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How Working From Home Has Changed Employees

They are used to far greater independence. And they may value personal time more. Bosses better be ready to adapt.

By [Alexandra Samuel](#)
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The employees who return to the office after a year of remote work aren't the employees their bosses remember.

They have spent over a year adjusting to a radically different rhythm—both in terms of work and their personal lives. They have shifted their working hours, and learned to manage their own tasks without oversight. They may place more value on their family time or personal priorities, and perhaps been forever changed by a loss or health concerns. After a year of working in solitude, many have come to expect more control over how, when and where their work gets done, and to have greater autonomy relative to their managers and organizations.

They may not even feel like they need a whole lot of managing anymore. "Employees are taking on more of the managerial responsibility for their work,"

says Holly Birkett, a lecturer at the University of Birmingham in Britain and co-director at the university's Equal Parenting Project, which surveyed managers and employees during Covid. "They are probably not getting paid any more, but they are feeling more responsibility for getting things done."

All these changes add up to a challenge for managers, who will need to think differently about how to mentor and coach their team members effectively as they return to the office. Their employees might *look* like the same people. But rest assured, many aren't.

Bosses should take time to get to know their employees all over again, to assess how they have grown or changed.

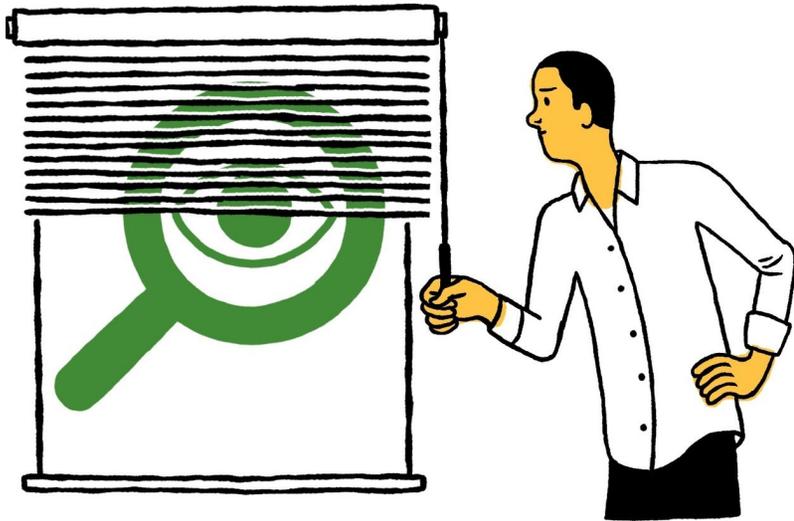ILLUSTRATION: MARTIN TOGNOLA

Start from scratch

For starters, bosses should consider renewing their relationship with every single employee—even those they've managed for years—as if they are starting from scratch.

To that end, they shouldn't assume what their employees can or can't do based on what they could or couldn't do before the pandemic, since they may have acquired new capacities while working from home. Perhaps a junior employee has learned to identify her own tasks and deadlines without the boss laying them out for her; perhaps an arrogant and

standoffish sales representative has developed a newly charming phone persona after months of relating long distance or being humbled by pandemic fears.

As a result, it's best to think about them as fresh hires, asking them how it feels to be back, what they look forward to accomplishing in the months or years ahead, and how they hope to combine home and office time.

Managers might think about treating the initial three to six months after the office reopens as something like a probationary period—not with an eye to firing people, but as a way to assess how employees have grown or changed, and how their own management tactics need to evolve in return.

Employees aren't likely to give up their new independence easily, but managers can find ways to accommodate it.

ILLUSTRATION: MARTIN TOGNOLA

Taste of independence

Probably the biggest change for managers is that many of their direct reports will have acquired a taste for independence, and a lot less managerial oversight. It isn't easy to go from a year of freedom to being under the boss's thumb.

"There is a good chance that those who have been working from home have come to appreciate the autonomy they have gained," says David Pauleen, a professor in technology management at the School of Management at Massey University in New Zealand, who has studied the work patterns of highly autonomous remote workers. "Some employees might bristle if this management trust in employee capabilities to work more autonomously suddenly ceased."

Bosses who are nervous about allowing in-office employees the same kind of autonomy they enjoyed at home should pause and remember what they observed during the pandemic. That is, more productive workers. Sarah Forbes, co-director of the Equal Parenting Project, says that "against managers' expectations, the majority of employees can be trusted to work flexibly, and employees are more productive." By stepping back, she says, "managers were getting better results."

Along with acquiring more autonomy over *how* their work gets done, the past year saw many employees get more control over *when* their work gets done. Mairead O'Connor, an honorary visiting research fellow at the University of New South Wales Business School, says her research found that during Covid, "management noticed that their workers sought nonstandard work time during the day. It turned out they spent less hours a day working [on weekdays] before 5 p.m., but there was a dramatic increase in the evening and weekends."

Many employees aren't going to give up that flexibility easily. Dr. O'Connor recommends that bosses establish core hours during which every worker on a

The percentage of surveyed executives saying they planned to increase spending in these areas to support hybrid working

Tools for virtual collaboration

72%

IT infrastructure to secure virtual connectivity

70

Training for managers to manage a more virtual workforce

64

Conference rooms with enhanced virtual connectivity

57

Hoteling applications

50

Communal space in the office

48

Unassigned (or hoteling) seating in the office

45

Source: PricewaterhouseCoopers survey of 127 U.S. executives, Jan. 2021

team or project must be online or in the office—and then give employees the flexibility to manage the rest of their schedule.

For managers who are used to tracking their team's efforts based on a 9-to-5 schedule, this will require a profound shift: managing team members based on progress toward agreed-upon objectives, rather than the number of hours they spend sitting at their desk.

But that doesn't mean withdrawing supervision. Khim Kelly, a professor of accounting at the University of Central Florida's Kenneth G. Dixon School of Accounting, found that during Covid, the supervisory mechanisms that are most beneficial to productivity were also the ones that decreased most, including face-to-face meetings and co-worker or third-party evaluations. They were replaced by less effective (but more "remote friendly") approaches, such as

online meetings, email and work logs. For that reason, she says, "managers still need to maintain face-to-face touch points with their employees, as well as reliance on a broader set of data points about an employee's performance."

Meetings and socializing

Then there's the dreaded meeting. Employees have long complained about meeting overload, of course, but the past year took that exhaustion to a whole new level—thanks to the frustrations of virtual meetings plus the reliance on meetings as a way to make up for the loss of informal, spontaneous interactions.

In the hybrid workplace, employees should be able to keep meetings to the days that they are in the office

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Employees aren't going to take kindly to going back to the same old same old. The idea that employees should be available to meet anytime between 9 and 5, five days a week, is an outdated way of thinking; so is the idea that employees are cloistered at home, ready to take a call at any time. In the hybrid workplace,

employees should be able to keep meetings to the days that they are in the office. That will only work if managers take a team-centric approach to the hybrid workplace, and build a common schedule that brings everyone on the team to the office on the same two or three days each week.

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Employees also have gotten used to the idea that meetings are a place for informal check-ins with their colleagues. Over the course of the pandemic, Dr. Birkett says, managers have used "team meetings and communications as a tool to enhance well-being and support employees, rather than purely for operational reasons." Managers should continue that practice, especially because a year apart may have weakened ties—and trust—among employees.

Dr. Kelly also advises managers to "create opportunities for people to be back in the same space."

A common schedule is part of that strategy, but managers can do more by encouraging them to maximize their interactions during office days. For instance, if a pre-Covid office was the kind of place where people would get the side eye for spending too much time chit-chatting in the break room, bosses can make an explicit break with that past.

Of course, encouraging social interaction isn't the same thing as making that interaction mandatory. The past year has allowed introverts to reclaim their freedom from forced, uncomfortable socializing, and given extroverts the opportunity to pursue friendships and activities with colleagues outside of the workplace. Rather than trying to turn back the clock, managers should recognize that some of their employees are going to approach the return to the office like a reunion of long-lost friends, while others are just there to get the job done.

Recognizing that different employees have different needs has always been the most important—and the hardest—part about being a manager. That will never be more true than in the coming months. Employees are emerging from the pandemic year as changed, but in different ways. The best managers won't just recognize that. They'll also benefit from it.

Dr. Samuel is a technology researcher and the co-author of "Remote, Inc.: How to Thrive at Work...Wherever You Are." She can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

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June
24
2021

11:00 AM - 5:00 PM EDT

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June
30
2021

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