

11 Pitfalls of Remote Work and How to Avoid Them



If you're struggling to feel settled at the makeshift workspace you've set up in your kitchen, or you're taking work calls from your closet in an attempt to minimize interruptions from your kids, you're not alone. The "rapid remote" shift many of us have undergone in the last few weeks due to COVID-19 brings its own set of challenges, far beyond the normal ones remote workers deal with daily.

Sacha Connor, Founder and CEO of [Virtual Work Insider](#), a consultancy that coaches organizations to work seamlessly across any distance, offers a reminder: "Have patience with yourself."

A veteran of remote work, Sacha has led large distributed teams for eight years. As one of the first remote marketing directors at The Clorox Company, she led brands worth over \$250 million and was the first fully remote member of the leadership team for a \$1 billion division. She now specializes in training geographically distributed and remote teams within companies and agencies.

"This situation right now—this rapid remote work—is the greatest empathy exercise you could have ever asked for," she says. Many companies were already shifting towards remote and distributed teams, and she expects that trend to continue. Leaders and teammates who may go back to in-office work after COVID-19 are getting the benefit of practicing this new way of working and, hopefully, learning tactics and norms they'll continue to use in the future. But it's a bumpy transition for many.

In this episode of the [Creative Confidence Podcast](#), Sacha shares 11 pitfalls to look out for when working remotely and strategies for success.

1. Dangerous delay mindset

Sacha sees this all the time: “The normal tendency when you're working in a team that's distributed across distance is to save up all the harder work until everybody's together in person,” leading to an imbalance in workload and stalled progress. While that approach might work if you'll only be working remotely for a week or two, we have no idea how long social distancing measures will need to stay in place for COVID-19. Not to mention, many companies are permanently shifting to partial or fully remote team structures. “Avoid that dangerous delay mindset where we're pushing things off until we are back together in person and instead move to a transition mindset,” she recommends. It might feel harder in the moment, but think about how you can adapt to keep productivity rolling in a virtual setting.

2. Thinking digital tools are all you need

When making the shift to a partially remote or fully distributed team, many people first look to load up on digital tools, like video conferencing or virtual brainstorming. While the tools you use are important, Sacha says the first step should actually be setting expectations, communication norms, and availability norms. Availability norms might include set meeting hours for synchronous work, virtual watercooler meetings, a daily time when everyone is available on chat channels, or different working hours for individual team members (communicated clearly to others).

The important part is that your entire team is on the same page. Signing up for video conferencing software won't help if you haven't agreed on how and when you will use it. “If you have that structure and those expectations set, then things can run more smoothly,” she says.

3. Not having the right tools

Once you've set expectations around how your team will work remotely, it's time to find the right tools. Video conferencing is a must on Sacha's list. Be sure to review the limitations (like number of people viewable on screen at a time) and benefits (like breakout rooms) of each platform. Consider video notes instead of emails or chat for more personalized communication. Virtual brainstorming tools are good for both synchronous and asynchronous work. Get to know the tools because “it's really about how the facilitator is using them to come together,” Sacha says. Sacha shares specific tools she likes in the podcast episode.

If you're nervous about using new tech, try it out with a small “safe” group before implementing in an important meeting. If you don't have the budget, it's OK to go low-tech. Have one person

on your call jot ideas down on sticky notes and send a photo to the group afterward. You can do a lot with free programs and shared documents when you think creatively.

4. Miscommunication

Without in-person meetings and visible body language cues, messages can easily get lost in translation. A dearth of communication tools also makes it easy to miss things if you're not constantly checking multiple channels. On top of that, people new to remote work might feel like they're annoying others with too many messages. But working remotely requires overcommunication. Know that it might take some time for your team to get used to this. Speed up the process by agreeing to communication norms. "Talk about how you are going to use different communication channels for different types of communication," Sacha recommends.

5. Mistrust

Organizations that aren't used to remote work can sometimes approach it from a place of mistrust and micromanaging—worried primarily that productivity will drop. Sacha says it's important for leaders to focus on building trust by being open with their teams. "By them showing their vulnerability, that will invite the vulnerability of others to be able to speak up and say what's going on with them and ask for what they need," she says. Assume good intent, and verbalize the trust you have in your team to do their best.

6. Burnout

"Managers need to worry more about the burnout right now than they need to be worrying that people aren't trying to get the work done," Sacha says. Remote workers often end up working more than they would have otherwise because they want to prove that they're being productive. We also have to multitask and switch between tasks—something studies show reduces productivity and lowers IQ—more than ever before.

As a leader, "make sure that you're keeping in mind both people and productivity," Sacha says. Check in frequently with your team to monitor how they're feeling about their workload and model behavior for signing offline at the end of the day.

7. Distance bias

It's easy for people to forget about you when you're not physically in the office or showing up on their video calls often—something the NeuroLeadership Institute calls distance bias. Sacha remembers a time as a remote manager when she accidentally left one of her direct reports out of an important decision. When he came to her upset with the oversight, she felt terrible. A

communication audit helped identify what happened—he'd been responsive to her questions, but didn't often reach out with new ideas or to ask for help. He thought he was helping by “staying out of her hair.” The audit enabled a good conversation about the importance of proactive communication to stay top of mind with your boss and teammates.

Staying top of mind is critical to having influence in the workplace. Great ideas won't go far if you can't convince others to get on board. Sacha says having an impact from a distance relies on crafting a virtual influence plan: mapping out your sphere of influence, prioritizing key stakeholders, understanding their communication preferences, and determining tactics you'll use to reach them.

8. Culture taking a backseat

It's true, culture building is easier to do in person. But that's not a good enough reason to ditch the effort when working as a virtual team. Culture is critical to balancing burnout, building trust, and connecting people in a human way that fuels motivation and happiness. Sacha says all remote teams need to create a plan for culture building over distance. “This is the time for activity creativity,” she says. “Take all of those things that you used to do offline and pull them online.” Focus on inclusivity—ensuring everyone, whether remote or in person, in your time zone or halfway around the world, can participate. She likes virtual happy hours or dance parties where each video participant adds a new move to the previous person's groove. It'll feel awkward, but it's a great way to release tension. On a daily basis, try opening your video calls with a human moment, like asking how people are feeling today or doing a quick creative warm up.

9. Too many meetings

At first, remote workers may love the feeling of productivity their virtual environment allows—you don't lose any time walking to a different conference room or taking a bathroom break when jumping from one video call to the next. But that benefit soon turns into a hurdle when video calls run nonstop for eight hours or more. One solution to the too many meetings problem is to be more thoughtful about synchronous and asynchronous work. “Everybody has such limited time and limited ability to focus right now,” Sacha says. “Think about what needs to be done all together versus what can be done apart.”

10. Lack of meeting preparation

Assuming you can run a virtual meeting the same way you would an in-person one is a mistake. Plan for even more preparation. If you're limiting meetings to only the most important live moments (as you should be), your goal should be to maximize efficiency. A meeting that feels

pointless wastes time and drains energy. Come to each meeting with a clear purpose and plan for facilitation, and leave with action items that are communicated to the group.

11. Requiring a 9-to-5 schedule

Especially right now, people are struggling to adjust to remote work while caring for kids and family. Globally distributed teams must also work around time zones (a 2pm meeting for one person might be midnight for another). Instead of requiring remote folks to be online for the full “regular business hours,” go back to your availability norms—agree on one or two blocks of time where meetings will happen, as well as a time when people are available by chat. The rest of the time, Sacha says to “allow people to get work done when it fits within the cracks of their current life.”

The virtual future

While change is always hard—especially when brought on quickly with little notice—this moment we’re in gives Sacha hope that organizations will more fully embrace remote work and all of its benefits going forward.

“I have been so inspired by this burst of innovation and creativity that this situation is enabling,” she says, “because with new constraints come new ideas.”