

Supporting remote working

Behavioural insights strategies to boost productivity and wellbeing

Behavioural insights strategies to help your team work remotely

Teams are increasingly working remotely to limit the spread with COVID-19. As with any change, it can take time to get the most out of new working arrangements. The good news is that behavioural scientists have been researching strategies to get the most out of teams while they are not sharing a physical location.

The NSW Behavioural Insights Unit have summarised our top five behavioural strategies for you and your teams to get the most out of working remotely.

1. Communicate in bursts

Researchers have shown that teams working remotely who communicate in bursts—exchanging messages quickly during periods of high activity—perform much better than teams whose conversations involve a long lag time between responses and are spread across multiple topic threads¹.

Intuitively, we may think that constant communication is the most effective and productive, but the research points to bursts of rapid communication, followed by longer periods of silence. These bursts of communication and with periods of silence are the hallmarks associated with the most successful teams.

How do you do this?

- Schedule short, regular catchups: The goal should be to agree priorities and allow time for energetic collaboration, followed by a period of truly focussed work time.
- Minimise channels: It can be tempting to keep conversations going through multiple different channels (emails, Slack, phone calls, IMs) but we're more likely to be productive if we keep thoughts together in just a few channels. This can allow for more focussed work time, reduce stress and the likelihood of burnout!

2. Get SMART with goals

Although setting SMART goals (i.e. specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-based) is common for most teams, they become even more important when working from different locations.

When working remotely, there are less opportunities for spontaneous conversations, for example, overhearing a colleague's conversation and identifying the need to collaborate. Without these spontaneous opportunities it is more important to set clear goals and timeframes.

How do you do this?

- In your regular 'bursts' ask team members to share their SMART goals for the day or week.
- Share goals across the team to ensure that you're all working in the same direction.

3. Create time for team collaboration

With teams working remotely, employees can quickly feel isolated and de-motivated. Rallying the team around a shared goal can help to keep momentum. In the Behavioural Insights Unit, we often run digital brainstorms - sessions where team members share their thoughts in a shared document (e.g. Teams on O365). Everyone can see what others are thinking and it allows team members to build on others' ideas, but without being together in the room. We use this over traditional methods because it helps to avoid key behavioural challenges like Groupthink² and allows time for individuals to work alone first. Working alone first encourages more creative approaches and input from more people in your team.³

¹ Riedl, Christoph and Woolley, Anita Williams, Teams vs. Crowds: A Field Test of the Relative Contribution of Incentives, Member Ability, and Emergent Collaboration to Crowd-Based Problem Solving Performance (December 8, 2016). Academy of Management Discoveries, 3(4), 382-403. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2384068>

² Janis, I. L. (1972). Victims of groupthink: A psychological study of foreign-policy decisions and fiascoes.

³ <https://hbr.org/2017/05/your-team-is-brainstorming-all-wrong>

How do you do this?

- Think about a key challenge for your team or a project you're working on. Set up a document that you can share and edit simultaneously.
- To boost creativity, suggest your team members think of two ideas that are feasible or practical and one that is out of the box!

4. Create opportunities for 'deep work'

Deep work is the ability to focus without distraction on a cognitively demanding task. Having time for deep work allows you to master complicated information and produce better results in less time.

When working remotely teams may have more time for 'deep work', noting some employees may have more distractions and responsibilities. Research shows that juggling several tasks and disruptions can create an 'attentional residue' – a phenomenon where even though attention is shifted, a small amount of attention remains on the previous task making us less focused on the new task⁴.

How do you do this?

- Embrace the opportunity for deep work in the team. Think about a task that requires deep focussed thinking and prioritise that.
- Consider what deep work you have for the day and schedule those tasks for when you are likely to have the fewest distractions. Consider sharing deep work with a colleague who might have fewer distractions.

5. Build in habits to foster psychological detachment from work

Many of us already battle thoughts about work intruding on our leisure time. Organisational psychologists have been studying how we can best leave those thoughts of work behind when we're no longer at work. It is a concept known as psychological detachment⁵.

Psychological detachment can become harder when we're no longer physically detaching from work. Building in strategies to foster psychological detachment has been shown to be an important way to maintain wellbeing and reduce stress.

How do you do this?

- Make time for activities that are enjoyable and active. Consider building in a creative task that you enjoy at the end of the day as a transition from work to leisure.
- Try to create a routine of when you are working and when you're not.
- Think about physical cues (e.g. a dedicated workstation) that allow you to transition from work to leisure. Leaving this work zone means you're no longer 'at work'. If physical space is not an option, perhaps visualise 'leaving work' or send a "goodbye" email to delineate work time and maintain social contact.

What to read next?

- The NSW Public Service Commission [resources for managers](#) on how to manage dispersed and flexible teams:
- [A Guide to Managing Your \(Newly\) Remote Workers](#)
- [Managed Remote Working: Building a sustainable way of working](#)
- [15 Questions About Remote Work, Answered](#)

⁴ Leroy, S. (2009). Why is it so hard to do my work? The challenge of attention residue when switching between work tasks. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 109(2), 168-181.

⁵ Sonnentag, S., & Bayer, U. V. (2005). Switching off mentally: predictors and consequences of psychological detachment from work during off-job time. *Journal of occupational health psychology*, 10(4), 393.