ART OF A ZDNET SPECIAL FEATURE: WORKING FROM HOME: THE FUTURE OF BUSINESS IS REMOTE

WFH and burnout: How to be a better boss to remote workers

Your company might not be in any rush to get its people back into the office, but home workers are suffering from burnout and 'Zoom fatigue'. Executives must think now about how to keep workers engaged as the WFH experiment continues.

Research suggests as many as 98% of people would like the option to work remotely for the rest of their careers, and many bosses already expect remote working to extend will into 2021 and probably beyond.

"I think the genie is out of the bottle to be honest," says Mark Gannon, director of business change and information solutions at Sheffield City Council. "I think people have realised the benefits of working remotely and the work/life balance that comes with it."

Yet a new-found affection for some of the plus-points of remote working is only one side of the story. Gannon stresses that the current home-working situation is "far from wonderful". Remote-working strategies were thrown together in days for the most part and, six months into the new normal, these strategies remain a work in progress.

Like other CIOs, Gannon refers to fears over isolation and team cohesion. Analysts suggest that top struggles for remote workers – many of whom are tied to computer screen and video calls – include loneliness, difficulty in unplugging from work, and distractions at home.

Employees refer to virtual-meeting burnout, known as "Zoom fatigue", with more than one-quarter (27%) of employees saying that they are "trying to pay attention, but often zoning out".

One senior executive at a blue-chip business told me recently that her colleagues had simply stopped using video-conferencing technology. "We were sick of seeing each other," she says, adding that most people now simply communicate using instant messaging.

Workers are also tired. Research suggests [75% of workers have experienced burnout](#), with 40% saying this is a direct result of the coronavirus pandemic. An additional survey suggests that [more than two-thirds (68%) of professionals](#) are feeling more burned out at home than when they did while working in an office, while 60% report working more hours than they were pre-pandemic.

IT professionals have been [under more pressure, too](#). It's been tough work to keep IT running in extreme circumstances.

Joe Soule, CTO at Capital One Europe, has nothing but praise for the way his IT team has pulled together to help keep the business operational and to meet customers' fast-changing demands.

Tech professionals at the bank pivoted at short notice from long-term strategic priorities to more immediate customer-focused concerns, such as ensuring mobile and web channels were stable and resilient. The great news for Soule is that – despite the challenges endured – workplace surveys suggest IT workers at the bank are now more engaged than ever before.

Yet Soule also recognises IT leaders might face longer-term challenges when it comes to keeping employee experience high. "I do worry about people's personal development, and whether they're investing as much in themselves as they are in the organisation right now. Because I have no question that they're investing a lot in the organisation," he says.

That's a sentiment that resonates with many IT managers. CIOs are thankful for the huge efforts their teams expended to keep businesses running and customers happy during lockdown. Now as the pandemic continues, they're going to have to ask their workers to give just a little bit more.

That request is going to be taking place at a time when many IT professionals might have been expecting to return to the office. While people have enjoyed the freedom to WFH, evidence suggests that isolated and burnt-out employees would now relish the opportunity to see colleagues IRL.

The key task for all business leaders now is to re-engage with their staff and to keep workers connected as the WFH experiment stretches onwards. Danny Attias, chief digital and information officer at [British charity Anthony Nolan](#), recognises that connectivity is as much about culture as it is about tech. "CIOs must guide their organisations through the adoption of new ways of working," he says.
In the longer term, Attias is keen – like so many other CIOs and HR directors – to think about how his organisation is going to make better use of existing office space and to create a hybrid approach that mixes the benefits of occasional home working with time in a collaborative workspace.

However, until we can get back to the office, socially distant work is likely to remain the norm. So what about the next few months? As time away from the office and non-face-to-face contact continues, how can CIOs boost employee experience and keep workers engaged?

For Randall S. Peterson, professor and academic director of the Leadership Institute at London Business School, business leaders must make sure they are present: "The perfect boss is empathetic, understanding, asking questions and open to feedback from their staff on how to manage them differently."

Being present is much easier in a physical space, where bosses can walk down the hallway and read non-verbal clues, such as body posture. Business leaders in our socially distant world must focus on ensuring – regardless of communication channel – that they are doing things that help their workers feel better and more productive.

"Ask questions about people's personal mental health and their sense of belonging," he says. "If you're not already doing it, re-engage the employee in key decisions and get people back involved and re-committed. Provide clear, transparent communication, otherwise your people will drift in different directions."

Peterson says the best way for bosses to avoid the medium- and long-term negative impacts of socially distant work is to avoid disengaging and demotivating people. That approach is all about ensuring employees are "feeling things" and that, as a boss, you're paying attention to employee engagement.

"We're not paying enough attention to people's feelings of belonging to our organisations," he says. "You need to ask people where they are right now, and then understand and meet their needs. Focus on ensuring that people feel that what they do matters to the organisation and the world. If you can get people down that road, you're much more likely to have a better outcome."