EXECUTIVE REPORT

Understanding and Adapting to the Needs of Your Remote Workforce



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With very little forewarning, COVID-19 has been thrust upon the world and the global workforce. For many, this has meant having to rapidly adapt to new ways of working. As our professional and personal lives are suddenly required to co-mingle, it has required a different kind of self-motivation, energy, resilience and focus.

There are both challenges and opportunities that have arisen as a result of this enforced "cohabitation." Having attended my first ever Zoom call in my capacity as Vice Chair of RIMS' global Diversity & Inclusion Advisory Council back in March, we very quickly wondered why we had not been holding our monthly meetings by Zoom prior to the COVID-19 lockdown, given our wide geographic spread and the difference it made to our ability to engage. We also found ourselves pondering why some of us were finding "lockdown" relatively easy, while others were struggling to adjust to working from the confines of our homes on a prolonged basis.

This paper will share the perspectives and experiences from five global RIMS community leaders. It will challenge you to pause and reflect on what we have learned about ourselves and our teams, and how we have maintained a sense of inclusion during this unique time in our global history.

Our leaders were selected using a diverse range of criteria. They were asked to consider the following questions, particularly from the perspective of maintaining a culture of engagement and inclusion within their respective teams:

1. How have you adapted your style in a virtual leadership landscape, particularly when you consider the introverts and extroverts within your teams and their natural tendencies?
2. Has remote working affected or influenced team efficacy during these unsettled times?
3. Have you recognized any differences between your work persona when at work, and your work persona when working from home? Has working from home challenged your normal home persona, and vice versa?

Introverts & Extroverts

Before we consider the range of responses, it might be helpful to understand some of the science behind personality traits. What does it mean to be introverted or extroverted, and how does this aspect of our personality influence our working style and how we interact with others?

"Introversion" and "extroversion" are complex concepts. And, naturally, there is a spectrum between the two. It is about so much more than whether you are quiet or talkative, or prefer the company of others to being alone.

Much of the work in relation to personality traits was done by Carl Jung in the early to mid 1900s. Jung was a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who founded analytical psychology, and coined the terms "introverted" and "extroverted." His desire to understand personality traits is said to have been sparked by differences he had with his colleague Sigmund Freud, and a need to explain the friction between them.

In very simple terms, Jung's research led him to believe that extroverts direct their energy outwards toward other people and gain energy from such encounters. Introverts, on the other hand, focus their energy inwards, toward more solitary, thoughtful activities. It is also recognized that there is a continuum between introversion and extroversion, as most people do not fit nicely into either box, but have tendencies that are both introverted and extroverted. You can classify yourself as an introverted extrovert, or an extroverted introvert, but if you fall somewhere in the middle of the continuum you are known as an "ambivert."

To enable self-assessment (recognizing that this is a very complicated subject), the classic personality traits of introverts versus extroverts can be summarized as follows:

You may be an introvert if:

1. You enjoy spending time alone.
2. You prefer quality time with one or two people over spending time with bigger groups.
3. You need "alone" time to rest and recharge after a busy workday or period of activity.
4. You can get lost in your thoughts easily and need time to process and think through most things.

You may be an extrovert if:

1. You prefer spending your time around other people and dislike being alone.
2. You like crowds, parties and other gatherings with lots of new people.
3. You need quality time with others to help you recharge.
4. You are outgoing, talkative and like being the center of attention.

From a work perspective, understanding where you and your colleagues fall on the introversion/extroversion continuum can greatly enhance team dynamics and culture, and ensure that the broader team fosters a sense of inclusion, based on understanding each other's personality types and natural tendencies.

Team Dynamics

Interacting as part of a team, no matter what size, involves many dynamics. These dynamics may have changed in recent times, as many of us have been forced to work from the confines of our homes.

For some, remote working was already part of a daily routine pre-COVID-19. However, very few, if any of us, have had to work from home under the kind of conditions that COVID-19 has forced upon us. As a result, many of us find ourselves confined to our home "bubble" with our "lockdown buddies" around the clock, often having to juggle parenting, home-schooling and normal household chores, all while trying to find a space to work without distraction, continue to deliver on our work priorities, and connect virtually with our teams and co-workers. All this, while a raging global pandemic has brought illness, death, economic hardship, massive upheaval and a great deal of uncertainty about our futures. And there is little prospect of an idyllic overseas holiday any time soon, to provide a light at the end of the tunnel.

There is a lot of research about remote working and team culture. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in

additional complexity. Many of us have not been able to adequately prepare to work from home. We are distracted by our surroundings and the complexities of merging our family and home environments with work. There are also heightened levels of anxiety and stress. New routines have to be formed in order to maintain a sense of resilience, energy, motivation and calm. Not easy when so much of our lives at the moment is so out of our control.

For the leaders among us, we have had to find new ways to engage our teams and maintain a sense of belonging, inclusion, energy and motivation. We must also be extra alert to the mental and physical well-being of our people at this unprecedented time, ensuring that we are fostering an ongoing sense of connectedness and community—not just within our teams, but with the wider organization.

In crisis, leaders need to put people first.

Greg Lazzaro, general manager of health, safety and environment at New Zealand Transport Agency and director of the RIMS New Zealand and Pacific Islands Chapter, describes himself as a "clear extrovert" and someone who derives his energy from others. Greg believes that lockdown necessitated a "back-to-basics" approach to leadership. "In crisis, leaders need to put people first, establish some key principles and stick with them, to create a stability that will endure," he said. "I quickly found that the first challenge was to give permission for my team to just stop, put their families first, stabilize their environments, stock up on food and allow them to feel like they were in control of something that seemed to be a massive disruption." In turn, this enabled his people to maintain a sense of stability and control and feel less anxious about the uncertain environment they found themselves operating in, both personally and professionally.

"Allowing for the team to consider that they would not be as effective as usual as the starting point in the early stages of the crisis was key, and turned out to be a big positive," Greg said. "It meant that people did not have to worry, not have to overthink situations, and could take the time to learn to cope in a different way. Allowing for this gave strength to the team, which in turn got people thinking and working much more collectively and efficiently. The side effect of allowing for 'slippage' in deadlines actually relaxed people enough to feel more motivated, and outcomes were not compromised as a result."

Soubhagya Parija, senior vice president and chief risk officer at New York Power Authority and RIMS Board Director, believes his "natural introversion" has helped him during lockdown. "It feels like I am more in control of my time," he said. "As a team, there has not been much impact on our productivity, and by using technology, we have been able to function remotely and meet when necessary." As someone who has had to "learn" extroverted qualities to be considered for senior leadership roles, Soubhagya has made a very conscious effort to reach out to his people on a one-to-one basis during lockdown, in order to ensure that they feel heard and listened to. As a natural introvert, he found himself with more energy during lockdown, largely as a result of being able to operate 100% authentically. He observed that engaging through technology has felt like a less energy-intensive way to interact.

This is in contrast with natural extroverts such as Megan Hastings, manager of enterprise risk at New Zealand Super Fund and Chair of RIMS New Zealand and Pacific Islands Diversity & Inclusion Sub-Committee. She found herself experiencing "Zoom fatigue" during New Zealand's period of lockdown. "Working from home has meant constant face-to-face interactions digitally, often with attendees spread across multiple screens," she said. "As an extrovert, I rely on being able to read body language and facial expressions to check in as to whether the audience is engaged, listening and receptive and to gauge how they are feeling and what intentions they might have. This helps me to work with them collaboratively. It is so much harder when interacting virtually. Meetings can be quite draining, as they require such a high-level of constant attentiveness." Despite this, she has found that the overall organizational experience with online video conferencing platforms was very positive, with such platforms proving their value as a critical business continuity and collaboration tool.

Megan also observed that for risk professionals, influencing is a core part of the role. Interacting on a virtual basis makes it more difficult to assess body language and reactions, which impacts the risk professional's ability to "read the room." This makes it more difficult to assess the effectiveness of the engagement, thereby potentially compromising outcomes.

This view was supported by Keti Mehta, advisory partner at Insurtech Relay Platform and RIMS Diversity & Inclusion Advisory Council member. "Insurance is a personal business built on trust and deep relationships," she said. "When navigating virtually, it's more difficult to engender and build trust. It is harder to gauge and read reactions in the room, especially when many choose not to turn on the video setting. You could say it's a contact sport—we miss the energy in the room to feed off each other. That lack of energy transfer seems to make it harder to keep your audience interested and tuned in."

To combat this, she has had to ensure a greater frequency of engagement and contact with clients. "So much of the deal-making in insurance happens before and after the regular scheduled meeting, increasing the need for more informal check-ins to take the pulse and ensure that you are meeting your clients' needs," Keti said. "The lockdown period has served as a useful reminder of the importance of 'connection' to build and develop trusted relationships."

Maintaining a sense of inclusion and a connected and engaged culture among their people and teams, was surprisingly not a challenge for these leaders. Everyone was very mindful of the importance of reaching out and communicating regularly—not just on a collective team basis, but also one-to-one.

"Making people the priority was key" Greg explained. "We established a

weekly community call where the only agenda item was to share our stories and listen to others' ways of managing their day-to-day realities. The conversations ranged from family pets feeling weird that humans were around all day, to juggling home schooling with kids, and the extra 'line time' required at the local supermarket due to the forever-hungry teenagers in the house. Yoga sessions, learning new technologies and cooking techniques—we covered it all. We adapted, we discovered and we supported each other, because we made the space to make this an important part of the week. With over 40 people on the call, we learned how to capitalize on this social experiment. As leaders, we over-communicated, ensured executive alignment and a consistent, clear message that was checked in on regularly. CARE, HOPE, STABILITY, INNOVATION, TRUST. This was our lockdown mantra."

The biggest "lockdown lesson" for Soubhagya was how easily the team was able to adapt to the situation. "I did not think it would be possible to make working from home work for the whole team," he said. "Prior to COVID-19, there were occasions in which we would allow individual team members to work from home, but on an as-needed basis as a concession, and we were careful to not have this misused." Through regular communication and an increased effort to connect with staff, he has not experienced any impacts on efficiency. "My staff—at least some of them—do miss coming to work and being with colleagues and peers. If the working from home situation continues for too much longer, it will be interesting to see how people start to react psychologically." Soubhagya is very attuned to this, monitoring how his people are feeling and their motivation levels, to make sure they feel supported and that the right resources are wrapped around them if needed.

Personas

In more normal times, most of us typically adapt our style of engagement and personality traits depending on whether we are interacting with our colleagues at work, are in a social situation, or with our families. Having a "work persona" and a "home persona" is common.

Psychologists say that it is natural for us to adopt different personas depending on whether we are at home or at work, given that our work and home lives offer different challenges and expectations. We may not even realize we are doing it. Sanna Balsari-Palsule, a personality scientist at Cambridge University, said that this is because "we are so used to acting out of character for the sake of professionalism. As we are now working in increasingly fast-paced environments with globally dispersed teams, being flexible and adaptive is hugely important."

The sudden merger of work and home lives has only intensified this unique situation of social isolation. We asked our leaders whether they had paused to reflect on how they find themselves interacting with others—not just their co-workers and colleagues, but those in their "home bubble," who are now not just part of the family, but also part of their day-to-day work life.

> Merging our work and home lives requires a retraining of the brain.

"Pre-COVID, it was very easy to honor boundaries between work and home because there was a physical separation and a time boundary," said Judith Campoya, senior analyst and operations at SubroSmart and RIMS Diversity & Inclusion Advisory Council member. "During COVID, this has become increasingly difficult because the lines are all blurred. There is a feeling of being submerged and a drowning identity crisis with little to no outlet. With the 'in-person influence' gone, it's harder to differentiate between home and work personas, particularly as these two personas aren't used to coexisting or working in unison."

This coexistence of work and home personas could lead to higher rates of anxiety, the longer the enforced lockdown continues. "We are used to home being a place of decompression, not a place of high productivity," Campoya said. "Merging our work and home lives requires a retraining of the brain, which then makes us feel like we are in production overdrive mode. We are trading off our beautiful home sanctuaries for high production factories. This could lead to burn-out, as people struggle to wrestle with the thought of maintaining both complexities."

Keti agreed with the idea that our brains are in "overdrive" as we juggle the two personas under the same roof. "One finds that there is not a lot of time to pause and reflect because the brain is struggling in overdrive," she said. "As such, there is a shorter fuse when dealing with household members. We might be taking out the frustration of the situation on them, perceiving that there are lower consequences. Household members are getting front row seats to our work persona. This is compounded by the false illusion that we are spending more time with our family members, when in reality, we're not actually present. There is no quality time."

Judith and Keti believe a third persona has developed as a result of the coexistence of our work and home personas. "It is hard to keep the work persona and home persona separate," Judith said. "It is hard for them to coexist, so a third personality has evolved called 'homework,' which is an amalgamation of the two. And we all know how everyone feels about homework. It feels like a part of us is having to stretch to accommodate this new third person. A persona that is trying to be the best at everything—the best partner, parent, worker, leader. It's too many roles to juggle without a clear delineation or boundary. It's confusing and it's tiring."

On the flipside, others have managed to keep their work and home personas quite separate while in lockdown. "I have a very clear segregation of work related activities and the home family mantra," Greg said. "Rarely is there ever any crossover, unless I have my teenager ranting (and within camera frame) while I am on a business call." Soubhagya has also been quite strict about separating the two personas.

"For me, it has worked by keeping the work life and home life separate to the extent possible," he said. "I even have my lunch separately, at my work desk at home. Where it has become difficult is when home obligations need to be met, such as getting maintenance work done or grocery runs, etc."

Greg noted that he has found himself "humanizing the work persona" to a greater degree during lockdown. This helped the team to maintain a sense of calm, as it was explicitly acknowledged that it was okay to make adjustments to the working day in order to cope with the new way of working. This resulted in a greater sense of engagement and achievement within the team.

One cannot help wondering what behaviors and impacts will endure post-lockdown, particularly given the prolonged nature of social isolation for some regions across the globe.

Conclusion

Fearful of its impact on productivity and work quality prior to COVID-19, many organizations remained wary of extending remote working opportunities to employees. Today, at this stage of the global pandemic, business leaders are much more confident in their remote work staff and have come to realize that the organization can indeed succeed without congregating at a physical location.

To remain resilient, business leaders must also recognize that to maximize remote workers' potential it is critical to acknowledge that employees are different; that they require different support; that their work "style" might differ online from in-person; and that this shift in work environment can significantly impact employees' personal lives.

Maintaining strong engagement hinges on our ability to foster an inclusive culture. Similar to our business strategies during the pandemic, leaders must also be flexible and ready to listen, empathize, understand and adapt to their diverse remote workforce.

Key Takeaways to Better Understand and Address the Needs of Your Remote Workforce

1. Make people a priority. Take the time to understand how your people are feeling, what their challenges are, and how they prefer to engage. Be empathetic, recognizing that we are all unique and that individual circumstances are likely to be varied.
2. Provide a forum and dedicate the time to "check-in" on employees to gauge how they are coping. The conversations can be an informal, yet highly-effective way to understand our employees' situations, while also building trust.
3. Monitor time-off (vacation days, personal days and sick leave) to ensure that your team is getting the mental rest that they need and that the stresses of lockdown are not causing anxiety or becoming overwhelming.
4. Ramp up communications. Without the face-to-face office interactions, more frequent team meetings might be needed to prevent individuals from working in a vacuum. Additionally, it is critical to keep your team informed of any changes to processes, and, more importantly, the overall strategy of the department and organization. This increase in communication should extend beyond the remote workforce and also apply to stakeholders, clients, partners and vendors.
5. Be wary of meeting fatigue. Meetings are important but we must also trust our employees to get the job done. It is also important to be mindful that the introverts in your team may find interacting on digital platforms uncomfortable or difficult.
6. Be flexible. As we intertwine work lives with personal lives, understand that household distractions such as dependent care, home maintenance and other pertinent matters might briefly interrupt a remote worker's day.
7. Monitor productivity and, conversely, deficiencies in productivity to identify potential remote work challenges.
8. Set expectations and boundaries, encouraging remote workers to "log off'at the end of their work day to maintain an appropriate work-life balance.
9. Collaborate with your human resources team to ensure they are prepared to address anxiety, stress, and other detrimental matters that could be linked to remote working. Keep that line of communication open and report issues as they arise.
10. Invest in and explore technologies that best support your remote workers. The situation we find ourselves in as a result of the pandemic is likely to endure for some time. Make sure your people have all the tools they need to be as effective as possible and to keep engagement high.