

More efficiency for virtual collaboration.

How employees build up important skills for working with collaboration tools.



Numerous employees were unexpectedly and predominantly in their home offices during the contact restrictions. For many a completely new situation with challenges in cooperation. For many of them, now return to the office step by step, often alternating with home office phases. In flexible, location-independent collaboration, there are some differences compared to pure office work, as the past months have shown. With the right measures, managers can help their teams to be productive and positive – regardless of where they work.

A laptop with a video conferencing tool is not necessarily a guarantor of positive collaboration. The advantages can only be

utilized if managers and employees have the right skills, so team work can continue in the home office and any other place.



Daily challenges for employees

At first, many managers did not see a problem when the entire team started to work from home. But what did this change really mean to employees? When there is no clear distinction between their work and private life, it can lead to stress – particularly when work loads are high.

For example, the first call already starts at 8:00 am. This means: Being ready and dressed appropriately; after all, this is a video conference. Then you look at the calendar and see that the next 20 minutes are the only free slot – except for the lunch break.

That does not leave any time for properly preparing or following up on issues. In addition, new e-mails and chats are often distracting.

For parents, this situation becomes even more challenging with home schooling and closed daycares: Children have problems dialing into the teaching tool (provided there is one), they must be motivated to learn, or they need help with homework. This means that work is often moved into the evening hours, when the kids are sleeping. And so, stress levels build over time.



How managers can help

Companies and managers should support employees in flexible forms of cooperation and help them to overcome the challenges.

Manager, regardless of whether they are direct superiors or project managers, must pay close attention to the well-being of their employees. To build trust, they become even more of a leader, enabler, coach or person of trust, rather than acting as a micro-manager. In this way, managers and companies can demonstrate that the modern management culture is not just a catchword but reality.

Colleagues should also be encouraged to help each other, not just with regard to managing the required technology for remote work, but also for taking on new tasks. After all, in virtual teams it is more difficult to assess who is over-worked at the moment, and who still has capacities. This is where clear and regular

communication comes in. It can be achieved with short, virtual team meetings for rapid coordination, through group mails or by picking up the telephone for that personal contact.

These and similar measures are also helpful for managers, who can use them to counteract the perceived “sense of control” when people are no longer physically present. Options include short, regular meetings (check-ins, stand-ups, retros etc., depending on the situation), in which team members can talk about upcoming activities and areas in which they need help. Relaxed virtual coffee meetings replace the small talk in the staff canteen, which is not always about work matters. In addition, “random meetings” can also be realized with a chat bot, for example. Companies can offer and test a variety of activities to see which are accepted and used by the employees.



How the HR department can lend its support

The HR department should provide a corresponding qualification product for employees that goes beyond team boundaries. They include virtual training for self-organization, reflection, scheduling or work-life balance. Such initiatives can be realized with external professionals or learning platforms, but also with the help of internal experts or joint workshops for knowledge sharing.

Consultation hours and communities can also be useful, depending on the corporate culture. For example, managed or moderated Communities provide employees with the sense that they are not alone. Topics such as “What is your experience looking after children while working from home?” or “How can I make sure I finish my work on time?” create transparency.



Best Practice tips for better collaboration

Companies can also provide employees with some self-help tips or checklists to help them work together regardless of location:

Calendar:

- Shorten appointment duration (e.g. 25 minutes instead of 30 minutes)
- Keep the number of participants as small as possible
- Do not overbook your own calendar and introduce personal blockers ("Focus Time")

Behavior in meetings:

- All participants switch on video
- Etiquette: Always let others speak out
- Use and respect presence status (e.g. "Do Not Disturb")

Empathy:

- Flexibility and understanding of the home office situation of colleagues
- Be sensitive to tonality – whether in writing or in video conferences
- Patience with requests via chat – give time to answer



Where companies have to invest now

Since many companies were forced to move workplaces off-site within a very short time period, there was a big push for innovation, particularly with regard to the introduction of collaboration tools. But at the beginning of the crisis, many of these solutions were hastily put together. As the current situation regarding hygiene and social distancing regulations continues to make it difficult for employees to return to work, these solutions must now be cleaned up for the medium term and made available for the long term.

This means that long-term work methods and tools must be properly established. To this end, employees must be won over with the appropriate change management measures, such as consultation hours for tools, or training. The staff should not get

the feeling that they are no longer wanted in the office on site. Home offices must be offered as a supplement and as an opportunity for employees, or as a required cautionary measure for health reasons.

Moreover, companies should introduce and actively implement suitable guidelines in this regard. To this end, they must provide clarity as to what the different channels such as chat, e-mail, social networks, teams, telephone, SMS, video calls or the Intranet should be used for. The importance of in-person meetings should be reconsidered in that context. For example, on-line meetings and on-line processes can save travel costs and reduce the stress on the environment.

Conclusion

The proportion of remote work will remain at high levels in the future. Just having the right tools is not a guarantor for efficient remote work. Having the right mindset also

matters, otherwise the measures are bound to fail. In this context, both managers and employees have to learn to manage the situation and develop the required skill set. Companies should support this process with the appropriate measures.

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