How Associations Can Adapt to Remote Working Quickly

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There’s little doubt that the COVID-19 epidemic has caused our world to change, seemingly in the blink of an eye. Two weeks ago, the majority of Americans were going about their lives: commuting to work, traveling to conferences and attending office happy hours. And then, it all just stopped.

According to Global Workplace Analytics, [approximately 3.6%](https://globalworkplaceanalytics.com/telecommuting-statistics) of America’s workforce worked remotely at least half-time in 2019. Fast-forward to mid-February, with the new coronavirus threat looming, and [nearly half of the 158 companies (46%) in a national survey](https://www.willistowerswatson.com/en-US/News/2020/03/north-american-companies-take-steps-to-protect-employees-from-coronavirus-epidemic) said they were implementing new remote work policies to minimize risk of spreading COVID-19. Fast-forward another three weeks and here we are, more often than not, home at our desks to start the work day.

While associations [have been embracing remote working](https://www.naylor.com/associationadviser/making-remote-work/) for years, many organizations were not fully prepared to [shift to remote operations](https://www.forbes.com/sites/waynerash/2020/03/18/checklist-for-companies-with-remote-employees-due-to-covid-19/#66e5776d184a) almost overnight. Yet, that is exactly what has been happening across the country. Association executives, managers and employees nationwide have been forced to make almost-instant course corrections to adjust to the new normal of remote working. On the bright side, we’re all in this together and there are numerous resources to help those who may be feeling unsettled by the quick turn to working (and managing!) remotely.

**Establish Flexible Routines**

Many employees find that the biggest challenge of working from home is setting firm boundaries for the work day. Ideally, you and your team should stick to your “usual” work hours when working remotely, especially when it comes to collaborative work that requires everyone’s availability. For the most part, you should be able to keep your usual calendar items in place, moving them to virtual platforms as necessary (more on that later!).

When you’re in the office, work breaks tend to happen organically as team members come by to chat or you get up to brainstorm with colleagues in another department. When working from home, you’ll need to be more intentional about establishing breaks (and encouraging your team to do the same), so don’t hesitate to build those into your schedule so that they don’t fall by the wayside.

And, of course, the best laid plans can fall apart, especially if you’re one of the many newly-remote workers who are also caring for relatives or children who are now home full-time as well. Think about how these additional responsibilities will affect the work day and build your routine around that as much as possible. Be forgiving: It may help to think of your schedule as a “trial run” – stick with it for a few days, or a full work week, then take time to step back and assess which elements worked and which didn’t, and revise.

**Be Realistic and Accountable**

Whether it’s a function of technology access or learning curves (and possibly both!), be mindful that a whole host of typical tasks may take longer to accomplish when working remotely. Plan realistically to give yourself and your team some cushion on those particular items, so that you don’t find yourself both frustrated and up against a deadline. Once you have a handle on which tasks seem to be more challenging to accomplish while working remotely, that may guide the framework for a daily/weekly schedule.

Now, more than ever, accountability is key. While remote workers have long been dogged by the *perception* that they may not be working as hard as their in-office colleagues, with entire teams now working remotely, it’s the perfect time to establish a culture of transparency across all team members. Encourage colleagues to share their daily/weekly workloads and to set goals. Recognize when they’ve achieved goals, either as a team or through one-on-one acknowledgement.

As your team is getting acclimated, you may want to increase the frequency of check-ins. If your team doesn’t already have a set meeting time each week, getting that on the calendar should be top priority. While you don’t want to allow meetings to digress to a laundry list of technical problems, do provide a time for people to vent – especially since colleagues have probably experienced and resolved many common gripes and can peer lead on troubleshooting. Take the time to check in regularly with each of your team members individually, and identify what resources they need as they get accustomed to the new normal.

Companies have been quick to adopt the many telework solutions available – [Zoom](http://www.zoom.us/), [Slack](http://www.slack.com/), [GoToMeeting](http://www.gotomeeting.com/) and [Google Hangouts](https://hangouts.google.com/), just to name a few. By all means, take advantage of the capabilities across these channels, which will only improve over time as more workplaces adopt the technology. But be mindful of virtual workplace overload – just because a meeting *can* be done by video doesn’t mean it *has* to be. Make sure that employees who may be new to the technology are given the support they need to adopt it successfully, and, like everything else, periodically reevaluate how well each platform is serving your team’s unique needs.