Manage in the new world

Thoughts and tips on hybrid working

The context for this paper

2020 has been a dramatic year. We, who survived the year, have experienced a worldwide crisis bigger than anything for at least three generations. Certainly since the second world war.

Whilst that crisis will end, its impact will not. As a result, lives and businesses will be changed dramatically. When we return to normal, which we certainly will, it will be to a 'new normal' of some sort. There will be differences in the world at all levels. And some of those differences will be important for businesses. Both in managing their existing operation and also because the competitive dynamics will change. New opportunities will emerge and previous ones will fade. The process of creative destruction will improve the economy as a whole, and will draw a clearer, possibly even dramatic distinction between winners and losers.

This document addresses one narrow aspect of that change. It shares some thoughts and ideas from MD2MD members and elsewhere on how office work will be altered. On how remote, home and flexible working will become a permanent part of the employment model for most businesses. On how the role of the office will change. It will also speculate upon and share some ideas about how business leaders may need to manage differently. Note the language. Whilst I have the good fortune to meet and engage with the thoughts of over 100 business leaders each month, I do not know *the* answer. What I can do is share what I've heard and what I think in order to provoke thoughts and encourage you, the business leader, to develop your own thinking. I hope the angles that I share will help you to reach a better answer for yourself, the business leader, and your business.

Why consider remote, home and flexible working

Some business leaders hold a view that things will, sometime in 2021, return to normal. People will return to the offices and resume working as they did before. I think that they are wrong. I think that the crisis has shown businesses how economic, efficient, yet still effective remote, home and flexible working can be (for certain people, managed well, in some roles.) I also contend that by being one of the best at managing flexible, remote and home working you will attract better staff, with greater life balance more easily and at a lower cost.

A balanced model

There will be service companies (like Facebook and Twitter) that decide to make home working their permanent new normal, like others who have always worked that way. However, I suspect that most businesses will retain an office base or bases as a hub, or because some part of their activity (like manufacturing) requires physical presence.

Despite my belief in remote, flexible and home working, I believe that there will be some

businesses that, for one of a variety of reasons do choose to return to 100% office based, generally full time work.

That said, I do think that the majority will never return to their 2019 model. Having tasted the forbidden fruit of remote and online during the crisis of 2020, they have realised there are benefits to remote, flexible and home working that are worth keeping, even as the crisis subsides.

The immediate economic benefits

I won't cover in depth the economic benefits as they are pretty obvious: savings in rent, heat light and power. In addition, possible savings in sundry office costs such as coffee and consumable, although they might need to be replaced for home workers. Probably the largest direct saving is the reduced space needed when at least some staff work from home some of the time. This is a saving which is clearly simplest and easiest to achieve when all staff work from home and the office becomes a meeting hub, alongside coffee shops and the many flexible 'workspace' offers now available.

Improve performance and attract better employees

For a few years Daniel Pink and others have championed the idea that people are less motivated by money than "Autonomy, Mastery and Purpose." I think the crisis has shown employees that they do not have to spend up to four hours a day commuting. Indeed, some may even have gone further and changed their priorities to decide that even if that did remain the best way to progress their careers, they are now more interested in a more 'sane' (as they see it) lifestyle.

My view, based on my own experiences in many contexts and after listening to many discussions around remote, flexible and home working is that the crisis has accelerated an adjustment that had been happening slowly for many years. More importantly, it has created yet another opportunity for the smart SME to distinguish itself from it's less smart, similarly

sized competitors and more sluggish larger competitors. This has been achieved by acting quickly and effectively in their approach to flexible, remote and home working to create a competitive advantage.

The evidence for this is building. Global Workplace Analytics research suggests "Seventy-seven percent of the workforce say they want to continue to work from home, and a Gallup poll says half have a personal preference for working remotely." So employers that offer the option of remote, home and flexible working are likely to have a greater choice of staff.

> *Anecdotal, practical evidence from a MD2MD member: This member, a manufacturer, has 70 or so staff and had never really considered remote working prior to the crisis. They recently decided to recruit a new Finance Director.*
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> *After the usual process - except being conducted online - they had six candidates to take through the final stages of the selection process - also online. The result: good news. One candidate stood out and ideally suited for the role. Yet, there was just one small problem. They lived 300 miles away and whilst happy to be onsite for a day or two most weeks, did not want to move. What would you do? How essential is it now that a Finance Director is on site every day? How does that compare to the situation of a year ago?*

Taking the idea of remote working to extremes, you might also consider employing the best staff from around the world. Again this is an existing trend accelerated by the crisis.

If I look back five years, I don't think MD2MD had any members with core support operations in other countries. They had sales

offices, manufacturing plants but not back offices, except the occasional small outsource. The situation immediately prior to the crisis had changed. A few members and one supplier have major internal back office functions run overseas in high quality, low cost countries. With the crisis I see that trend accelerating. No longer will geographic distance be as much of a constraint as it was!

> *Whilst it's an aside from employee relationships, our own experience illustrates how geographic limitations are breaking down. MD2MD itself was pre-crisis a wholly in-person operation in South and Central England. Having moved a large part of our offering online we 'accidentally' recruited a member from overseas.*
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> *We had always booked overseas speakers when visiting Europe, but we now realised that we could simply book the best speakers wherever they are in the world, without the constraint of physical proximity. Online breaks the limitations. Now, we mix members from Glasgow with those from Manchester, and those from Swindon. Whilst in-person meetings remain important to us, we can also offer service online.*

Despite impressions, it may be easier to manage culture online

Although it feels more difficult to develop and manage a culture when remote working. I suspect the reality is that it is no different to managing culture in an office. It may even be easier. Disruptive conversations and upset people can quickly and easily negatively affect the climate in a physical office. Being remote doesn't necessarily stop that, but it does make it more easily controlled.

> **MD2MD member action / insight**
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> **Recognise that others may not be coping so well and intervene to avoid potential disengagement.**

With a good, well implemented policy, you can reduce the traditional silo attitude that sometimes develops between departments or sites. No longer does the natural relationship between people sitting physically alongside each other in the same department need to dominate over the relationship between two people working in different roles on the same client. Nor a project or two people working in different offices.

Technology and remote working levels the playing field. With carefully planned communication processes, lateral, cross functional, cross site and cross hierarchical conversations, both formal and informal, can happen as easily as conversations between two people doing the same role in the same department.

What's changing?

In my view the key shifts accelerated by the crisis:

- Everyone now understands that technology now exists (and is developing rapidly) that enables and support remote, home and flexible working
- Businesses now better understand the potential cost reductions, productivity improvements and performance benefits that can result from well managed remote, home and flexible working
- People's attitudes have shifted. They now place a higher value on lifestyle and dislike unnecessary travel.

Most importantly many businesses have already recognised that the limit to their growth is the ability to recruit and retain top quality staff. Some are now recognising that being good at managing remote, home and flexible working is a key way of attracting and retaining the best staff (potentially from across the globe.)

So, maintaining engagement and managing performance when teams comprise remote staff is important. That said, it is not easy. Typical questions posed at recent MD2MD meetings include:

- How do I keep staff engaged when they aren't in the office?
- How do we cross fertilise ideas when everyone is working in isolation?
- How do I develop and manage culture when staff are remote?

Why tackle this now?

These are questions that have been compounded in importance by the crisis. People feel insecure and the employment impact of the crisis creates fear. So our people need more support than ever. Meanwhile our ability to tune in to those feelings and to provide this support is reduced or at least challenged. In-person meetings are more difficult and staff are simply out of sight. As a result, addressing challenges has become much more difficult.

As a final aside, whilst this paper focuses on staff, many of these points apply also to contractors and in many cases to clients and suppliers. It is critical to the success of your own business to stay engaged with the human beings involved. It may also be quite critical to success in difficult times.

Underlying principles

Before suggesting some specific activities, let's explore some of the principles that might, or might not be part of your baseline for action.

Show you care

The most powerful action that you can take is to show staff that you, as the business leader, care about each and every one of them. Clearly, that gets more difficult, more challenging, and requires more effort and

more planning as the business gets larger. Simply taking action and communicating with staff about how you are trying to address their needs in an uncertain world is likely to be a helpful first step.

I believe that, making the importance of employee wellbeing clear, while emphasising that you actually mean it when you say 'people are our biggest asset' will help.

> **MD2MD member action / insight**
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> **Monitor people's wellbeing and mental health in a more quantifiable way if possible. At the very least reach out more on a 1:1 basis and on a more 'human,' non-work level.**

In addition, engaging staff as partners in finding a way forward that works for them and the business in difficult times will also be of benefit. This is not a topic where anyone knows the one 'right' answer and credibility is likely to be higher with staff if you involve them in developing and proposing policies, practices and in refining and adapting them as you test and learn.

Be flexible

One of the biggest challenges of any policy is that one size will not fit all. From listening to the discussions of business leaders over the last few months, it is clear that policy and practice in this area has to be flexible. It needs to take into account at least three key variables:

- Role and activity
- Personality
- Personal situation

Role and activity

Some roles (e.g. manufacturing) require a physical presence at all times. Some (e.g. sales and innovation) require a presence for some activities or for most effective performance. And the policy will need to allow for varied solutions for a variety of activities. I don't expect many businesses will end up with a policy where no one ever meets face to face.

Even without an office, coffee shops, flexible offices and even parks can be used for in-person meetings. Likewise, I don't expect many businesses will, in future, be able to insist on full time presence in the office irrespective of personal preference, without turning away some potentially capable employees. I'm not arguing that policy is wrong. Only that such a policy needs to be chosen taking into account the possible impact which will of course vary by sector and demographic.

Personality

Some people enjoy and work best in the presence of others even if that is not essential to the role.

Others do best by themselves, and sometimes even try to isolate themselves (e.g. using headphones) when in the office. The best businesses will find ways to enable a range of personalities to succeed in their own way.

Personal situation

Remote working may not always be practical for the individual, even if the role is one which could be done remotely and the personality welcomes remote work. More than one MD2MD member has reported coming across members of their team trying to work with a laptop balanced on their knees sat on the end of the bed, whilst young children are chasing around nearby. Not ideal!

Use the wisdom of the team

The world is changing fast. For some years, thought leaders have talked about the challenges of leading in a VUCA world. A world of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. The Coronavirus crisis has indeed exacerbated that challenge. In reality though, with the right attitude this can be a great opportunity for you, your management team and your staff to 'build back better' (to steal a phrase.) How can you build a business system and culture that engages and enthuses your staff even better than ever before? How do you create the long talked about learning organisation that operates well now and continually improves?

My hope is that this crisis will force new ways of working for office workers in the same way that the UK manufacturing industry was forced to change in the sixties and seventies. The introduction of kaizen or continuous improvement, lean manufacturing, the theory of constraints and six sigma revolutionised manufacturing back then.

As someone who has worked in services for most of my life, I feel continually embarrassed about how few of those techniques we apply in our offices, where they are equally valid. Potentially, given that our office staff tend to be expensive and the UK economy is 70% services, this is even more important. We have to get smarter in the way we carry out office work. I hope that the Coronavirus pandemic will create an inflection point that will finally address our long term failure to improve productivity.

> **MD2MD member action / insight**
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> **Set an objective for a member of one department to team up with a member of another department to find either an interesting fact or something out about their role within the business that they were previously unaware of.**

The challenge is, like in manufacturing, there are no simple, correct answers that apply everywhere. It's easier to define wrong answers than it is to find the right ones. So: harness the power of the team. Ask them to design ground rules and reach team agreements on working processes, practices and policies. Ask them to think about how people work together both synchronously and asynchronously. In the office and remote. At whatever times work.

As you move forward into the new normal, develop a routine that engages everyone in putting forward ideas. Make it clear that all contributions are welcome. Yet, take care. Set expectations carefully. A right to be consulted and to contribute does not mean that every idea will be taken on-board and implemented. There will be conflicting suggestions and it will not be possible to meet everyone's expectations. The management structure and process is there to learn from all ideas and resolve those conflicting ideas and differing priorities.

There are no simple answers and neither is there one static answer. Set expectations from the start that developing your ways of working will be an iterative process. Whilst you want the team to do their best to find the best solution first time, you also realise that there are unknown unknowns. Only after you've implemented the plan will you discover an further way of improving. Build in regular feedback loops. Keep asking "How can we become better…"? Encourage your team to get good at learning. What's going well and what did we learn? What could/should we do differently and what is still unknown?

 When you engage the team in designing their own working processes, you don't just lead the business to a better solution. You also enhance their commitment. Daniel Pink (recommended book: Drive) suggests that once people have a basic level of income, they are less motivated by pay than by mastery, autonomy and purpose. Involving them in designing their own work processes is a great opportunity to gain their commitment and loyalty.

Business actions - the practical

Discussions at normal MD2MD peer network meetings and at our special best practice sharing workshop on this subject have provided a vast range of ideas as to what actions can or should be taken to address, manage and capitalise upon the change to remote, flexible and home working. I've read around the subject too, and so add to the insights from the MD2MD meeting other insights shared with me.

As with many aspects of business leadership there is no simple, one size fits all solution. You need to consider the options carefully and decide the approach that works best for your business in your own unique situation. So my purpose in the following section is not to prescribe, but to provoke ideas by sharing some of the vast range of considerations and options that I have come across.

Working from home

The first consideration for any employer with regard to permitting, allowing or encouraging home working is to consider the health and safety requirements. There are long established and well documented example policies online for this, so I won't provide repetitive detail here. Simply to say, you need to ensure that your staff have a suitable environment to be safe and productive, including considerations such as desks and chairs, monitors and keyboards.

A related consideration, which is often given less attention, and not entirely non-regulatory, is the commercial sensitivity angle. Do you allow your staff to use their own personal equipment? And their own private phone number? If so, how do you protect company assets, data and sensitive information? Especially if they should become a disgruntled employee, or leave to join a competitor. Of course, you need to direct your attention to data protection. Again, there is much available online, and so my purpose here is simply to flag up the need to address this area.

Finally, consider how you encourage, motivate or even incentivise those working from home to stay well. In many cases the challenge with home working is not getting someone to work, it is stopping them working. At all hours and straight through breaks. Consider how you

encourage them to take a break, to leave home and get fresh air, to take exercise and rest mentally.

Whilst flexibility has benefits for both employer and employee, being always on and never away from work can lead to mental and indeed physical health challenges that need careful consideration by a professional employer. Some ideas include technology solutions that prevent access to systems outside hours and informal solutions like facilitating or even incentivising employee health and fitness events and competitions. A good example of a competition would be: which department can walk the most miles during lunchtimes this month? :-)

At the very least the employer has a duty to provide guidance to employees on the expectations of their working pattern, and about how they should look after themselves in the absence of the employer when working at home.

> **MD2MD member action / insight**
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> **Consider time out for people who need it - supported by the boss. Introduce at least one social activity, potentially involving family as well e.g. quiz/fitness/coffee morning.**

Working from office

Clearly, the first consideration today is ensuring working from the office is also safe. But that again is a subject well covered elsewhere, probably already addressed and hopefully not needing to be permanent! Anyway I leave that for others to consider. Instead, in this paper I will focus on the wider, longer term issues that, for many, are still a work in progress.

The first and key question to ask yourself has to be "what is the office for?' closely followed by: "why do we need an office?" and "what do we want to gain as a business from having an office?" I don't want to imply that there aren't potential benefits - there definitely are. Even in the view of someone like me, an advocate

of remote, home and flexible working. I do want to provoke you to explore what those benefits actually are. Because it will impact on your policies and practice. As always, I also don't know the answer. I simply know that answering the question is important in developing the right solution for you and your business.

I suspect that in the 'new normal,' the office will not, for most businesses be for sitting silently by yourself doing work. That may apply in some circumstances, such as when the individual doesn't have the ability to work effectively at home, or is of a personality that struggles being alone.

I suspect in many cases the purpose of the office will be one or more of the following:

- To interact - socially and otherwise.
- To communicate - emotionally as well as practically.
- To relate - to get to know each other.
- To work closely together - to brainstorm, to develop ideas.

All of the above can be achieved remotely, but even I feel they are best achieved face to face.

Despite this, please note that none of the above involve working at a desk in a cubicle with headphones on. They imply meeting rooms. They may imply informal meeting areas - think coffee shop style. MD2MD had one member who supplied (healthy) breakfasts and encouraged staff to beat the traffic and have breakfast together at the start of each day.

Fundamentally, then you consider the layout. What is the best use of space in the office? Whilst doing so, don't forget practical points such as entry and exit, as well as arrival and departure times. One MD2MD member tells the story of a socially distanced office on the 6th floor that was unusable. They, and all the other tenants faced the challenge of it taking 4 hours for lifts with capacity reduced to 2 to get all staff to their offices.

A further consideration is whether you prefer a single, main office where everyone can meet. Or, does the remote hubs model work better for you? Maybe it isn't just chain shops that will have a dozen staff working in premises in every town nationwide. Perhaps the big consultancy firm of the future will have 200 offices in every major town rather than 20 working hubs in each major city as today? Of course, that leads to the idea that maybe the growth of flexible, book in, book out work hubs will resume post-crisis, as many more employers buy-in to the idea of avoiding commuting, yet want to provide their staff with a professional environment.

Below are some creative ideas that have emerged from some discussions and articles and may appeal to some:

- Enhance conference rooms with screens that include images of remote participants lifesize at the meeting room table to increase the feeling of presence. Soon, maybe robots with screens for heads might join physical meetings to represent those working remotely. Holograms of remote staff are reputed to be coming to replicate the feeling of physical presence.
- Some suggest the opposite solution. A policy that virtual meetings are always conducted at the desk so that those present in the office are on a level playing field with those remote.
- Add video monitors with sound on to corridors and informal meeting spaces such as kitchens so that those in the office can chat interactively and informally with those remote.
- For those delivering content to an audience regularly, perhaps the plan could include creating a virtual studio fully equipped for delivering sophisticated, remote presentations.
- Certainly, it's important to keep a watching brief on the fast moving meeting related technology, as it's advancing very quickly at the moment.

Finally, because it may become too easy for people to avoid the commute, it might be an idea for business leaders like yourself to consider how to attract people to attend the office. Whilst mandating attendance can work, and some people will naturally want to work in the office, not everyone will want to do so. Some MD2MD members have focused instead on creating a desire in their team to attend the office: a fear of missing out!

Not home, not office

By developing your policy and practice for remote, home and flexible working, don't forget the middle ground. The use of coffee shops and informal flexible and temporary workspaces was growing before the crisis and is likely to continue as part of the 'new normal.' The idea of working, at least part- time with clients on their site is also quite common.

> **MD2MD member action / insight**
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> **Find creative ways to give everyone a bit of a breather.**

The not home, not office model can also be a key part of building a flexible, engaged culture.

What is your policy of staff meeting in coffee shops? It may be positive, but don't forget the risks too. These risks include disclosing competitive intelligence to competitors eavesdropping in coffee shops outside your office and breaching the data protection act by disclosing information in a public area. I've lost count of how many times I have overheard 'interesting' information in coffee shops, hotel lounges and on trains.

On the positive side, despite some weather-related limitations, a walk in the countryside might address those risks, as well as encouraging your staff to stay healthy. What is your policy on walking meetings? What is your practice? Do you encourage them? Again, MD2MD members come up with creative solutions. Staff segway days being one brilliant idea for getting teams to engage positively, have fun and communicate during lockdown.

Keep questioning how you can encourage staff to take time to recharge, and preferably to take breaks outside whenever possible.

Working flexibly

Recruiting the best today often means being able to engage and enthuse people who are in a situation that means they cannot work in conventional ways or may just choose not to. Flexible working may be a 'reasonable adjustment' that an employer has to make to avoid unnecessarily discriminating against those with diverse needs.

Irrespective of the legal requirement, in a world where there is a lot of competition for the best staff, most business leaders would recognise that considering the needs of diverse people in different roles is critical to recruiting and retaining the best team.

When planning for flexible and remote work, don't forget to give consideration to other impacts of geography. Working routines, working practices and holidays will differ. Even time zones differ. All can have both positive and negative impacts. Following the sun activity becomes easier, but getting everyone together at the same time becomes more challenging. This is especially true if you are to avoid burning people, especially senior people, out through 6am calls with those to your East and midnight calls to those to your West.

Support technology

I won't bother here with any detail about Zoom, Teams and Meet, or the myriad of smaller alternatives. I'd simply highlight that, not only is the functionality of these tools developing extremely fast, they are also spawning a raft of complementary add-ons and specialist competitors.

Tools such as Slack, Chat and the various messengers, coordination and productivity apps have already come to the fore alongside the online meeting tools. Other trends are emerging too. I'm particularly intrigued at the sudden migration of Discord bourne from the world of gamers chatting as they play, potentially 24 x 7 to the world of work. Maybe we can be connected and chatting to the person in the virtual next door cubicle 24 x 7. Do we want that? Will it improve things? I don't know. However, such tools certainly seem to have the potential to address large elements of the demand of people to be able to chat informally while they work, as they once did in the office. Surveys and tools such as Tinyplus can also be useful in providing anonymous feedback on collective thoughts and feelings.

Finally, I would be remiss not to highlight under this heading the importance of considering security: the confidentiality, integrity and availability of data. These are all dimensions that are much more difficult to manage with staff fulfilling a variety of roles in a variety of situations. Again, although there are benefits, it is unlikely all of your remote

staff will have a power cut or an internet outage at the same moment.

> *To use a simple example of how remote working enhances availability from the MD2MD world.*
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> *We now ensure that we have two people from different locations involved in running each MD2MD meeting. If one loses internet or power, then the other can take over instantly. The nature of remote working gives us ready built resilience.*
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> *I wish I'd had the same capability in my business twenty years ago! I still have nightmares about the day the phone system to our town went down for 4 hours. Not very helpful when you have 70 or so sales people targeted to take £250k of orders that morning.*

Business actions - the personal

The previous sections have suggested some immediate practical challenges you need to consider, some matters to address and some approaches to consider. I would contend that that is the easy stuff. While important, it is also relatively straightforward for you as an experienced business leader to manage.

Understanding how people are feeling and who is not happy are critical qualities of managers. It may be a fair comment that, in a remote world it can be difficult to understand how your team is feeling. Additional effort is required. But is that really true? I'd suggest the real challenge is that in the physical world you have to be exceptionally thick skinned not to get a feel of morale in the office. In my view, the problem is more precisely that remote working makes it easier (and tempting when busy) to ignore how people feel. The old adage 'out of sight, out of mind' seems apt. With remote working there needs to be a conscious effort to engage with and understand the feelings of your team. Without effort you won't know!

The big challenges are much more subtle. You, as a leader need to engage with,

coordinate and even inspire your people as human beings with emotions and feelings. They need practical and careful leadership/management if they are to behave, and perform as you might hope. For example, how do you and your staff communicate effectively when you don't see each other physically? How do you know whether someone is motivated and being effective and efficient .. or failing? Or whether they are physically or mentally ill. A tricky challenge. The following sections are again intended not as a rule book, but to provoke thought and share some ideas from MD2MD members and elsewhere.

Plan communication and coordination

I've mentioned already that I just happen to be someone who has operated for thirty years or more as a member of, or a leader of, a remote team. One of the key things that I have learnt was the importance of ensuring good communication. Not just this, but also good planning of communication. MD2MD member action / insight"

When you're all in one office, communication happens naturally. Planning it is a good idea, but without planning, communication will happen anyway. For example, as you walk across and chat to Sue or when the team gets together for the 'standup' each morning.

> **Add a fun, interactive element to meetings to bring out those employees who tend to take a back seat.**

Plan communication and coordination

When remote, meetings don't just happen. Despite my orientation towards remote working, or maybe because of it, I value in-person time. When working remotely in-person meetings would rarely happen by chance because we were all travelling. So I learnt we had to plan. Plan

how the organisation communicates and coordinates, plan what meetings we need daily, weekly and monthly. Not only this, but where and how those meetings would occur. Finally, (and probably most importantly,) why.

> *I hate wasted time so I was very clear that the company-wide team leaders meeting at 10am on Tuesday was strictly a 30 min, one way information sharing update with one minute assigned to each person. This was so that everyone across the company had a snapshot of everything going on. No discussion - because when 3 were discussing a topic, 27 others were wasting time. Not that discussion was banned - quite the opposite. Discussion was encouraged - just afterwards in small, appropriate groups.*

That was some time ago. In today's world the same applies online. A broadcast (webinar) with 30 or 300 attendees is very different to an interactive session. Both have their place. So I would encourage you, as the business leader to plan and design the way that the organisation communicates.

How does information get shared upwards and downwards, within departments and across departments and company-wide? Indeed, with customers and suppliers. What meetings happen to what routine, who is attending and why? What is the purpose? Information sharing, idea exploring and developing or decision making. They are three fundamentally different processes that need different meeting styles.

Agree normal meeting etiquette

Even assuming meetings happen there is a challenge: meeting etiquette. In addition to defining meeting schedules and purposes, it is worth defining the ground rules explicitly. For example: videos on or off, sound on or off, multi tasking or meeting focused, how to get attention, whether questions should be typed in chat or how to attract attention and speak, who uses the all-powerful forced mute button and why?

A key part of meeting etiquette might also be to reinforce the desired culture. How does the business expect people to treat each other,

especially when they disagree or get heated? Consistent and clear communication of such matters, and behaviours of the leadership team can be a useful way of signalling the culture.

Regular, planned routine communication is a helpful base for coordinating work. But it's not enough.

Ad-hoc meetings are necessary too. Determining the best way to communicate is not easy and rather than try to define it top-down, some MD2MD members have put in place best practice development teams. They have given those teams a brief to explore how best to manage online, and indeed offline. In a few cases roles such as digital mentor, digital coach, internal or external personal buddy (someone to talk to about your feelings) or a digital Ninja have emerged.

Focus on the person as well as the task

We all know people are critical to the success of the organisation and the development of a positive culture. Also that people have emotions and feelings. As a result, it is critical in designing communication processes that you don't just think about the task; think about the person too. Think about how and when you and your managers check-in with people and how they are feeling? In the physical world we have informal chats. Over lunch, at the coffee machine, in the kitchen, by the toilets. How do you recreate those informal conversations remotely?

Sadly, in the remote world conversations about natural human feelings probably need to be planned and scheduled. However, that

should not mean that the content should be constrained. It is absolutely critical to successful remote working that leaders like yourself and your managers check in with your team's non-work life, their emotions, feelings and interests. Your goal should be to replicate and improve upon the conversations that might be held by the coffee machine. 'Just how did your football team do yesterday Susan?' 'What did the kids do at the weekend James?' Such idle chat is not idle. It's important to understand the person behind the role and what drives them. The bad news is that with remote working it doesn't just happen easily. We, as leaders need to ensure that it does!

Additionally, dealing with the person and their feelings inevitably leads to consideration of well- being, psychological safety and mental health. In today's world, it is critical that these matters are surfaced and managed well by the business. One MD2MD member speaks today, 30 years on, about how a suicide at work still impacts upon the way he leads his business. A simple idea is that we need to make it ok to talk about well-being. One mentioned the idea of a "Well-being Wednesday" to encourage everyone to use that day to discuss how everyone is feeling.

Build cross business communication

One of the biggest cultural and communication challenges in many companies is the barriers that form between departments, locations and functions.

It shouldn't happen but it does. Remote working and planning the communication process gives you the opportunity to address, limit and hopefully avoid such barriers through careful design of the communication processes.

Some MD2MD members have created roles that deliberately and explicitly bridge departments. They are a contact point with responsibility for ensuring their two departments are communicating well and engaging as people sharing the common goal of success for the whole company, rather than the success of the department.

> **MD2MD member action / insight**
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> **Encourage staff to communicate sideways between departments**

Others have deliberately cross-functional projects that involve people from across the business working together. This can be a direct business initiative - such as implementing a new system - and can also be projects focused on building human relationships across departments. Themes and projects give purpose to cross- team interactions and are a great mechanism for engaging everyone around an idea.

> **MD2MD member action / insight**
>
> **Strategically place resources into bridging roles to ensure consistent processes and communication between departments**

One example project might be deciding upon and organising a Christmas event. Some members even have an online 'social club' that organises activities like 'dress up online' days (perhaps that day everyone wears a silly hat for meetings.) Cross-business competitions and collaborations such as running for charity and fantasy football seem to work well. Book clubs and groups to review the latest Netflix series have been mentioned. The possibilities are endless, limited only by the creativity of your staff and your willingness as a leader to let that creativity emerge.

Manage performance by outcomes

I've left to the end of this section the most crunchy topic. Crunchy because it involves us as business leaders evaluating and potentially adjusting our mindset.

As previously mentioned, I had the good fortune of having to manage remote teams for most of my career. With 16 training centres across the country and my immediate team in Leeds, Manchester, Swindon, Oxford and Newcastle, it was never possible to manage by physical presence. So, the idea that people felt they had to work late to appear committed, or to leave their coat on the chair to imply they were at work when they weren't was, for me always purely a joke.

That said, I do recognise that many didn't learn their trade in that situation and have previously relied upon seeing people appearing to work hard as their measure of performance. Sadly, if you are one of those people, you have probably found 2020 much harder than I have as you've had one of your most important key indicators of performance removed suddenly. So how do you manage in such circumstances?

All I can do in this paper is to explain how I and others do it. I can't make you comfortable with outcomes-based performance measurement. I recognise that many leaders still like to be able to see their team working hard. All that I can do is to explain, and then you can decide what practices to adopt and what not.

I have heard more than once how the remote working model has enabled business leader members of MD2MD to discover who was really doing the best work - and I've noted a few times that it wasn't always the person who, when in the office, put in a great show of being a good worker.

Outcomes-based performance management begins, somewhat obviously, with being clear about the outcomes expected of a role. What results and in what volume are reasonable? What are the appropriate objective performance measures, key result areas and KPIs? Do you and your team know in advance how their performance will be measured, and do they feel that those measures are fair?

The challenge is that, in most modern roles, significant elements of performance are difficult to measure and quantify. My own way of addressing this is to define roles using key result areas (such as ensuring that customers are satisfied) with KPIs (like survey responses) as indicators of performance NOT the sole measure.

A result of this is that I, as a manager can utilise the indicator in discussion with the individual, whilst also being clear that the indicator is simply that - an indication, not the complete result. The key question for discussion in this example is: "are customers satisfied?" rather than the simplistic "did we get an average score of 9?" Note the language. You cannot normally measure performance with numbers alone. The numbers are an indicator which supports an adult discussion of overall performance, in the key result areas discussed.

Remote working behaviours

And finally: behaviour. The biggest challenge of all, alongside the topic of culture. You, as the leader, are the key influence on the success of remote working. Therefore, as you put in place the projects, structures and processes you deem appropriate, also focus on your own behaviour. Think about what you can do and put in place that signals the behaviours and cultures you desire for your business.

You, the leader

Simple things can make a big difference. There is no doubt that the occasional random, unexpected and engaging chat with a junior member of staff can do wonders for motivation - both positively and negatively!

Even better if you can find a reason to call and thank them for a job, however small.

View these calls more as a way for you to gather information and get to know people and less as a way to tell people. Also, remember the comments above about focusing on the person as much as, sometimes even more than, the task. Not only does that avoid bypassing your management team, it also gives you direct information about how people are feeling.

In a similar vein, why not join meetings at random, or if you're nervous about hijacking the whole meeting, why not agree you'll join for ten minutes at the end to answer any questions anyone has? Make sure that you ask them genuinely and openly what's going well and what could be better.

One MD2MD member says that regular but randomly timed calls from the MD to all staff asking how they are and showing concern for

them as individuals has had a very positive effect in their business. The group simply suggested that, to avoid the potential of it becoming repetitive for the MD, they might consider doing one call a day instead of one day of calls a month.

Your line managers

Probably the greatest challenge in building a culture that works for remote, flexible and home working is to develop the ability of the management team to operate in that environment. Investing in them both with training and with time is critical to getting their behaviour in-line with your goals for the business. Your job is to look after them, so that they look after the team and then the team

looks after the business

Train, encourage and motivate yourself and your team to do everything described in the previous section. Get your team checking in with their staff regularly. Additionally, encourage them to engage with the person, not the task and to show their appreciation regularly.

Thank you

This report is not definitive guidance. It is simply a range of thoughts and tips collated, considered and developed by Bob Bradley and shared with business leaders in the hope of providing additional insights and helping them with their decisions.

It has been informed by a vast array of resources. By far, the most powerful and useful were the real practical discussions of business leaders in MD2MD meetings as they faced up to real life challenges quickly during 2020. These discussions were conducted both peer-to-peer and also within a number of speaker- led workshops. They culminated in MD2MD running a workshop specifically for members to share best practice in engaging remote staff, which resulted in a range of powerful insights included in this report. Thank you to all the MD2MD members and speakers and everyone else that helped develop the thinking shared here.

The author - Bob Bradley

Managing Director of MD2MD, Bob is himself a specialist in businesses that succeed and grow by delivering consistent quality, service and experience in premium segments, having run five such businesses as Managing Director or Chief Executive.

His last employed role was leading a £16M, 200 person family business having previously been Chief Executive of a listed plc for which he raised £5M funding and grew from £4M to £12M in three years through two acquisitions and organic growth. Prior to that he ran a corporate subsidiary where he was responsible for leading 450 staff to deliver £10M profit on £45M revenues.

He is passionate about the positive impact most SME businesses have on society and fascinated by the challenges businesses face as they transition as 'adolescents' from small to medium.

MD2MD

MD2MD is a membership organisation for business leaders dedicated to improving business performance by helping the leader be the very best they can be. MD2MD meetings provide a private space for members to debate their challenges, explore best practice and develop their leadership with support and challenge from their peers. Members say MD2MD helps them identify smarter, more coherent strategies, make faster, more informed decisions, engage their staff more effectively and implement better, more considered actions.

Further reading

MD2MD speaker Eileen Donnelly shares her thoughts on managing remotely

Former MD2MD member Alex Minchin made the brave decision to go 100% remote permanently and shares his thinking

A large set of 'collaboration super power' resources are available here

A you tube video on being vulnerable as the leader

Harvard business review on combating Zoom fatigue

Companies now operating entirely with a remote workforce

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