

## Staying Engaged and Effective While Working Remotely – Part 1

By STRUCTURE's Editorial Board Members

*The article represents a collaborative effort by members of the STRUCTURE magazine Editorial Board. Text enclosed in quotes denotes personal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Over the past nine months, the engineer position has transitioned to a primarily remote-work model as firms have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. As staff juggle family risk factors and dependent obligations, the remote-work model adapts to workers' needs and lessons learned. Many firms had already integrated some degree of remote work to support work/life balance and family needs; the firms and individuals that took advantage of this previous experience were better positioned to expand to a 24/7/365 proposition.



For those that had always worked in a traditional office environment, the transition was a leap into the abyss. Most engineers probably had a few thoughts and expectations of what it would be like to work remotely for a few weeks, or a month at the longest, during the “flattening of the curve” phase but, for the most part, perceived it as a temporary inconvenience. However, as health officials nationwide started worrying about second waves, spikes, and spreads, what started as a temporary option morphed into a situation with no specific end in sight and one that required more thought-out plans.

The Editorial Board wanted to share some lessons learned from the current situation and to provide a few ideas for making firms more resilient and adaptive when all or most staff is working remotely. While we hope not to have another pandemic anytime soon, other situations, social pressures, or local needs may make some form of remote work a more permanent arrangement in the future.

Regardless of personal or political beliefs and circumstances, good engineers grow and adapt. Learning how to stay engaged and effective while working remotely, should it be necessary, is critical to personal success and firm success. We hope you find our observations helpful. Please send a message to the Editorial Board if you have any additional lessons to share with our readers.

### Logistics

Engineering is a business; whether staff is working in an office or working from home, the business needs to find work, execute that work, and get paid. The success of an office is dependent on all three of these activities working efficiently and cohesively. Before the COVID-19 lockdown, most of these activities were performed in the office where managers, engineers, and administration staff could



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collaborate and communicate face-to-face and quickly resolve issues. “It is more difficult doing so remotely because the three groups are working in ‘silos,’ and important issues can get neglected.”

Most offices have an established reputation and business profile that clients recognize and align with their needs. Clients expect to contact their engineers as easily as before and to have their needs met in the same manner. Maintaining this profile in the work-from-home environment is critical to assure clients that they can rely on the same quality of service and innovation they have always received from their engineer of choice.

There may be an additional level of disconnect if your client is accustomed to calling the main office number and hearing the voice of a well-known receptionist. When the office building is closed, that may not happen, either because the position is not as available as before or calls are not forwarded to the receptionist but are redirected to the engineer. Businesses should discuss options with the receptionist and/or office phone service provider. It would be optimal if, when the office number is called, it transfers to the receptionist wherever they are working from during regular business hours. Make sure that the receptionist can effectively and efficiently transfer calls as they always have done.

It seems like most engineering offices now have their staff working from home, except for essential activities like servicing IT equipment and picking up the mail. In many cases, a few workers go to the office to perform these functions. It is equitable to seek volunteers for this assignment and respect that staff can have concerns or fears that they will be exposed to the virus. It is important that a system is developed to get mail to the person who needs it. It is not uncommon to see a massive pile of mail – magazines, letters with bills and payments, etc. – piled up on a table and left undistributed.

## Management

Maintaining company culture is critical. Each firm has its own way of operating, communicating with clients, communicating internally, performing work, learning, celebrating successes, and handling challenges and difficulties. These unique attributes are what makes the firm what it is and distinguishes it from other firms. Since working remotely is something that most managers have not been trained to do, it takes a lot of learning, experimentation, and flexibility to maintain the culture as best you can.

Engineers are trained to solve problems, and they function best as part of an organization that works closely together to achieve an optimal outcome. “One of my engineering colleagues who married a ballerina told me once that she appreciated her husband’s ability to follow instructions, like discipline demanded in ballet.” Working



from home limits the natural sharing of instructions, feedback, and collaboration that every engineer needs to succeed.

Management and senior staff should schedule regular meetings to connect and walk through what their teams have been working on; this is especially critical when working with younger or less experienced engineers. “The frequency of meetings depends on individual projects and the experience of team members. Experienced project managers will appreciate hearing from every team member. Sometimes you don’t know what you don’t know, so these meetings will uncover issues that need discussing and create learning opportunities. Sometimes, young engineers can be afraid to speak up. When they do proactively contact their managers, take advantage of the opportunity.” Having a set time to review tasks and planned approaches to the work provides for feedback and clarification to avoid rework and frustration. The process is a great learning experience for younger engineers and a support mechanism for all the staff involved who may feel disconnected.

Regular calls with the entire staff are also valuable for individuals to report on their billable work and marketing and administrative activities. “Urban Engineers of New York conducts daily calls at 8 am each day, and each project manager is asked to give a report. When a project manager is not available, the staff engineer is asked to report on the work. This call provides a regular opportunity for staff to hear about proposals, the status of projects, and administrative activities like executing contracts, sending invoices, and collecting money. The success of this call is astonishing. Urban Engineers has seen almost 100% participation in these daily check-ins over the last seven months.”

Some large, complex projects and proposals require extensive collaboration that is difficult to achieve when working from home. “Team and Zoom meetings provide a platform for collaboration, but the technology limits the exchange of information and ideas: it is flat, 2-dimensional, and singular. Multi-discipline projects require the coordination of several documents and references.” There can be a distinct advantage in certain circumstances to strategically bringing technical staff to work together in person. When this occurs, the

office must be a safe space that adheres to CDC recommendations and local health department mandates for COVID-19, including screening personnel, strict mask protocols, social distancing, proper ventilation and filtration, and aggressive cleaning. If done right, the benefits should outweigh the risks.

## Staying in the Loop

If you live in an area where your office can continue to operate much as it did before COVID, and only specific personnel work from home (e.g., self-quarantine, high-risk individuals, etc.), remember to keep them in the loop. “Out-of-sight, out-of-mind can hurt when they find out they were the only ones not to get the memo handed out in an impromptu meeting at the office, or they are the only ones on a conference call not getting the joke about what happened in the office last week. Working remotely necessarily brings some degree of isolation but feeling like an outsider in your own company should not be part of the bargain. Avoid making general statements that ostracize or belittle people who choose to work remotely. There are still lots of unknowns, and their choice has to be respected.”

## Maintaining Learning

Continuous learning on the job is fundamental; creating opportunities to share information, either top-down or laterally between coworkers, is more difficult when working remotely. Older engineers can probably remember important lessons learned at work that happened spontaneously, in a casual conversation or when eavesdropping, and turned out to be more useful later in their careers than knowledge gained in formal seminars or lectures. Some things just seem to “stick.” For the most part, young engineers learn by doing and observing what is going on around them, the kind of over-the-shoulder learning that is typically unscheduled. They need the most attention of any group in the firm.

By now, most firms have probably fully integrated one of the branded meeting technologies. It is essential that older engineers aggressively use real-time screen sharing tools available in these programs, to pull up plans, quickly sketch out concepts, and create interactive teaching moments with young engineers. Rather than send a marked-up set of drawings or an edited letter back to the young engineers, senior staff should use screen-sharing technology to create the same review and learning experience as would have been experienced face-to-face in the office. “The back-and-forth discussion is really key. Don’t be afraid to tell a few stories, since these can be valuable. You won’t even see the rolling of eyes and the here-he/she-goes-again look!”

In addition to maintaining technical education and development, it is important to include soft skills as well. Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott, both of the London Business School, published an article in the Harvard Business Review (November 2016) titled *What Younger Workers Can Learn from Older Workers, and Vice Versa*. Takeaways from their survey of over 10,000 people point to issues that may be

exacerbated in the current work-from-home paradigm (italic text in the bulleted list is from the 2016 article):

- The study report noted, *There is no doubt that for many people in their thirties, the demands of work can be tough; some have young children to care for, bosses to impress, clients to serve. Faced with these many demands, they report having little control over the way they work, the hours they work, and their capacity to craft new ways of working. This puts stress on their families and vitality. It is no surprise that they say they are more exhausted than older workers.* When working from home, those issues are spotlighted because frustrations and long hours are front-and-center for the family.
- *The financial literacy of younger workers, in general, is limited, so learning how to handle money and finances helps in the workplace (proposals, contracts, negotiations, etc.)...* Involving young engineers in the details of projects and business financials should not be overlooked when working remotely.
- *When we look at long, productive lives, it is clear that...the development of relationships and networks is crucial at any stage... Those over the age of 50 are simply maintaining their current network and failing to build new networks. As a result, their networks will become increasingly homogenous and static.* During this pandemic, face-to-face interaction has been basically halted. It can be difficult and daunting to create strong relationships and networks via email and video conferencing.

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However, younger engineers seem to be more productive with networking, and doing it with technology may be easier for them. This might be an opportunity for young engineers to train the older staff!

It is important to make sure that remote interactions do not just focus on the immediate technical needs of a project. Regular conversations on broader topics and soft skills are just as important and essential to employee engagement and development.

## Relationships

According to the HR firm Paychex, *Given the time spent together, it’s possible that the people you share an office with can become more than just coworkers. These relationships formed through work can have a major impact on how satisfied people are in the workplace. They can*

also affect how comfortable employees feel coming into the office each morning, how productive they are throughout the day, and how happy they are in their chosen career. This camaraderie is impacted when staff works remotely. In a survey of 1,011 full-time workers, Paychex found that (*italic text is from the survey report*):

- Job satisfaction and willingness to ask coworkers for advice or help on the job is positively correlated to the number of office friends.
- 70% of respondents felt that office friendships had a positive impact on the work environment and strengthened the workplace in terms of teamwork.

While working remotely, it is important to take responsibility to reach out to coworkers to maintain relationships. “Simple efforts can increase your sense of camaraderie with peers and how supported you feel in your role. When appropriate, management should also seek opportunities to facilitate virtual socialization among staff. Virtual activities can include happy hours, trivia events, or other similar activities that promote social engagement among staff. These social events should not be mandated but offered for those staff seeking such an outlet.” If local health rules permit, try getting together in person in small groups just to say hello.

Relationships with clients are just as essential as those with coworkers. “It is as important as ever to make sure your clients know you are engaged and still have their interests and projects as priorities. Respond to emails in a timely manner. Share your cell number with important clients, even if you typically do not like them contacting you directly.”

Another alternative is to have calls to your office number forwarded to your cell phone to maintain the privacy of your cell phone number. Conversely, it is probably more acceptable now than before to contact clients on their cell phone if permitted, even when it is not critical or particularly important. It is best to ask them what they are comfortable with. “Don’t forget to update your greeting to include what you consider ‘work hours,’ so the caller knows when to expect a return call.”



## Talent – Where Will We Live?

When thinking about working remotely, most people still think about continuing to live in the firm’s geographic area. It has not been long enough for people to consider selling their homes and moving farther afield. But the natural question will eventually arise about really working remotely, like in another state or country. Once a physical link with the office is broken, what is the limit, or better yet, is there a limit on where the staff lives?

“More progressive firms may find that they can retain key staff by allowing them to locate around the country or the world and take advantage of a 24-hour work-day and the consequent benefits.” Making site visits or meeting in person with clients could be off the table. There could be substantial savings in salaries,

healthcare, and reduced office/rental expenses from a business perspective. Keep an open mind! Engineering will lead our society in this new normal by discovering new ways to work and live, just as this profession has done for other historical events and challenges.

The same goes for hiring. Most firms hire locally and recruit from local universities unless they have the reputation and reach to go farther afield. But if working remotely is acceptable, then maybe new hires work remotely, opening recruiting to previously untapped sources. Some serious thinking will be required about getting these remote hires to be part of the team and take on the company culture, but it will certainly be worth considering for the right hires.

## Empathy

Management must understand the additional stress that staff is experiencing and help them navigate the work-from-home situation. Remember that an engineering firm is really nothing without its people. Staff with children may need additional help since, besides work, they are serving in the role of an assistant schoolteacher. Burnout is real. Do not get caught blindsided by asking your staff generic questions like, “How are you doing?” Probe with more revealing questions such as “What has been the biggest hurdle for you lately?” Offer help by asking, “What can the business be doing to make your life easier and less stressful?” Virtual happy hours may sound like a great idea but, after a long day of work with considerable time spent on video conferences during working hours, another hour on the computer may seem more like work than fun.

Also, recognize the impact of pay reductions, due to furloughs and other situations, on the lowest-paid employees who are also likely to have the smallest financial resources. It is easy to forget that the income and wealth accumulation of senior staff and management often exceeds that of hourly staff and younger engineers just getting a start in the industry. When speaking with staff, particularly hourly staff, put yourself in their shoes. You might want to avoid talking about the new car you bought, the home addition and kitchen remodel you are considering, and leisure activities that the staff cannot partake in because of time or financial restraints. Even in the best of times, some people may not want to hear about your trip to your cabin in Montana or a little R&R along the coast to clear your head, but in a pandemic, think twice about these discussion topics.

## Conclusion

COVID-19 has severely impacted the engineering profession. Companies have lost work, employees have been laid off, and our physical movements have been restricted. Some believe that corporate performance has not been impacted, others disagree. Society may be getting used to working-at-home, and voluntary remote-work options may be deemed useful for some businesses in the future. Time will reveal the impacts of the forced work-from-home model, good and bad.

Society will ultimately rebound, but our lives will be different. Until the verdict is in, we need to work remotely as well as we can. ■



Watch for Part 2 of this series on working remotely in a future issue of STRUCTURE magazine. In the interim, please send your comments, observations, and experiences to [RemoteWork@STRUCTUREmag.org](mailto:RemoteWork@STRUCTUREmag.org).