



# Flexible, Remote and Online Working guide

## Part 6: Our hybrid future

In addition to all of its headaches and heartaches, the global response to C19 has made the working world more accessible, flexible or even possible for many.

This has, of course, happened in a way that's frustrated many Deaf, Disabled and regional people in particular (and allies like me) – in that the world suddenly got a whole lot more accessible the minute that city-based non-disabled people needed it to. But it has also benefitted people with caring responsibilities, (formerly) long commutes, or simply those who would prefer more 'life' in their work-life balance.

Many of us haven't able to be as strategic about the move to remote and online working as we would have liked. Which means our digital workplaces and programs might be more accessible and flexible than they were, but that doesn't yet mean they're accessible enough. Or that they'll stay that way when we're all able to go back to our offices.

So how do we keep the things we like about remote and online working and fix some of the things we don't while we start to transition back into new hybrid workplaces that work better for more people?

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### Part 6: Our hybrid future

What our workplaces have achieved (in such a short period of time and under such difficult circumstances) is actually quite incredible. Conversations and processes that could have taken years (or never got off the ground) were implemented overnight. Organisations that never had a work-from-home policy are now working entirely from home – and communicating entirely with others doing the same.

Also incredible is how all the excuses that employers used for years to tell staff we couldn't work from home (let alone from a different state or territory) were immediately blown out of the water.

While most of our experiences of remote working so far have been far from perfect, it feels like most of us are sitting somewhere in the middle - in that we've found both good and bad things about working online. And when we start break them down, many of the bad things can either be blamed on the context that led to this remote work revolution, or the speed at which we had to put remote work environments in place – rather than the nature of remote and online working itself.

2020 has taken us so far away from business as usual. But even if it's just a temporary new normal, it's one we can improve - by using this moment to revisit the logistics and culture of remote working, find ways to make it better for those still working exclusively from home, and start to plan for a new (and hopefully better) hybrid future both on- and off-line.

## **Remote and online working wins**

As we start to move towards a new-new-normal, it's becoming clear that we don't want to go back to the way it was before. That, in many ways, our former work practices were less flexible, less accessible, less diverse, less productive in many cases, and certainly less compatible with other areas of our lives.

Remote and online working can also provide other benefits, such as:

- Increasing our regional, interstate and international reach.
- Reaching more non-traditional markets and audiences in particular.
- Diversifying our income as a result.
- Making our offices less crowded (if different people work on different days).
- Allowing us to recruit staff and Board members from a much broader area (including regionally and nationally).
- Reducing overhead costs (for those who can shrink, share or sublet areas that aren't needed when more people work at least partly from home).
- Reducing our environmental impact (of both office-based delivery and commutes).

## **Time to take stock**

Whether our teams are staying online a while longer, or are already starting to transition back on-site, it can help to pause and revisit our work environments to take stock of where we are.

- Check in with your teams about how remote and online working is going for them, and what they might need to make it better if it's going to last longer term.
- Ask them how they'd prefer to continue working when they're able to make a choice (which could include being totally onsite, totally online, or a combination of both), to give you the information you need to work out what you can and can't accommodate.
- Talk about whether they might need additional equipment or support for hybrid work arrangements (such as having work chairs or monitors in both locations, or being matched with a remote work buddy so they don't feel cut off from office life).

Importantly, if you're continuing with either an online or hybrid work environment, don't assume all of your team have access members to or can afford the equipment or data they need at home.

This issue of digital inequality has been brought into sharp relief by C19. Some of our team members are sharing devices or fighting for bandwidth with other members of their households. Some may have previously used shared equipment that they can't access anymore. Some might not be able to afford to increase their home data plans – particularly if their work hours have been reduced. And more than 2 million Australians aren't online at all.

Be very clear about who will pay for what, and try to make a safe and non-judgmental space for team members to tell you what they can and can't afford.

## **Don't default**

Once team members start to split between home and the office, it's also important not just to default to the way things worked before.

This could include things like continuing to meet online even when some of your team are on-site. Try to avoid automatically slipping back into the habit of having staff meetings in office meeting rooms with work-from-homers on screen or speakerphone. Instead, ask your office-based team members to dial in from their individual work spaces too. This is both more accessible and equitable, helps support social distancing, and can reduce feelings of us-versus-them, which will hopefully mean work-from-homers are less likely to feel left out.

## **Take time to make time**

Remote work requires us to communicate more often, more effectively and in more different ways, and online meetings are an important part of that. However, taking time to review (and reduce) our existing meetings and think about new ones more strategically can help us make those meetings better, and avoid meetings that happen out of habit or simply because we don't have time to think about doing them differently.

## **Review team interactions**

When most of us are busier than we've ever been before, balancing the need to check in with our teams more often with the time it takes to do those check ins requires us to be both more proactive and more strategic.

This includes finding time to check in with everyone individually, and putting thought into the team and social strategies that can address what we lose from the office interactions that used to keep us connected, informed and enjoying our work.

## **Agree online meeting protocols**

- Unless you have connection or data issues, use your video as much as possible.
- Check your lighting and camera position to make sure everyone can see you.
- Try to position your eyes approximately one third below the top of the screen.
- Make sure there's no light pointed directly at the camera.
- Blur or upload a background image if you've got lots of activity going on behind you.
- Keep yourself on mute except when you're speaking.
- If you have a comment or question, use 'raise your hand' or write in the chat box.
- Wait for the chairperson to call on you, rather than speaking over each other.
- Speak directly to your camera and slightly slower than your usual pace.
- If you share your screen, don't assume everyone can see or understand it. Read all your written content and describe all of your images.
- If connection issues occur, act quickly. Turn off video unless you are speaking - or altogether if that doesn't work. Or dial in on the phone instead.

- In this meeting, multi-tasking [is/is not] appropriate.
- In this meeting, gifs and side-chat [are/are not] appropriate.
- The chairperson will be keeping us on topic and on time, so may need to rein in the conversation.
- OPTIONAL (for mixed phone/online meetings or meetings including external stakeholders): Please say your name before each time you speak.
- OPTIONAL: This meeting [will/not] be recorded.

### **Strong chairing techniques**

Many of us cringe at the thought of taking on the role (and control) of a chairperson. But competent and confident chairing techniques are vital for effective online meetings (particularly when things go wrong). These includes:

- Managing your time (and everyone else's).
- Managing turn-taking, chat and questions.
- Managing tech and access issues.
- Managing social moments (if appropriate).
- Managing difficult situations (as required).

### **Keep going, keep growing**

Remote work is a process, not a fixed point. We never fully 'arrive'.

The best remote work solutions are those that developed by teams working together to create plans and protocols specific to their situations.

- Keep talking to your teams to co-design and update online communication protocols that work for you.
- Designate a Remote Working champion/s to make sure those protocols are implemented.
- And keep talking about the challenges of working and communicating online too. Be open about the issues. Ask your teams for advice. Crowdfund solutions.

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### **About the writer**

Kate Larsen is a Non-profit & Cultural Consultant with more than 20 years' experience as a leader and senior executive in the non-profit, government and cultural sectors in Australia, Asia and the United Kingdom. She has particular expertise in the areas of workplace culture and wellbeing, online communication and communities, and increasing access for marginalised groups. This includes experience managing remote-working teams at a state and national level.

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