes the same argument, drawing on a number of studies. She says that gossip accomplishes the same things as in Haupt's argument, and adds that it helps identify issues that need to be addressed.

Certainly, office gossip requires different channels in a remote model, such as email or instant messaging. But more importantly, the performance-based culture we advocate is likely to attract people whose interest in gossip is minimal.

Some people thrive on being better than others. They dress better, eat at the best restaurants, drink the best wine, or have the most amazing kids. This type also will be thwarted in a remote model. Again, it's possible to brag via instant messenger, but in the culture we promote, people stand out via results and performance, not designer clothes.

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If you are going remote and your team includes these personality types, you should have a frank conversation with them. It may very well be that they will be happier in a brick-and-mortar office, which may mean leaving your company. If you want to retain them, you'll need to help them explore other ways of finding fulfilment in the new model. The office gossip might take a leadership role in organizing online social events. The wine connoisseur could start a monthly virtual tasting club. However, more important may be the 'soft skills' that enable some people to thrive in a remote model.

CHARACTERISTICS AND SKILLS

Those who excel in a remote model share some skills and characteristics. By skills we mean things that can be learned, like communication, analysis and time management. Skills help people perform better. Characteristics, on the other hand, come from values and personality, and include things like accountability, thoroughness and compassion. Characteristics can be negative, but the positive ones enable a person to add value beyond pure performance.

When we started to brainstorm a list of those qualities, we realized it was a lot of the same qualities that help people thrive in an office setting. The difference, however, is that these qualities need to be heightened or well honed in order to drive remote success. For example, a sense of responsibility is valuable in any setting, but absolutely essential in a remote model, in which people work independently.

We interviewed consultant Jackson Lynch, who has worked at and with a number of companies (including PepsiCo and Nestlé) in various capacities, including forming and leading remote teams. He shared some of the characteristics that he believes are essential for remote employees. They include:

- **Very strong critical thinking skills.** You want that in just about any employee, but Jackson explained that prioritization is different in remote work.
- **Collaboration** and, because collaboration is harder in a remote model, those who are thoughtful and deliberate collaborators will stand out.
- **Professional drive,** or the motivation to build one's talents, both horizontally and vertically.
- **A results orientation and sense of urgency** are also important, and a remote model will reveal those who lack these traits faster than a sticks-and-bricks model will.

Another important skill Jackson emphasized is clear communication. Just about every job posting you'll see asks for 'excellent communication skills,' but they become indispensable in remote work. One reason is that, in a remote model, you often lose body language, facial expressions and intonation in most communication channels. You may have heard of the work of Dr Albert Mehrabian, who concluded that communication is 7%, 38% vocal and 55% visual. By 'vocal' he means intonation, volume, etc. That means that 93% of communication is nonverbal.

The remote model allows for some nonverbal communication, such as intonation over the phone and facial expression in video meetings. However, according to Jackson, letters, emails and even instant messages require excellent writing, grammar and spelling skills. Some jobs don't require mastery in this area, but any job that requires a good deal of collaboration will require pretty strong communication skills.

Within the context of communication, good writing is a skill that can be learned. One important point is that in good writing, clarity is the primary goal, and style is a secondary one.

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MORE CHARACTERISTICS AND SKILLS

Additional insight comes from Lisette Sutherland's 2018 book, *Work Together Anywhere*. She argues that, to excel in a remote model, employees should have:

- technical savvy;
- problem solving and troubleshooting skills;
- a proactive mindset;
- the ability to work independently and be a team player;
- reliability;
- high responsiveness;
- a pleasant and positive attitude;
- a supportive attitude towards others;
- receptivity to feedback

WORK ETHIC

This is another characteristic of a good employee in any setting, but there are unique aspects to work ethic when working remotely. For one thing, assuming you follow our model and implement performance metrics, poor performers are revealed pretty quickly. Regarding work ethic, however, we suggest that, when you go remote, you set expectations and clarify just how you will measure performance. When a low performer is revealed, you can act quickly to find out what the problem is and address it.

Self-discipline is non-negotiable in remote. Working from home is fraught with multiple demands for attention, including children, pets, television and chores. One of the reasons that remote is great for leaders is that it gives you time for quiet reflection. And that's good for everyone else as well. However, as many people discovered during the peak of COVID-19, having family members of different generations at home when you are working there is both a blessing and a challenge.

WORK ETHICS GONE WILD

Another interesting take on work ethic in remote settings comes from Leigh Thompson, professor at the Kellogg School of Business. While a strong work ethic is desirable, she argues, too much of a good thing can be a problem. In 2014, she and Sarah Townsend conducted a study to determine how high levels of the Protestant work ethic (PWE) influence individuals and teams. Building on the early 20th-century work of Max Weber, they simplified the concept of PWE into 'The belief that hard work and the delay of gratification will lead to success.'

Based on that study, Thompson believes that people with very high PWE may be at risk in four ways in a [remote model](#):

- 1. These people work harder, putting in long hours.** They have a hard time letting go and may work on a problem long after others would have escalated it or accepted it as unsolvable. Control is important, but they may feel that they have less control in the remote scenario. All of this is a recipe for burnout and frustration. If you have someone like this on your team, you should help them create boundaries around work hours, such as setting a timer or alarm to remind them to stop working and do something else. You can also help them adopt new ways to control the things that need to be controlled. For example, if they lead a team, they may feel a loss of control because they are not able to directly supervise them. Help them understand that, in the remote model, 'control' will come from monitoring their team's performance metrics rather than observing their work habits or micromanaging them.
- 2. Those with high PWE typically eschew socializing and dive right into work.** However, some socializing is important and necessary to a healthy culture. Thompson believes that this all-work-no-play approach can be damaging to morale and lead to unrealistic expectations. One way to help your high-PWE employees with this is to create social and/or teambuilding events and make it clear that you expect this person to participate. In this way, your high-PWE colleagues are encouraged to not focus solely on work and the team itself becomes more cohesive through different forms of communication.

- 3. This type of person usually sees challenges and crises as competition**—the unhealthy kind: a sort of workplace Darwinism in which only the strong will survive. Recognition is an essential part of any healthy culture, but high-PWE employees may crave it more than others. Make a point of sharing this person’s successes without giving them more attention than you give others—sometimes a comment like ‘great job’ can make a big difference. On the other hand, guard against letting these employees set themselves too far apart by promoting collaboration as a key value in the culture.

- 4. High-PWE people become frustrated when others don’t seem to want to work as hard as they do.** This can be particularly problematic if the high-PWE person is a supervisor or manager, constantly checking up on team members. Remote workers have enough distractions without being micromanaged. You’ll need this person to buy in on the use of performance-based metrics. One way you might do this is to set this expectation and hold the person accountable. You can also encourage them to use the metrics in their weekly team stand-ups—that will help them own the metric-based approach to supervision. In addition, they will have to come to terms with the new reality: as long as a team member hits the target metrics, it doesn’t matter how hard they worked, how many hours they put in, or when they did the work.

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HELPING EXISTING STAFF THROUGH THE TRANSITION

Setting your existing employees up for success as you go remote will require a fair amount of training. We've shared several tactics for doing this, such as ensuring each team member has good time management skills. If you have been conceiving of your role as 'boss,' it's time to reinvent yourself as a mentor and coach. You are a facilitator who helps team members solve problems and achieve goals. Coaches may be tough at times and encouraging at others, but they should always focus on helping their team members and teams succeed.

Most importantly, ask your people what they need. It's great to encourage input, but don't just sit and wait for it. First of all, it shows that you care about your employees' well-being, and that can be motivating in and of itself. Find out what challenges they are facing and help them overcome those challenges. At the same time—and this is something of a balancing act—respect their autonomy and encourage them to be resourceful and self-sufficient.

SCREENING FOR REMOTE SUCCESS

When you are bringing on new employees, there are ways to help predict whether or not they will be effective in a remote model. One way is to determine whether or not they can follow easy-to-understand instructions. This can be embedded in the recruiting/onboarding process, such as asking them to go online to schedule an interview or take and submit a personality assessment. Good remote employees are self-reliant, and if simple instructions are a challenge, it might be a red flag.

Chris has a clever assessment tool. He asks candidates to state the difference between Louis Armstrong, Neil Armstrong, and Lance Armstrong. It's a virtual test and the answer is written. Obviously if someone gets the answers wrong, that's a very bad sign. But the way a candidate answers the question can be insightful.

For example, if concise communication is important in the open position, the ideal answer is something like, 'trumpeter, astronaut, cyclist.' If research is an important skill for the position, you want to see evidence that the candidate did some digging. On the other hand, if the answer is clearly copied and pasted, that's a red flag.

With any kind of assigned task, you want to see that a candidate can work independently and resourcefully. At the same time, it can be a good sign when a candidate 'raises their hand' to ask for help. This person is showing that their ego doesn't get in the way of achieving goals. In fact, it takes some courage for a candidate to admit to a prospective employer that they need help with an assignment.

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Your process will probably involve a video interview with candidates. If someone struggles with the technology to get into that interview, it may be a bad sign. Someone with high 'remoteability' will take time in advance of the interview to make sure everything is good to go.

We do advise against using any single weak spot as the lone deciding factor. For example, suppose you have a video interview and notice, in the background, that the candidate's bed isn't made or the living room is a mess. You might be tempted to think, 'Well, they didn't make much effort to put their best foot forward.' That may be true, but it also may be that they dealt with an emergency earlier that day, and making the bed was simply pushed off the to-do list.

Another way to identify potential remote talent is to consider candidate pools made up of people who often are overlooked or rejected by brick-and-mortar employers. Remote work can provide opportunities that are otherwise unavailable to some, and one would expect that these candidates are highly motivated to make it work. Who are we talking about?

FISHING IN NEW TALENT POOLS

We're talking about military spouses, people with physical disabilities and 'non-traditional' employees. Many companies shy away from military spouses because there is a good chance they will be transferred. As a remote employer, you don't have to worry about this. Even if an employee is transferred to another country, you can make it work with much less effort than it would take to replace that employee.

From our experience, they may need a couple of personal days to make the move and settle in, but that's barely a bump in the road. In *Get Scrappy*, which Kim co-wrote with Dave Berkus, she relates the story of two very talented but non-traditional employees. One was a military spouse who was director of recruitment quality and client engagement. While this individual's family lived in Dallas, her husband, a naval officer, was posted to Hawaii for several months. She packed up the kids to be right there with him and didn't miss a beat with her work.

The other was an accounting/HR assistant who worked six months of the year from on board a clipper ship in Connecticut, and the other six months from the jungles of Costa Rica. She also spent time, including working, on a Coboat excursion—an 82-foot sailing catamaran with satellite connectivity designed for 'digital nomads and entrepreneurs.'

Another underutilized talent pool is people with physical disabilities. Not every brick-and-mortar facility has the accommodations, and even if they do, transportation may be challenging. Not only can you engage talent that your competitors miss out on, but you also might develop a reputation for being a disability-friendly employer. Talented people with disabilities might seek you out. [Brian Havens states](#) that people with disabilities are employed at about half the rate that non-disabled people are. There are, no doubt, many reasons for this, but one of them may be that these well-meaning employers don't offer remote options.

It certainly is possible that neurodiverse people can succeed in a remote model. According to [disabled-world.com](#), neurodiversity is 'an approach to learning and disability that argues diverse neurological conditions are the result of normal variations in the human genome.' Such conditions include autism, ADHD and dyslexia.

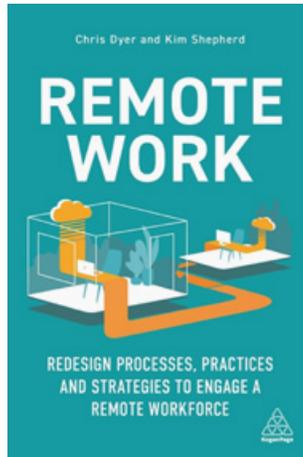
In the spirit of full disclosure, this is not an area in which we have deep expertise. These conditions vary widely from individual to individual—one reason that people often speak of autism as a spectrum rather than a single condition. For that reason, you will have to assess neurodiverse candidates on a case-by-case basis.

For example, [AutismSpeaks.org](https://autismspeaks.org) says that many employers don't realize that people with autism can have 'intense attention to detail, commitment to quality and consistency, creative and "out of the box" thinking, the ability to excel on repetitive tasks, lower turnover rates, honesty and loyalty.' On the other hand, those with autism are often challenged in the areas of interpersonal interactions and communication. We've already emphasized the importance of these characteristics in the remote model, so there is your challenge as an employer.

There are things you can do, as an employer, to support neurodiverse employees, and it can depend on specific individual needs. Writing on [SHRM.org](https://shrm.org), Taryn Oesch says that support can range from on-the-job training in communication and interpersonal skills to engaging help from organizations that specialize in helping neurodiverse individuals succeed at work. The article also recommends pairing neurodiverse individuals with neurotypical 'buddies' who can help them. If you want more information, we suggest starting with the articles cited here.

Determining which employees can and can't work from home is not as simple as it seems. There are a lot of factors at play, and a person may have one skill set that outweighs a drawback. We're inclined to believe that almost anyone can do it, but it falls to you, as the leader and mentor, to help them be successful. 📌

Info



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