



MANAGING THE COGNITIVE AND EMOTIONAL ASPECTS OF WORKING REMOTELY

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We've taken care of all the things that we need to work from home - an adequate internet connection, a secluded space, calendars, meeting organizers, digital whiteboards etc. - but a feeling of discomfort lingers on. Why?

We can walk out from a four hour face-to-face meeting with fantastic outcomes and a feeling of accomplishment; but when we attempt a four hour video conference, it goes south really quick. Why?

The answers might lie in understanding the factors that guide cognition and emotions, especially when dramatic shifts occur in our primary, otherwise well-organized behaviors like work, for example.

Literature around remote-working usually revolves around three kinds of distances that have to be reckoned with -

- a) **Physical (place and time),**
- b) **Operational (team sizes, bandwidth, skill levels) and**
- c) **Affinity (softer, more behavioral factors like trust, values, co-operation and reciprocity).**

Organizations mostly tackle reducing physical and operational distances to 'prepare' for remote working; this is not nearly enough to guarantee performance, motivation and collaboration.

Reducing affinity distance is crucial to getting a handle on the above factors. Let's look towards Cognitive Science to give us a handle on the working of some of our higher-order mental processes in the remote-working context.

Remote communication is a cognitive depletion abyss

UNCERTAINTY - THE PRICE TO PAY FOR FLEXIBILITY

There are clear boundaries and expectations defined when we head into work everyday - work begins when we step into our workplaces, and ends when we walk out. Processes have been laid out and norms already exist; we know what to expect - business hours, attire, meeting cadence, breaks, lunch, informal chats. With remote working, however, these norms are either vague or non-existent and are mostly left to the individual's discretion. A quick walk across to a colleagues desk is replaced by decisions in the digital space - 'should I call her, what if she's busy?', 'should I write first, or schedule a calendar invite?'. This uncertainty, then, becomes the price we pay for flexibility, not to mention the significant strain it places on our cognitive resources.

WHAT COMPANIES COULD DO

Set Defaults to manage uncertainty
Set expectations for work from home by creating defaults to manage all areas of uncertainty - a work from home dress code, working hours, lunch hours, when participants in a meeting are expected to turn on video, when it's okay to directly reach-out and call colleagues and when meetings ought to be set-up, whether it's okay to take video meetings from different parts of the house, and so on. Open communication about factors like these will significantly ease the cognitive strain on employees.



DIFFUSED ATTENTION

Let's talk about **attention**. Focusing on a call is hard enough, with the brain working overtime to complete any gaps and fill in missing emotional cues. To make things worse, the limited attention that is left, is distributed between people and tasks at home - the brain prioritizing immediate and more proximal demands over remote ones (which unfortunately, include the people on the other side of our digital meetings).

WHAT COMPANIES COULD DO

- Acknowledge that people are **working from home, with everyone at home**.
- As a general principle, it is better at this time to dial down communication, rather than dial it up - for eg. sending meeting invites over different channels of communication, because we want to ensure recipients see it.
- Acknowledge, and work with the limited attention capacity - set default meeting times to 25 minutes, rather than the regular hour.
- Managers could ensure that there are participants at digital meetings, who track attention and interest levels and call for breaks when these levels wane.
- Emails and notifications add to cognitive load. Institute a repository where employees could go pull information when needed, rather than push all information (company news blasts, happenings etc.) to employees during this time.

INTENT MIS-PERCEPTION AND BREAKDOWN IN TRUST

Lack of a shared physical space and emotional cues mean that we are continuously tracking the intent of people we are digitally interacting with ('she just put herself on mute, wonder what she's doing?', 'why is his video not on?'). These moments of negative intent-perception and judgement, can immediately distract, and over time, lead to a breakdown of trust, which is extremely harmful for collaboration.

WHAT COMPANIES COULD DO

- Encourage **Consistency & Honesty**
- Choose consistent modes of working - video on/off, mute on/off (when others are speaking).
 - Encourage honesty about distractions and deviations to expectations that have been set - excusing oneself before going off video, or walking around during a call.
 - Embed rituals to build collaboration and wipe the intent slate clean before meetings start - humour and informal chit-chat help.

FUTURE INTERACTIONS AND BELIEF UPDATION

A shared physical space (workspace, meeting room) is an equalizer, as opposed to a video call, for instance, which affords access to participants' unique physical environments. As a result, a significant portion of our cognitive resources are deployed into belief updation ('that looks like a nice clock behind him - must have been expensive, wonder where he got it'). The cognitive costs associated with belief updation are unavoidable - these are automatic processes, with resources being continually marshalled towards them. These beliefs also shape future interactions with colleagues and are not easily modified once they have been cemented.

WHAT COMPANIES COULD DO

Ensure Stability

While it's okay to be flexible about where in the house one can work and take meetings from, guidelines about these spaces could be established - a relatively neutral, non stimuli-rich environment is ideal.

NEGATIVE OUTCOME EXPECTATIONS AND BEING 'ALWAYS ON'

Another aspect of working remotely entails mentally calculating outcome probabilities (probabilities of certain events occurring, and the possible outcomes of those events) - 'what if I'm at lunch and my boss calls - he'll think I'm shirking work', 'what if I'm on a break and I miss something important'. Expecting negative outcome probabilities could lead to coping mechanisms like being 'always on', leading to distortion of the already blurred lines between home and work. Additionally, the commute home, which gives us time to wind down and switch modes, is also missing - exacerbating the 'always on' feeling.

WHAT COMPANIES COULD DO

Bracketing - work and not work

- Companies should establish brackets for when work starts and ends - create artificial rituals around starting and ending work as real ones don't exist. Communicate that when it's not within the work brackets, it's okay to say no.
- Employees could mark out certain parts of the day so that meetings do not get scheduled
- blocking times on the calendar for lunch, exercise and breaks with family are important.
- Everyone working from home will mean an obvious increase in the number of meetings, and therefore, it's also important to block-off time for actual work - a 'no-meetings' slot on the calendar.
- It's important to switch-off for 2 mins on the hour, every hour, and reset - get a glass of water to drink, breathe deeply a few times, stare into space - basically, do nothing.

In a nutshell, working remotely really puts our limited resources to the test. Coping cognitively and emotionally is key to ensuring positive outcomes with the extended working from home scenario that most of us across the globe are likely to face in the coming months.