R O P E

Remote Office Pairing for Engagement

Roping office and remote workers together to provide work and social engagement

(Written in June 2020 and revised in July 2024)

When the COVID-19 virus pandemic imposed a "lockdown" on us in March 2020, the working lives of most people changed radically. Remote working was here, whether we liked it or not!

Enforced change and adjusting:

We quickly adapted to a new way of working. It was accepted because of the urgency and necessity that drove us. It may not have been welcome, liked, or wanted, but it was there, so we had to work with it. It could be and has been argued that this new enforced way of working was a good thing, forcing us to work differently and find new and better ways to work.

Plato is widely accredited for saying that necessity is the mother of invention (Edwards and Pinckney-Edwards, 2008), and in this case, I believe this saying to be entirely accurate.

Had we decided to do this before the pandemic, there would have been much research, costing, discussion, and, I am sure, arguing, too. The urgency made us change quickly.

There was initially great turmoil as we all grappled with this sudden change, trying to mix the home environment with working life. Gradually, something unexpected happened. Many employers and people decided that remote working was okay or even great. Businesses were shocked but delighted to discover that it worked. They started to see the lure of long-term benefits and think and plan how to bring it into what we then called the "new normal."

"X" (then Twitter) publicly embraced this thinking, announcing that it would allow all its employees to work from home forever (Paul, 2020). I loved that so much. Well done!

Note that they gave them the option and let them choose; we'll look at this critical point later.

I also know that as time passed, people realised they did not like it quite as much. Some came to hate it. People yearned to get back into their lovely world of work with people in that physical environment to interact with other humans. Being with others is in our DNA.

Video conferencing erupted as we struggled to interact with our co-workers who were now working remotely. Remote working meant adapting to a new work/home environment. We had to start juggling all sorts of things and experimenting to merge both environments, but gradually, we realised this was not quite the same as that human touch (pun intended).

Reading about the renewed importance of looking after each other during the lockdown was encouraging. LinkedIn was full of posts on the topic. We saw the need to become emotionally intelligent and practice empathy. Like so many I talked to then, I hoped this would continue and develop within this "new normal" we were expecting.

This article came to exist because there has been ever-increasing chatter about remote working. Many people asked me, "What are your thoughts on how best to approach this"? Or, "How do we ensure we don't let remote workers become isolated"? Enter our R O P E thinking.

WFH - Choices and our fickle brain:

In the last 12 months (23/24), I have heard various discussions and decisions about changing the WFH arrangements in organisations. Some say that people can become fully remote, semi-remote (often 3/5 or 2/5), or remain in the workplace 5/5. Many have gone strictly 3/5 or 2/5 across the organisation (no exceptions), and other organisations have allowed team leaders/managers to make local situational decisions. I also appreciate that some may have to adapt, but let's ensure we have them covered. Leaders/managers need to consider that not everyone manages well at home, and some no longer manage that well in the office.

Be considerate and ensure that your planning includes people changing their minds, as our brains are fickle! Let them mix it up occasionally if your working practices and their jobs permit that.

Our brain is, in fact, biased and sometimes untrustworthy, and therefore, its decisions may require some scrutiny.

The brain's criteria for deciding are not fixed; it adapts its criteria as it accumulates experiences, particularly more recent ones (Eagleman, 2017). Even seasonal changes may impact preferences (hay fever, colds, etc).

If a person has had a great time WFH **and was productive** and is then told they **must** go back to 5/5 in the workplace, and their workplace experiences were not so great, they will probably object strongly to 5/5 in the workplace.

But on the other hand, someone else may have had a tough time adapting to WFH and longed to return to their workplace.

However, when they did, they found that the workplace environment felt different, and they may want to change to WFH again or 2/5 or 3/5. Regardless, remember to expect minds to change—requests for full-time remote working to become part-time and vice versa.

There are intangible nuances at play within the work and home environment that are, by their very nature, invisible, unnoticed but felt. We have given this a name: "Felt Presence"! They are those ad hoc moments in a lift or on the stairs, the two minutes in the kitchen making a drink and chatting or something as simple as the smell of laundry or cooking in the home.

Whilst some may see these as incidental, they form part of that invisible connection, empathy and even sympathy we have with each other, which is critically important to us (Orti and Middlemiss, 2019). Orti and Middlemiss go on to use the term "Office Optional", which suggests a more flexible option on a weekly or monthly basis. Organisations must find what suits most needs or is the best for the greater good of the business **and** its people. The balancing act may take some getting used to. Depending on team roles, it may look and feel different, so use ACE (Approach with Care and Empathy). Like "X", give people choices.

Most of us will have preferences depending on various work situations, alternating those preferences between communicating directly by phone, online video, or whichever suits us best. Even though I am diagnosed with ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorder), I occasionally think it would be good to communicate more personally with others, so I arrange a coffee or a walk together. This feeds our human instinctive desire to connect.

Unconscious human needs:

The terms "Disappearing Human Moment" and "Toxic worry" are from a paper in the Harvard Business Review (Hallowell, 1999). To appreciate the first phrase, Hallowell describes a "human moment" as having two prerequisites: the other person's physical presence with you and their emotional and intellectual attention. As he says, we can even travel beside another person for hours without engaging with them. So, just being there isn't always enough.

The "Disappearing Human Moment" refers to important moments of quality **face-to-face** human interaction that have been disappearing increasingly over the years.

I have long found this borderline avoidance of face-to-face interaction in preference for electronic communication disturbing. Now, some people see real-time communication between two or more people as awkward or risky! We have become far more dependent on asynchronous than synchronous communication and are paying the price.

Lockdown meant we had to move training online, but it worked because it had to! Moving too much learning online will, in time, have adverse emotional, social and psychological effects unless managed with great care. Email, voicemail, video messaging, and texting are all fraught with miscommunication and easy to hide behind. People need people in the room!

We use online video solutions far more now, suggesting they are the same as face-to-face, but I beg to differ. They are close but missing just enough to make a big difference.

The face-to-face environment offers a cocktail of ingredients we often unconsciously process, digest and react to. It gives us far more information than we realise. In the book The Art of Human Communication (Grazer, 2019), Grazer says, "It's like the WIFI of human connection." That really resonates with me, and I agree with it. Ironically, the official opportunities we get to communicate face-to-face, which we call "meetings", are poorly managed and waste precious time and resources, so we actively avoid them at all costs. We make life so much more complicated than we want it to be, and yet we keep on doing it.

Two pieces of research suggest the participants preferred face-to-face (F2F) communication over online. 61% (Brown Sr. and Hersey, 2018) and 64% (Baym, 2004). I worry there are other factors behind **some** people's preference for working remotely.
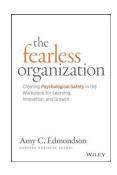
Many people still prefer face-to-face (F2F) communication, often for reasons they cannot explain.

From 2020 to 2024

Plan and prepare to move more roles to remote roles but do so with the contributions of everyone affected. Ensure you give them an environment where they can speak freely without attracting unwarranted criticism or consequences. We call this environment "ES^2".

In brief, ES^2 is where the organisation does not just permit but encourages ALL their people to speak out and challenge others professionally and respectfully. Its people **know** they will not be persecuted for doing so.

People don't step back from suggesting change or new ideas because they're just not interested; they usually fear what others may think of them or even do to them. After all, they have dared to go against their thinking, especially if the thinking is from more senior people in an organisation (Edmondson, 2012). Amy Edmondson calls this "Phycological Safety" and has written an excellent book on the topic. If you have experienced or are experiencing this, then innovation is slipping through your fingers, which is far too costly a loss!

The concept of ES^2 came to me due to an experience I had many years ago while serving in the army. A newly promoted soldier arrived to work for me. He was four ranks below me, so I was far senior to him, and I was the head of the department. As I walked him around our workplace, I pointed out that having fresh eyes was good as sometimes new people see things we don't, as we have been immersed in the work too closely for too long.

I said that if he saw something he thought could be improved, he should raise it with the other, more experienced staff or me. I also explained why it was something we insisted people do. I said that we'd either give him an understanding as to why his suggestion would not work, or we'd be delighted and adopt his suggestion.

Two weeks later, the soldier came to me with a small suggestion to add a column to a stock management sheet. It was simple but brilliant! I escalated his idea through the regimental channels, and all similar departments throughout the regiment adopted it. Some senior officers suggested that it should be incorporated army-wide. (Why hadn't I thought of it?)

Imagine if I had not told him to come and tell us his thoughts and suggestions. We'd have missed this superb idea of his. My words to him helped him feel he was permitted to do this and that we actively encouraged and expected it.

I'd provided him with security, which empowered him to speak out, and the safety to do this must have been tangible as he knew there was no risk in doing so except learning.

That second term, "Toxic worry," captures the impact that the lack of human interaction may have. Hallowell says that the effects of this disappearing human moment can be quite debilitating, become a poison, and turn our behaviours upside down.

I know that over time, more and more people have been returning to the workplace, but not all will return as employers adapt. We, therefore, need to be very focused on how people are "truly" coping. In other words, we must ensure they have a lifeline that works. We do not just want a manager who will tick a box by saying, "Are you ok today?" to which people answer "yes" when they may be far from it. (More on coping with this challenge of checking in shortly).

During the lockdown, an almost invisible tripwire appeared due to the reduced human interaction in our organisation. This resulted in misunderstandings, miscommunications, and some hurt feelings. To combat this, we decided to have "check-in chats" to check communications and how we genuinely felt. We usually did this around 10 a.m. and again around 3 p.m.

This proved most useful. It also caught me out a few times as I had clearly misunderstood communications, which seemed obvious, but to my relief, this became good fun. We made a huge effort to make these fun and threw in the odd challenge to develop our relationships and improve communication.

Leaders often miss the value of workplace chat, which is not work-focused. A workplace survey (Grieser et al., 2019) found that employees who had occasional chats performed better and increased their productivity. They also trusted leaders and managers more as they showed their proper human side to them. But interestingly, they expected a balance of work and fun. This also suggests that leaders and managers who show vulnerability say, "Yes, I am human, and I have worries as well".

Are you ok?

The typical answer most of us offer is, "Oh yes, I am fine, thanks", which is often not entirely accurate. We need to find an easier way for people to communicate how they truly feel without having to say things like, "Actually, I am struggling today".

A chat with a client in last year allowed me to share our health check system, which many already know as RAG (Red, Amber, Green). We designed our version based on our experience working with people with PTSD through our registered charity. We knew from this experience that it's about "how" we ask something, especially if it's about a sensitive or emotive topic. We expanded it so people can use expressions or grades something like this:

- "I'm Totally Green today" / "lower green today" / "just in the green today."

- "I am pretty much Amber today but would love to get to the green."

- "On the edge of Red today" – "In amber but worried about tipping into the red."

From such answers, we can use questions to explore further and support our people.

You don't have to use the same phrases but try to give people the ability to articulate to you or their colleagues what they could do with a boost. It has proved more comfortable for people to apply a grading than say, "I am not okay today." This brings us nicely to "ROPE."

R - O - P - E

The image represents the network of people working remotely from home but safely paired with others working from the office. This roping/pairing can change as and when it suits individuals and thus offers some variety to chats.

ROPE doesn't come without challenges, such as:

- Everyone wants to pair with the same person.

- People are paired with someone they are not overly keen on.

- Do we let partners pair?

- If partners don't pair with each other, could this potentially create issues?

We must find a solution that works best for most people, and each solution could look different between teams. We can't have just the managers managing or arranging this, so use your team and let them sort it out for themselves. Empower them.

Regardless of how well people work remotely, most of us, at some point, will feel a little isolated, especially from the chat around work and social points of interest. Roping people together offers that lifeline allowing us to feel part of the team even when working remotely.

They know the organisation is behind them and wants to help them keep in touch with their team by updating them informally. Yes, especially on non-work topics. The social chat.

In Summary:

- Like on a mountain with unseen dangers, roping up our people offers security.

- It can provide a lifeline for your people, which they can use ad hoc to suit their team or working environment.

- They can have two or three different colleagues with whom they can connect to get more rounded views and opinions.

- Two organisations we work with now use individual and group "pop-up chats," where a person or a few people start a chat because something unexpectedly pops up. Regardless of the name, ensure everyone is on the same page.

- ROPE provides opportunities to catch up with the additional interaction that is missed when we work in isolation from an office-based community environment, which we unconsciously miss.

- It helps with mental health, well-being, and mindfulness by identifying warning signs that signal a deeper conversation is required to avoid feelings of pressure or stress.

- Organisations will have more productive people, more unified approaches to goals, fewer conscious or unconscious saboteurs and the issues they bring, and better-informed managers and leaders. Add some fun regarding goals and targets; you could merge into that ES² environment mentioned earlier.

"Show your people that you truly care about them

and they will truly care about you and your organisation."

~ Mac Macdonald ~

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Please share this document with anyone you feel may be interested.

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