



Expert Insights To Help Business Leaders Manage Remote Teams

Virtual cocktails, coffee roulette and compassionate leadership all help, as does being bold and innovative with remote-working policies

Without question, one of the main trends to be accelerated around the globe by the coronavirus pandemic was remote working. Now it is here to stay, because the benefits outweigh the drawbacks, for both employee and employer.

Crowe is a trailblazer in terms of supporting staff and remote working. For instance, in 2015, Crowe LLP in USA introduced a mobility strategy designed to attract and retain the best talent. The two key elements allowed employees to wear what they want and to work from wherever they want in the world – and many people certainly took advantage of the latter policy.

“Rather than focus our energies on an outdated dress code or making people travel to the office, we’re going to concentrate on measuring what matters and allowing our professionals to deliver the best possible client experience,” said Jim Powers, Immediate Past CEO of Crowe LLP, when the program was launched. He highlighted the value to Crowe staff of not commuting and the ability to reach a younger group of employees by offering remote working. “I’m a firm believer that people are more motivated and productive when you trust them to do what you’ve hired them to do, and you let them do it their own way,” Mr Powers added.

Technology has proved to be the great enabler of remote working. A good internet connection, a connected device, and the ability to locate the unmute button on a chosen video conferencing provider is all many people need to work away from the office. It is notable, however, that even Eric Yuan, Chief Executive Officer and Founder of videoconferencing leader Zoom, recently revealed that he, too, suffers from “Zoom fatigue.”

How can business leaders manage a remote team successfully? Here, pioneering decision-makers who have made bold decisions, embraced innovation, and adapted to the new reality of work, provide their top tips.

Show empathetic leadership – ask and answer questions

To manage a remote team, leaders must change their own ways of working and interactions with colleagues so that they are compassionate, understanding and flexible, suggests Hayley Sudbury, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of global technology company Werkin, which currently has a fully remote workforce spanning the globe. This means asking questions and giving employees space to tell you what’s going on in their lives, she says, adding: “A different style of leadership is required.”

It’s better not to be overbearing when managing a remote team, agrees Sandeep Kishore, who stepped down as Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director of Zensar Technologies – a leading multinational digital solutions and technology services company headquartered in India – in January 2021. While he recommends “light-touch leadership involvement,” he admits that one of the most important things to keep in mind when managing a remote team is the mental health and well-being of staff. “Every day, we reach out to our people and bring them together on a common platform,” he says.



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Jim Powers

Immediate Past CEO, Crowe LLP
Co-chairman, Crowe Global



Mr Kishore led the transformation of Zensar Technologies from a legacy IT organization to a “100 percent living digital enterprise” since he was appointed CEO in 2016. He offers a unique way for his 10,000 employees to communicate with him and other Zensar executives: through the company’s smartphone application. Anyone can ask him, and the organization’s key figures, questions that must be answered – and displayed for all to see – within a matter of days.

Effective communication is essential – as is encouraging fun

Agreeing on a preferred communication method with colleagues – whether having one-to-one meetings or videoconferences – is crucial. Equally important, communication needs to be more intentional suggests Nicola Mendelsohn, Facebook’s Vice President in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Rather than fire off a quick email, managers could – and should – pick up the phone and dial in to team members and regularly check in. Business leaders should view this as an opportunity to show their human, compassionate side.

Virtual coffee or beer meetups also help. Ms Mendelsohn reveals that the social media giant has introduced “coffee roulette,” which pairs together people who don’t necessarily know one another well on a videoconference call – and the feedback has been great. She explains: “You enter your name and then play coffee roulette with colleagues. The random nature of it creates surprise and it’s a great way to get to know people in 15 minutes. It’s especially good for people joining the company.”

Have a plan – share it, but make it flexible

If a business creates a plan that outlines how a remote team will operate, then that will help to manage employee expectations. “We mapped out a culture plan, which included how to onboard employees in a virtual way and what’s acceptable and what’s not,” says Nicole Alvino, Co-Founder and Chief Strategy Officer of SocialChorus, an American multinational software company with a global remote team. “For example, we explain when [employees] absolutely have to be on video and when it’s OK to go for a walk for 10 minutes,” she says.

SocialChorus consulted with neuroscientists about how to manage remote workers. A key learning was to make sure there was a break, for at least five minutes, between back-to-back meetings. Also, the organization has run “social distancing days” since the first coronavirus lockdown in America. “We choose one Friday every month and take it as a day off to do whatever you need to do,” says Ms Alvino. Employees are encouraged to “go outside, be with your family, focus on regrouping and taking that time.”



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Bruce Daisley

Ex-Twitter VP

Host of the ‘Eat Sleep Work Repeat’ podcast



Generating a social connection with colleagues is vital, particularly when managing a remote work team. SocialChorus has organized virtual team-building exercises, mostly centered around food and drink fun – though of a higher standard than usual. For example, a professional mixologist could help people prepare virtual cocktails over Teams, or a professional chef might showcase how to cook steak with truffles via a Zoom lesson, with staff having been sent the ingredients with which to cook and mix before the class.

Similarly, Stuart Templeton, UK Head of Slack, the digital communication platform, reveals that his team has been playing a virtual version of popular British TV program Through The Keyhole, where they have to guess, from just three images, whose home it is they are looking at.

Create a community – hire a manager

Software development company GitLab has more than 1,300 employees distributed across 67 countries and is one of the world’s most successful fully-remote startups, having been so since 2011. Their comprehensive remote working guidebook sets out exactly how they do it. One notable thing they have done is hired a “Head of Remote” to oversee it all. Darren Murph, who was appointed in July 2019, says: “I lead at the intersection of people, culture, operations, inclusivity, marketing, employer branding, and communication overall.”

Bruce Daisley, who formerly ran Twitter’s business in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, and is now an all-round workplace culture enthusiast and host of the popular Eat Sleep Work Repeat podcast, explored this topic in a recent Q&A. He referred to a July 2020 post written by Sarah Drinkwater, who was hired by Google to connect to the London startup community, entitled Why you need to hire a Chief Community Officer.

“There is a great skill to building a community, and it is going to be incredibly valuable to firms,” says Mr Daisley. “How can they make people working through screens feel connected to each other?” He adds: “If we don’t give [the skill] due consideration it might be something that comes back to haunt us.”

Attempting to micromanage employees working remotely could backfire, though. “When people are unable to assert their own autonomy on the job they’re doing, it ceases to be a good job and starts to feel more of a prison,” Mr Daisley says, who concedes that remote working is easier for some groups than others.

Finally, whatever level of remote working an organization is at, managers can’t afford to leave anyone behind. “If minority groups are less visible than before that will have an impact on their experience of work and their ability to feel they are performing an enriching job,” Mr Daisley says.

Business leaders should have this last point in the front of their minds as they look to make smarter decisions when managing a remote team. They have to consider the well-being of all employees. If businesses don’t recognize this, we can see certain groups becoming disengaged, which in turn could be a retention and hiring issue. Smart businesses have a diverse complement of people, and retaining – or even improving – that diversity is paramount, whether the workforce operates remotely or in the office.

Viewpoints from the Crowe Global Network

Susan Hodkinson, Chief Operating Officer at Crowe Soberman (Canada)



«Communication should be frequent and transparent. We have a virtual coffee event, which replicates the kitchen coffee chat with co-workers. You’re trying to have those touchpoints you would have in the office.»

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