



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H0409G
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
NOVEMBER 30, 2018

ARTICLE **HEALTH**

Helping Remote Workers Avoid Loneliness and Burnout

by Jennifer Moss

HEALTH

Helping Remote Workers Avoid Loneliness and Burnout

by Jennifer Moss
NOVEMBER 30, 2018



KOLBZ/GETTY IMAGES

It's a weekday and Jeff, the director of technology at Economical Insurance, kisses his daughter and waves goodbye as she enters the doors of her public school. Then, he either turns the car around and returns home for a day of remote work, or he continues on to his office, where his hours are flexible — he just needs to keep his boss in the loop.

In 1871, when Economical was founded, Jeff’s employer might not have imagined this scenario. Today, HR policies like these are less of a progressive perk but more of a standard practice. Actually, a new [study](#) interviewed 18,000 employees across 96 international companies and found that 70% of employees are working remotely once a week and 53% are spending half the week away from the office.

Flexible and remote work policies are becoming increasingly popular with employees. A [study](#) focused on flexibility and its impact on performance for working parents confirmed that flexibility at work increased gratitude significantly. It also increased job satisfaction and decreased stress, particularly for parents with children at home.

Employees appreciate remote work and flexible hours because they offer tangible benefits. It’s not just the time saved on commuting — there are real financial upsides. A [study](#) that looked at data from job boards and the U.S. Bureau of Labor found that the average remote worker saved \$444 on gas, and spent roughly 50% less on lunches. Most parents can also save on childcare costs if they can arrange their schedules to be at home when their children are out of school.

As more employees want to take advantage of flex and remote work options, organizations are accepting that this is how today’s talent wants to work. [The 2018 Future Workforce Report](#) by Upwork claims 63% of U.S. employers are offering some form of flex option. For example, PwC came up with “All Roles Flex” in an effort to reduce the stigma of those who use it. In a recent interview, Dorothy Hisgrove, the partner and Chief People Officer at PwC Australia, told me: “At PwC, 82% of our people use some form of flexibility. They’re most successful when they have the everyday flexibility they need to meet the demands of their professional life and accomplish the things they identify as priorities outside of their career.”

As more workers work flexibly or remotely, companies will need to change the way they operate. “It forces structural and systemic change to accommodate different ways of working and different ways of being ‘available’ and productive,” says Hisgrove. Remote and flex work also present new challenges for managers. In particular, I call your attention to two: burnout and loneliness.

Burnout

One risk, perhaps unexpectedly, is burnout. People using flex or remote policies often do feel more grateful to their employers. That feeling of indebtedness can lead some remote employees to keep their foot on the gas until they run out of fuel. A research paper titled [“Doing More with Less? Flexible Working Practices and the Intensification of Work”](#) examines this unanticipated consequence of adopting flexible working practices. Using social exchange theory, researchers suggest, “employees respond to the ability to work flexibly by exerting additional effort, in order to return benefit to their employer.” Some of the intensification happens at the employee level (choices they make to “return the favor”) but frequently, it’s the employer intensifying the workload with requests that can’t be accomplished within certain timeframes.

To ensure employees experience gratitude rather than indebted servitude, check in. Go beyond project updates and work-related conversations. Leaders need to know what is going on with their people beyond just their work. For example, be sensitive to employees who travel extensively. Rather than booking them into scores of meetings on their return, give them some time to reconnect with family and recharge.

Rethink which attributes constitute going “above and beyond.” Working longer hours, answering emails late at night, putting time in on the weekend, coming in sick, piling up vacation days, not sleeping – those attributes are way too often considered “high-performing” traits. However, all it does is increase and reward the behaviors of burn out. Instead, lead by example and encourage your virtual staff to slow down (even when they don’t want to) by supporting mental-health breaks, taking vacations, and spending time with family.

Remember, remote employees are tougher to diagnose with burnout because you can’t see changes in their personality on a day-to-day basis. Ensure there is a process of checking in and [being aware of the signs](#).

Loneliness

According to the [2018 State of Remote Work](#), loneliness is the biggest struggle to working remotely. Although being alone is not the only cause of loneliness, it can be a significant contributor. It’s also a [dangerous and growing epidemic](#) that scientists are taking seriously.

At the 125th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad from Brigham Young University presented the results of 148 studies with a total of 308,849 participants. The [study](#) laid out the connection between loneliness and premature mortality. “There is robust evidence that social isolation and loneliness significantly increase risk for premature mortality, and the magnitude of the risk exceeds that of many leading health indicators,” Holt-Lunstad shared.

What can managers do? One option would be to establish an “in-the-office” day, when remote employees are encouraged to come in. According to a Gallup poll of 9,917 employed U.S. adults, remote workers that come in to work at least once per week are the happiest. These “mostly” remote workers report a slightly higher rate of engagement, but more importantly, they were more likely than full-remote or full-office workers to say they had a best friend at work, and that their job included opportunities to learn and grow.

For further-flung members of the team who can’t come in weekly, make the investment to bring them to the office monthly or quarterly. Joe Granato, the Chief Supply Chain Officer at Mountain Equipment Co-op, told me that he believes it should be mandatory to find the budget to gather in person. “Face-to-face time builds quality relationships, thus enabling trust and speed in communications. Having opportunities to be together (in the same space, not virtually) is a quality

investment.” Granato also advocates for a “working remotely code” to help level-set expectations and make everyone feel looped in to the strategy.

Today’s flexible and remote work arrangements are far more fluid than the rigid “flex plan” policies of yesteryear. Regardless of what HR policies may dictate, in a tight labor market, managers are going to do what keeps their people. Today, that likely includes more flexible work options, paired with a management style that helps remote workers flourish.

Jennifer Moss is a workplace expert, international public speaker, and award-winning author. She is the bestselling and award-winning author of *Unlocking Happiness at Work*. She is also a United Nations Global Happiness Council Committee Member.
