How to Support and Encourage
Newly Working From Home Employees

By Paul White, Ph.D. and Natalie Hamrick, Ph.D.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption of typical work circumstances, millions of individuals have begun to work from home. This change in office settings has affected employees and leaders at all levels within organizations. While the duration of "stay-at-home" orders is difficult to predict, the challenges of workplace location, communication, and processes will continue throughout 2020.

Traditional Remote and COVID-19 Remote Employees Differ

Newly working from home employees have significant circumstantial differences than those who were working remotely prior to the COVID-19 crisis. First, they were *forced (did not opt) to work remotely* – either by government orders or company decisions. Secondly, they are *working from home* (as opposed to working in an offsite work location). Working from home presents a variety of challenges (other family members present, a new working environment). A third key difference is that they are concomitantly *dealing with major health concerns* – for themselves and family members. Finally, *additional external stressors abound* – the pandemic's global impact, broad economic concerns, job instability, disruption in daily activities, and financial challenges.

While some [prior lessons have been learned](#) from having remote employees as part of one's workforce, it is critical to repeatedly remind ourselves that the current state of working from home is fundamentally different. Two of the most impactful aspects are *instability* and *unpredictability* – and this is true for everyone: owners, managers, employees, family members. These factors lead to an *overriding anxiety* in our lives.

Understanding Newly Remote Employees: Data from a 4-Week Study

We felt it was important to gain a current view of employees' perceptions, concerns, feelings, responses, and their ways of coping with stress.

From 1200+ applicants, we chose 50 individuals, attempting to get a balanced sample of gender, living situations (alone, with roommate, spouse / significant other, children), and location (urban, suburban, rural). Additionally, we wanted a range of remote working experience – some participants had worked remotely for several months or years, but most had worked from home less than two weeks when the study began.

The participants completed an online questionnaire weekly for four weeks (March – April, 2020), looking at:

- their single greatest concern that week
- the biggest challenges they were facing in daily life
- their level of anxiety (and sources)
- what coping behaviors they were using
- the types and intensity of feelings they were experiencing
- what positive results they experienced by working from home
- their level of connectedness and isolation
- actions they and their colleagues took to stay connected

Core Themes Identified

We found a number of themes – some confirming previously identified principles and some interesting tidbits. Most of the results point to practical actions that leaders (and employees themselves) can take to manage the stress and anxiety of daily life upheaval.

Not surprisingly, working from home employees experience a moderate amount of anxiety (seemingly at a level appropriate for their circumstances). Their worries include:

- health concerns (for themselves and family members)
- the impact of the pandemic globally and on the economy
- financial issues
- what their future lives will look like

Their biggest daily challenges are created from working from home ("working while overseeing my children's schooling"), work-related issues ("Not being able to easily ask co-workers questions"), family issues ("children's behavior regressing – crying and meltdowns").

A key set of findings related to how people cope with their stress and anxiety: Individuals who experienced lower stress reactions, lower anxiety, and higher levels of positive feelings were more likely to: a) get adequate sleep, b) eat healthily, c) limit their "binge watching" of the news, d) take breaks from work; e) engage in rejuvenating activities; and f) make efforts to connect with colleagues.

What are some techniques that proved to be successful to connect with coworkers?

- communicating via video (versus just email or phone)
- "checking in" occasionally
- having time to chat with colleagues about non-work topics
- sharing funny texts or videos .

Overall, the majority of remote employees continued to have hope that "things will get better." The most impactful sources of hope were their religious faith, family and friends, and maintaining a positive attitude.

Unexpected Findings

Remote employees *strongly* report enjoying the extra time experienced as a result of working from home. The finding itself wasn't surprising but the *widespread nature and intensity* of the issue was --over 90% of descriptive comments related to extra time due to not commuting ("I don't have to commute!"; "I have more time to exercise") or having more time with family ("I get to have lunch with my wife"; "I love being at home with my baby"). They also love the flexibility from working from home ("taking my dog for a walk as a break from work").

Interestingly, some factors did not influence employees' stress, anxiety, or positive feelings, including: age, location (urban, suburban, rural), living situation (alone, roommate, family), or their degree of extraversion / introversion.

Practical Implications

The results from this study are not just "interesting"; they have significant pragmatic relevance for leading others. The following issues should be integrated into workplace cultures.

Understanding and managing anxiety. Since the experience of anxiety is so widespread, understanding the sources of employees' concerns (they differ for each individual) and teaching them how to manage their anxiety is a major "take away" from the results of this research. Sharing simple cognitive tools such as "keep your focus on today, not the future," can be highly effective.

Staying connected. Remote employees are here to stay, even after the current pandemic becomes history. Putting practices in place to assist team members in having ongoing interactions (both about work and personally) will be foundational to having a healthy workplace environment. Having "virtual coffee breaks" and team meetings by videoconference should continue.

Healthy Habits. A key message to team members about keeping remote employees resilient through this difficult time is, fortunately, not difficult to understand and relatively simple to implement. Encourage employees to do those activities that we know create a more positive, robust life: get adequate sleep, eat a healthy diet, take breaks, stay connected with others, focus upon the positive, limit intake of anxiety-producing news, and do something fun occasionally. In our study, the more of these activities a person did, the better off they faired mentally.

Positive "Work from Home" Factors. The fact that so many employees discovered significant positive aspects from their time working from home cannot be ignored. The majority of employees report a great deal of satisfaction in their lives from the time saved by not having to commute every day, and the flexibility associated with working from home. This raises the challenge of managing the desire by many who may want to continue working remotely after the current "stay at home" orders are lifted.

The "social experiment" forced upon us by the COVID-19 pandemic has created dramatic shifts in the daily lives of millions of individuals, including those who have been forced into a role of working from home. Fortunately, we appear to have the tools to adjust to and manage the anxiety and stressors created by this massive change in our lives, and we can continue to build those positive behaviors into our lives as the challenges continue.

For more information, contact paul@drpaulwhite.com or visit www.appreciationatwork.com .