Six Steps to Making Remote Working Work for Your Business

A guide for empowering employees and customers during Covid-19 and beyond
Covid-19 Is Forcing Change on Every Business

These are difficult times for businesses. The rapid shift to a fully remote working model in the wake of Covid-19 has been hard, even for those businesses that previously supported employees sometimes working from home. IT departments have had to make sure every employee has a secure, connected device they can work from, and that they can access the tools and applications they need for work.

Employees are learning how to work together remotely as a team, how to be productive and how to manage and support their teams when they are not co-located. Everyone has their own trials, from finding a quiet place to work in a full home, to home-schooling children, looking after family members, or simply coping with an unnerving and disorienting situation.

The challenge for businesses now is how to make the best of the current situation, to remain agile, minimize risk, and keep their workforce productive and engaged. However, this is also an opportunity for businesses to lay the foundations for their own transformation, to take advantage of the flux that is already affecting how we work.

Enterprise collaboration provider Slack is a great example of a company that is thriving thanks to its culture, its processes and working practices — and its channel-based messaging platform for helping teams work more effectively.

In this report, we outline six recommendations designed to help organizations struggling with the shift to remote working. With learnings and insights courtesy of Slack’s story, these recommendations aim to help you remain agile and productive, while also providing a strategic framework for your long-term success post Covid-19.

Slack Rides the Wave of Remote Work

On 7 March 2020, as Covid-19 began to spread beyond Asia into Europe and North America, Slack made the decision to direct all employees to work from home until further notice. Over 2,000 employees, of which 97% were office-based, needed to transition to remote working overnight.

At the same time, usage of its collaboration platform was spiking as businesses struggled with their own business continuity challenges. Slack added 9,000 new paid customers in seven weeks, compared with 5,000 per quarter for the previous two quarters. Customer support requests and online help centre usage surged, underlined by a new urgency as organizations sought to help teams stay productive while working remotely.

Despite all the changes it faced, Slack ably handled the growth in demand for the platform and for customer support, while accelerating the roll-out of new capabilities, and continuing hiring and onboarding new staff, all in a purely remote capacity.
Step 1: Provide a Central, Collaborative Place to Get Work Done

The primary step for any business in supporting remote work is to provide a central place where all your people, tools and information can come together, so teams can get approvals, share the latest documents and data, and turn conversations into decisions. Many organizations still rely on e-mail and tools designed for personal rather than team productivity, and the limitations of these are amplified in a remote working scenario.

Cloud-based team collaboration platforms help overcome inbox siloes, creating a more open, transparent work environment where teams can communicate and work more efficiently and productively. These tools organize conversations around projects, topics and teams, creating a record of all discussions and decisions, and supporting synchronous and asynchronous communication. Despite gaining momentum in the market in recent years, they have often been categorized as nice-to-have, requiring a certain mindset within organizations and an appetite for business change. However, the impact of Covid-19 means these tools are fast becoming a business-critical requirement for work enablement and should be considered as a cornerstone of your business continuity programme.

Slack Relies on Slack to Get Work Done

It is no surprise that Slack is a committed user of its channel-based messaging platform, and the company points to this as being at the heart of its success in transitioning to company-wide remote working.

There is no internal e-mail use at the company; all communication takes place on Slack.

Slack’s workforce uses the platform for all its activities, with channels for teams, projects, corporate communications, knowledge sharing, social groups, account management, customer and partner engagement.

Because this way of working was already well-established and embedded in Slack’s processes, it provided a foundation for maintaining operations as the company shifted into full remote working.

At Slack, all work happens in channels. You never get an e-mail from someone inside the company.

Tamar Yehoshua
Chief Product Officer, Slack
Step 2: Be Open and Transparent in Communication and Decision-Making

It is important for business leaders and management to maintain a regular cadence of clear and open communication with employees to give them confidence and reassurance, allowing them to focus on the job at hand.

The nature of the Covid-19 pandemic, combined with the speed of change to remote working and the added complexities of personal circumstance, has resulted in huge uncertainty for employees in all businesses about what is expected of them, how long they need to work this way, what this means for the future of their employer and their role within the organization.

Employee engagement and well-being has never been so important, and communications and HR leaders must play a pivotal role in ensuring the workforce is able to move forward in a productive way.

Transparency and Empathy Underpin Slack’s Company Culture

Transparency in leadership decisions and empathy for others are key principles in Slack’s culture, reinforced by a commitment to communicate openly and honestly.

Following the move to remote work, leaders were quick to reassure employees that no jobs were at risk, and the company was in fact still hiring to meet customer demand. Leaders openly acknowledged the uncharted nature of the situation; that everyone was learning as they went along, and it was difficult to be productive all the time.

The internal communications team launched several programmes to ensure staff received the information they needed as quickly as possible, creating new Slack channels to capture questions and concerns. Guides and checklists were created and shared with employees and managers to help them cope with the changing situation.

With everyone working remotely, its platform has now become even more important for social interaction at Slack, as colleagues ask each other how they are feeling and connect on a personal level. Emojis are used extensively, providing valuable non-verbal communication, for example using the eyes emoji to indicate that the person has seen a request to review a document, and a green check emoji to signify the request is complete.

New channels like #remote-best-practices have been created to fuel discussions, develop ideas and share tips, offering a more intentional and structured vehicle to replace the spontaneous discussions that take place in an office environment. Peer groups across the company have also morphed into more formalized networks to help share best practices and tips.

The company’s existing use of non-work channels — such as #parents and #dadjokes — has been reinforced during lockdown, helping staff find some normality, light-heartedness and camaraderie.
Step 3: Prioritize secure remote working

Providing a way to connect your employees is the first step in the transition to remote work, but it is also critical to prioritize security as part of a remote working solution, to ensure your employees and your organization are fully protected.

Traditional, perimeter-based security models that secure everything within the corporate network are well-suited to office-based working when employees are connected to the network and using corporate devices. However, with people now working from home, often on personal devices and on home or public networks, traditional security models are no longer effective. The potential attack surface for the business is suddenly dramatically bigger and is compounded by lower visibility or awareness of potential security breaches due to already-overstretched IT resources.

With cyberattacks accelerating amid the Covid-19 crisis, it is vital to pay attention to security features such as encryption, multifactor authentication and end-point management, and ensure security policies are enabled for all your employees.

Security at Slack

Security is a key priority for Slack, and the company had already enabled a range of security provisions prior to the pandemic to keep its employees and equipment safe on untrusted networks.

Measures included controlling the security settings on all corporate employee equipment (and to a lesser extent on personal devices used under bring-your-own-device policies), constantly monitoring laptops in a 24x7 security rotation, running current antivirus software and requiring two-factor authentication on all services used by employees and administrators.

In response to the pandemic, the company is accelerating planned changes to end-point protections, including deploying solutions to better enforce use of compliant equipment when connecting to software-as-a-service solutions, and is also investigating services that could improve employee experiences when working on home networks.
Step 4: Integrate Digital Workplace Tools to Improve the Employee Experience

The lack of integration between tools is one of the biggest obstacles to workplace productivity. Employees need access to many different tools to get their work done, from line-of-business tools such as CRM and finance applications, to collaboration and productivity tools like Zoom or Microsoft Office 365, or corporate applications like travel booking or performance management. Switching between tools is immensely counterproductive, interrupting employees’ concentration and creating friction in their workflow.

CCS Insight’s research shows that 40% of employees are frustrated with the amount of switching between applications, and 46% feel there is inadequate integration between the work applications they use. In a remote working scenario in which employees may be using personal devices to access business tools, this friction is magnified.

Collaboration platforms enable organizations to integrate different applications and their associated processes directly into the team collaboration environment, creating a single, central hub for work. This allows employees to interact with a multitude of applications, such as requesting status updates on sales opportunities, creating help desk tickets or joining video meetings without leaving their collaboration application. This integrated approach dramatically improves the experience for employees, reducing the time and concentration lost by switching between applications, allowing them to focus on getting their work done more effectively. It also significantly improves adoption of the collaboration tool by making it the primary place for all work-based activities.

40% of employees are frustrated by application switching at work

1 Source: CCS Insight Employee Workplace Technology Survey 2019
“Slack’s not specifically a work from home tool; it’s more of a create organizational agility tool. But an all-at-once transition to remote work creates a lot of demand for organizational agility.”

Stewart Butterfield CEO and co-founder, Slack
An untapped opportunity for improving productivity in any workforce — remote or otherwise — is to automate the multitude of simple, repetitive tasks that absorb so much of an employee’s day. Examples include notifying colleagues when a document is created, uploading e-mail attachments to a shared file store, or requesting feedback or approvals from colleagues. Automating these small but time-consuming activities allows employees to focus on more valuable and rewarding tasks, improving their productivity while also significantly enhancing their employee experience.

These types of tasks would have been too small and ad hoc for traditional workflow technologies, but the new wave of no-code and low-code workflow tools provides a platform for non-technical users to create their own personal or team workflows, at the same time creating a more tailored, personalized experience within their collaboration platform.

**Slack’s Workflow Builder Allows Non-Technical Users to Create Custom Workflows**

**Workflow Builder** is a visual tool in Slack that enables users to turn processes into automated workflows. These workflows include message-based triggers and actions, and do not require technical knowledge to create.

**Slack uses** Workflow Builder extensively in its internal deployment, with workflows for internal approval processes for travel and expenses, daily stand-up update reminders and feedback requests, as well as a workflow that automatically shares Zoom meeting notes into the relevant channel. The company has created multiple templates, including specific examples for remote work² and has shared these for customers to take advantage of.

² Slack’s remote work templates for Workflow Builder https://slackhq.com/workflow-builder-templates-remote-teams
As the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic continues to unfold, it is becoming clear that we are entering a new phase of working. As governments ease lockdowns and cautiously restart their economies, businesses face a new wave of challenges as they balance office working with the ongoing need for social distancing, and the changing expectations of employees who now see the possibilities in remote working. Remote work will continue to be necessary in the near term, with businesses forced to embrace more flexible working policies in the longer term.

It is therefore critical that organizations take a long-term view on helping employees to be productive, connected, supported and engaged, wherever they do their work. Rather than treating technology investments during the pandemic as tactical, temporary solutions to connect people while they cannot be in the office, consider this as an opportunity to accelerate your organization’s ability to transform, and to embrace new ways of working that boost employee productivity, business agility and even the way your business interacts with customers and partners.

**Slack’s Approach: Don’t Waste a Crisis**

At Slack, the decision-making process has accelerated during the crisis as many unprecedented decisions needed to be made rapidly, and the company is keen to maintain this approach beyond Covid-19.

In response to the urgent demand for customer support during the crisis, Slack invited employees from across the business to assist its Customer Experience team in helping organizations get started on Slack. This had the added benefit of helping the employees better understand the challenges faced by customers and Slack’s role in helping them work more effectively.

Prior to the pandemic, Slack’s management held two events each month: a 90-minute “all-hands” meeting at the company headquarters, and a “town hall” question-and-answer session. After the shift to remote working and the need for accelerated communications, executives hosted a much shorter, 20-minute virtual all-hands session with a much less formal structure that required less preparation and time commitment. The new format received a positive response from staff, so the leadership team decided to adopt it more regularly.

Unable to visit customers in person, Slack’s sales team has accelerated its usage of shared channels for these interactions instead. Already extensively used by customer support teams at Slack, shared channels connect the Slack workspaces of two organizations to enable collaboration between them. The sales team has found that this enables conversations and contractual negotiations to happen much more quickly, with sales cycles accelerating as a result.
Now Is the Time to Start Transforming Your Business

The Covid-19 crisis may still be ongoing, but it has already had a dramatic effect on the way we think about work, turning the status quo on its head. This is a pivotal time for businesses, with those that resist change facing an even more challenging future at a time when economic conditions are expected to worsen. Those that succeed will embrace the opportunity to work in new and more flexible ways, will take advantage of new technologies, and will consider this a chance to improve and rethink their operations, products and business models.

Companies like Slack, which are already well advanced in their own journeys to this future, provide some valuable insights, learnings and best practices that can help inspire other organizations to take their own productive first steps. Work has changed; the future is now. Take this opportunity to be ahead of the curve and embrace your own business transformation.

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