

Hybrid Work Series

Navigating Remote Work

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Remote work is not a new concept. But nonetheless, when the majority of the country moved to remote work within a matter days in March of 2020, the ground beneath the feet of the traditional in-office employee—and the occasional remote worker—shifted dramatically. Companies quickly sprang to action by creating experimental work setups; there was widespread conversion from in-person to virtual meetings and corporate functions; and suddenly, a vast body of managers were no longer face-to-face with their staffs.

But as time has progressed, so have the abilities of companies to pivot and thrive despite these changes to the conventional workplace. Those who already had a robust remote or hybrid-work model may be a little farther ahead, but others are catching up as they plan what comes next.

To explore how work-from-home and greater business uncertainty are influencing work and the workplace, Knoll introduced a Hybrid Work Discussion Series that convenes workplace leaders across North America for peer-to-peer discussion around the changing workplace and the impacts of Covid-19. For one installment of the series, Knoll explored the topic of Navigating Remote Work via a virtual roundtable that brought together executives to share challenges and best practices experienced in rolling out distributed work in their organization. What follows is a recap of the lively discussion.

What We Learned About Remote Work in the Current Climate

Insight #1

After some trial and error with the abrupt shift to remote work, companies are moving toward developing formal policies and benefits. The corporate world's remarkably agile reaction to the pandemic-driven shutdown nonetheless included approaches that were reactionary versus having been deeply researched. But today, these same companies have employee feedback and other data as they work toward refining their remote work policies. Throughout the roundtable, the underlying consensus was that the same solution does not work for every employee. Rather, it's all about what gives the best result for each employee based on their individual needs, their role/persona or both.

Companies represented in the discussion reported various levels of remote work already in place. A pharmaceutical executive noted that while his company had already been on the remote path prior to Covid, "it was a struggle for some to adapt. The directive that we now have is to promote not only alternative workplaces, but also remote work," he explained. He noted that his firm's remote work profile is typically based upon job function, and that this will likely become permanent—so as the organization plans for the future, they are looking at space requirements for the alternative workplace to include a combination of free address (unassigned workspaces) and remote work. But he also added that these permanent policies are in the formative stage as they continue to survey employees, observe results and examine head-count needs.

"We pivoted quickly when we went home. One of the more surprising things is that our contact center associates are successful remotely—and I think that's a game changer."

HEALTHCARE ORGANIZATION EXECUTIVE

Others in the discussion were further along in developing their permanent (yet flexible) policies. It was noted that employees are given more latitude and choice than ever before. Common factors that weigh into remote work policies include:

- + Determination of the *personas/teams who can work offsite successfully* and want to continue to do so. Examples cited included engineers, call centers and even brokers, a job that was previously considered an in-office only position.
- + *Stipends or equipment supply* for replicating an ergonomic office setting in the remote location.
- + *Flexible scheduling* for the ebb-and-flow of collaborative days in the office with days worked remotely on solo projects, or for those whose personal situation impedes offsite work.



A financial services executive described how at the outset of the pandemic, knowing that people were struggling, her firm provided an initial stipend to everyone working from home. But she described how the conversation turned toward longer-term policies when, in summer of 2020, the CEO announced that the company was moving to a remote framework. “The people who will go into more of a monthly or quarterly schedule will get an additional stipend to help them set up their home workspace. From an equipment standpoint, we have set up an IT equipment ordering system to enable employees to customize their remote settings,” she added. Additional scenarios across the spectrum included these examples:

- + A technology executive pointed out her company’s slightly different approach to bolstering remote workers. Rather than providing employees with a stipend, they instituted a program to provide employees with ergonomic solutions offsite by enabling them to purchase high quality, sustainable furniture like they had in the office—but for home office use. “Assembly of desks is also provided,” she added, ensuring safety, compliance and convenience for the employee.
- + An airline executive described his company’s more limited approach given the pandemic’s financial impact on the travel industry. After their employees abruptly went home, “they’ve been pretty happy,” he noted. While certain groups such as the reservations team stayed on campus throughout; the airline has also begun bringing people back at lower capacity in socially distanced setups. But importantly, employee satisfaction whether on campus or remote remains paramount. And like many firms in the travel business who are not in the financial position to spend money or provide stipends, he noted the success of the remote work force as they’ve taken the new model in stride—including their creativity in making their remote workspaces into “something special.”
- + A beverage company executive noted that they are provisioning, providing stipends and sending equipment to their remote workforce. As a global employer, she reiterated that work from home does not work everywhere or for everyone, e.g., those with infrastructure challenges and/or multigenerational households. “So, we’re designing the provisioning to be locally appropriate.”

Participants agreed that communication with employees, be it via surveys or direct conversations, is integral to make sure that the entire workforce is properly set up for productivity and success.

Insight #2

While there are many different models, companies are supporting remote work from the top down. Participants concurred that overall, remote work now has the “thumbs up” from the boardroom. Managers who at one time may have said remote work couldn’t be done successfully are now not only supporting it but applauding its results. Companies are doing extensive research on what employees want, and the successes that have been tracked are leading to a lot more trust across organizations.

As a beverage company leader described it, management decided in September 2020 that the company would “take a gap year” to ease future transition back to the office. Noting that employees were struggling in the first few months as they worked on laptops in makeshift settings that were not yet “set up for success,” the company equipped employees (called “partners”) with such support as a remote office stipend and office chairs and monitors. “We said every partner will get a desk/workpoint, whether in the building or at home.”

“We went into remote work almost overnight. By summertime, our CEO said remote work is here to stay. He saw that we were doing it—we were still performing at a relatively high level.”

FINANCIAL SERVICES EXECUTIVE

Setups ranged from a laptop riser with monitor arm to a full desk with double monitors. He also noted that his company has continued to conduct employee surveys, and these have shown that most were embracing remote work. In fact, in Spring of 2020, employee sentiment showed a preference for working two to three days a week remotely, but by September, that preference had increased to four days a week.

“We are considering who really needs to be on campus. We made the communication clear from the top down: if you’re not comfortable coming back, don’t. The leaders have been staying away, too. That way, employees do not feel pressured to come back just because the bosses are all there. No boss can tell somebody they need to come in.”

AIRLINE WORKPLACE LEADER

Lending a longer-term perspective, a technology executive explained that the remote work factor was present at her company well before Covid. “Many employees over the years had wanted to work remotely. And in many cases, employees travel, they go to meetings, they have their vacation time—so they are not in the office full-time.”

She noted that employees had already been obtaining management approval to pursue remote options, which her organization refers to as “alternative work locations.” But she cautioned this didn’t happen with the “flip of a switch.” Rather, her company had been working on this shift for more than eight years, overcoming challenges as a result of remote working, through effective change management and consistent communication.

“It’s as if everybody’s light bulb went off. No one had ever mentioned people like traders trading from their bedrooms or software development teams (who had to be on the bench together) working fully remote. It’s as if nothing’s off the table now in terms of remote work.”

FINANCIAL SERVICES EXECUTIVE

Another example of support from the top down was described by a banking executive. “We had about 80,000 of the 250,000 office worker population on assigned seating of some form. But as a company, we never really had a formal endorsement around remote working, even though we knew it was happening on a more ad hoc basis,” he explained. And yet while he noted that some decisions regarding mobile technology must be made based upon factors like resiliency, data privacy and security, the company as a whole had been moving toward a virtual desktop interface over the past few years, with all computing happening in the cloud. As a result, when the pandemic sent everybody home, the bank was fully prepared because both in-office and home-based workers had been utilizing the virtual sessions. “That made the transition really seamless, which was kind of an unintended benefit of what we’d already done,” the workplace leader noted.



Insight #3

The traditional office is evolving into a collaborative hub with employees calling many of the shots and utilization data driving decision-making.

Discussion focused on the need of companies to bolster remote work by giving access to collaborative space for remote teams to come together as needed in a physical setting.

Several participants agreed that workplace adaptation means taking a critical look at why a company needs group space and why someone might need access to a private office. Traditional assumptions are gone, and space usage and allocation must be evaluated by location and function. Most importantly, when an employee comes into the office, it will be for a particular reason. “That reason,” a technology executive noted, “is to collaborate—for example, around a product improvement or innovation. You’re there to do something with others with the same goal.”

Another approach for the remote/in-office balance is the creation of what a healthcare executive called “incubation space.” While employees may work remotely, this enables them to come onsite for training with peers. “In this way, they can learn what the culture is, and then go home and mimic it,” he explained. He also noted that they will likely be migrating to an activity-based workplace that, combined with a remote work policy, may significantly reduce the overall footprint from pre-Covid days.

A technology executive described that in addition to the customer success teams who have thrived in the remote work environment, a surprising outcome has been that engineers love working remotely and have been incredibly productive and successful. But while the CEO continues to emphasize the company’s “together culture,” employees have gotten used to being extremely productive working remotely. “I don’t know that it’s going to be the leaders who can say ‘you have to come

“Our open office initiative, which started eight years ago, launched many of the topics that most companies are seeing right now in remote working. It was a relatively smooth transition to a remote working scenario.

In the future we are looking at fewer individual spaces for heads down work. Since group interactions are best within the office, we're looking at more open, collaborative and meeting space. Individuals are going to decide what works or doesn't work for them.”

TECHNOLOGY FIRM WORKPLACE LEADER

back in,” he concluded. His firm will likely continue to work on striking that balance based upon employees working onsite for collaboration and to utilize technology to foster connectivity between remote and in-office team members.

Lastly, there was a practical discussion around the topic of spreading out the workforce via different in-office days to balance capacity.

One roundtable participant noted they were considering using incentives like “free food Fridays” to encourage remote workers be onsite on that less-popular day.

“Everyone went home, almost overnight. It was astonishing how well everyone leaned into it. But our surveys are telling us that these many months later, fatigue is setting in. People do want to be back in the office—not full-time, but they want to have the ability to meet with colleagues.

And of course, for those places and locations where work from home did not work, the office remains essential.”

BEVERAGE COMPANY EXECUTIVE


One participant also noted that apps can be of assistance in managing, or “booking,” not only the time of shared/collaborative space needed on a given day but also request parking spots. “By doing so, we could manage demand and inventory and even push notifications to alert employees about days when there may be higher or lower demand.”

Looking Ahead

While the different organizations demonstrated that they were at various points along the path, all were seeking to adapt their remote work strategies based upon the hands-on learnings gained throughout 2020.

“I don't think we get to tell people what to do, and when to come to work or when not to come to work. I think behavior will lead and everything else will follow. It's going to be more on an individual basis, people making decisions about what they're doing—and where and how they're doing it. It's going to change the culture, with more autonomy and trust than ever before.”

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Overall, the common thread was clear: while remote work had already existed in various forms; the pandemic jump-started its implementation; and the result is a more humanistic, employee-driven future workplace. 

A special thanks to our roundtable participants from across North America.

For Further Reading

Knoll k. Talks

<https://www.knoll.com/design-plan/resources/research/k-talks>

Tips for Remote Work Success

<https://www.knoll.com/knollnewsdetail/tips-for-remote-work-success>

Managing a Remote Team

<https://www.knoll.com/knollnewsdetail/strategies-for-managing-a-remote-team>

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Through research, Knoll explores the connection between workspace design and human behavior, health and performance, and the quality of the user experience. We share and apply what we learn to inform product development and help our customers shape their work environments.

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