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Trusted IT Advisors

Running a
Virtual Company

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I founded Harvard Partners over 10 years ago. We are a Strategic IT Infrastructure and Operations management consulting and staffing/recruiting firm. When we started the company we made a decision to be 100% virtual. This included all our technology. Other than laptops and phone handsets we have never had any physical servers, networking, storage, etc. We have never had any regrets.

Besides helping clients with COVID-19 work-from-home technology challenges, C-Level executives are asking us to provide coaching on how best to manage a virtual office. While we are not experts in this space, we have personal experience. Here are some things to think about as suggested by Harvard Partners' staff.

The Office Is A Social Place

There is no substitute for face-to-face interactions. The most important thing you can do is to keep in contact with your staff via phone or video conferencing. Email and text are impersonal mediums. My business partner and I speak 3 - 4 times a day. I try to speak with the members of my team at least once a day. In addition, we email, text, and IM each other all the time.

- Shorten meeting times and add more meetings. This creates more interruptions in the day. Leave time in-between meetings for people to catch-up.

- Long meetings are deadly whether in the office or at home

- Break down hierarchies by having executives engage staff at lower levels. For many work-from-home issues, engagement is key. Nothing is a more powerful motivator than recognition from above.

- Find reasons to pick-up the phone and call people. If an email thread goes beyond a certain level get on a conference call.

The Discipline Of Working From Home Can Be Difficult

This is one of the most prevalent things I hear from people working from home during the COVID-19 Pandemic. People who have developed routines at work find ways to transfer that to work-from-home. Those who rely on following other people's patterns are lost when they try and work from home.This is going to be a transformational business event. We will emerge with new ways of working and interacting with each other. How IT engages and approaches challenges will define the next evolution of IT. Stay tuned!

- Identify people who are having difficulties and give them specific tasks with a beginning, middle, and end.

- For those who have the discipline, trust their work ethic, trust they are accountable, trust they will take ownership.

- Create more scheduled touchpoints during the day. Simply touching base at start of day or end of day leaves a lot of time for people to become lost.
  Identify and give praise when deliverables are accomplished.

- The office culture and the work-from-home culture should be the same. Communication is different, but the culture can remain.

Home Can Be A "Zoo" and Home Can Be Lonely

Every person has a different experience working from home. For some, they are trying to find that quiet corner where they can get away from the kids and the dog. For others, who typically live alone, spending all your time locked in a house can seem like a prison. We have no grand wisdom on this topic other than leaders need to be sensitive to this. Leaders shouldn't be afraid to ask individual staff how they are coping and what they find most difficult about working from home. Maybe it is an opportunity to facilitate an audio or video conference with people having similar issues.

Social Distancing Is More Than Working From Home

My wife, son, his girlfriend, and I agreed to practice social distancing by only being proximate with each other. This means we stay in our homes and we can go visit each other so long as we have not been close to anyone else. While very limiting, at least we have the four of us. Consider what social distancing means to someone who lives alone. The lack of human interaction at the office creates a very lonely situation.

It is important you, as a leader, recognize what people are going through. Besides loneliness, people are worried about catching a virus and dying and losing their job. It is difficult to be hopeful when you have all those things stacked against you.

Work/Life Balance

I admit I have no idea what work/life balance is. I never have and it's what I choose to do. When working from home you lose sight of that balance because there are no "boundaries" to help you understand the difference. A staff member summed it up by saying "at the end of the day there is always one more thing to get done." As a leader, even if we don't practice work/life balance, we need to help our staff maintain this balance.

- Set schedules for work and personally abide by them. People will follow your lead.

- Limit emails sent off-hours and weekends. Staff receiving an email from a manager feel obligated to reply. Outlook has a great feature allowing you to send mail scheduled to be delivered during work hours.

- Find a way to give people time off. This is not easy when people are working from home. Time off and time on become a blur. See what you can do to make the delineation clearer.

These are challenging times, and not just because we are trying to avoid a deadly virus. People react differently under these circumstances and we not only need to be supportive leaders, we need to be supportive friends.

Online Meeting Etiquette

COVID-19 work-from-home scenarios have forced all meetings online. Online meeting participants are no longer "back benchers," and how meetings are attended and facilitated is now as equally important as the content of the meetings.

Onsite meetings typically rely on a structure dictated by the physical presence of a conference room, conference room tables, chairs, placement of screens, microphones, whiteboards, and furniture. Online meetings rely on meeting participants to restrain themselves from distracting the meeting.

Based on my own experience, and having gathered pointers from the web, here is my top list of things participants shouldn't do.

We Love Your Dog, But...

Dogs, kids, relatives, people shouting up the stairs are all cute interruptions the first time they happen, but cause a meeting presenter to pause.

- Close the door

- Use a headset with microphone

- Mute your microphone

- Create "office hours"

We Know You Are Hungry

In an onsite meeting eating is not a significant distraction. When you are in an online meeting we really don't need the close-up of you shoveling food into your mouth.

- Excuse yourself and turn off your video

- Mute the microphone (we can hear you chewing)

- Don't use a headset while eating.

- Don't do it!

Audio & Video Quality is Important

The quality of audio will stop a meeting and the quality of video will distract a meeting. Be cognizant of the effect you are creating.

- Use a noise cancelling headset with a microphone

- Speak slowly and clearly, not loudly.

- Keep windows and room lighting behind the camera

- Do not have a distracting background

- Look directly into the camera but don't get too close

Meetings Need Leaders

Online meetings are no different than onsite meetings.

- Always publish an agenda

- The leader should always use video

- When referring to someone else in the meeting, use their name

- Leaders need to control a meeting

- Designate meeting leadership to someone else if necessary

We Can't Read Your Body Language

While we don't know we do it, we use other people's body language as cues during a meeting. In an online meeting that becomes difficult.

- Pause between thoughts. Give people a chance to speak.

- Stop to ask if people have questions or comments

- Don't talk over others

- If you don't like or agree with something, don't grimace or "stew." Wait your turn and express your feelings.

Obvious Things

A successful work-from-home strategy involves participation from all staff. Meetings are one of the most important tools to make it happen.

- Be on time

- Be collaborative

- Wear appropriate clothing (yes, I did wear a Hawaiian shirt to an online meeting yesterday)

- Silence your Alexa and Google Home devices

About Matthew Ferm

Matthew Ferm is a founder and Managing Partner of Harvard Partners. Prior to Harvard Partners, Matt spent 17 years with Wellington Management Company, LLP. As an Associate Partner and Director of Enterprise Technologies, Matt was responsible for managing the global physical computing infrastructure of this financial services firm.

About Harvard Partners

Harvard Partners is a management consulting firm focused on helping companies more effectively leverage their IT investment. We engage with the C-Suite and Technology Team to help them better understand their IT infrastructure and process in order to align the technology strategy and organization to reach the firm's strategic business goals.