How Coronavirus reveals remote working from home benefits

By Michael Kightley

Oddly (and fortunately), for our team at Inflexion Analytics and a number of companies like us, Coronavirus COVID-19 hasn't changed the way we work. We've been using a remote globally distributed workforce since our founding in 2015. Remote working has been presented as a challenge for businesses, but we chose this model pre-pandemic because we believe that it has a number of advantages which lead to better client, team and business outcomes. Our people can work from wherever they like as long as they can get a reliable internet connection. For us, "digital first" and "digital by default" are not Buzzwords they are the stuff of everyday working.

I find myself wondering whether the "challenge of remote working" might force a cultural shift that will result in a number of advantages, that companies might not have expected.

The Competitive Advantage of Remote Working

Our experience is that clients respond to our model, as it offers excellent quality at significantly lower rates than our competitors, as well as providing a highly responsive service. This means our clients trust us with critical work and it is the remote globally distributed model that has helped produce these results.

We've had clients we have only ever met over Skype or Zoom – and our relationships with those clients are strong. It is working together on problems, helping each other and being available when your client needs you that builds relationships and you can do those online, often more easily.

So, how can this be the case? What are the advantages that made us choose this model? Why does this way of working result in better client, team and business outcomes?

Trust is Key

Firstly, let's talk about trust, because it underpins this way of working. Trust is vital, between the team and between clients and the team – trust in people, in their commitment, in their skills and in their efforts and in shared work standards. This trust also enhances peoples focus and dedication to their work and their colleagues. Building a culture and managerial style that supports this is a key part of reaping the benefits of this model – and when it is lacking, none of the benefits will be seen and problems will develop.

People are still accountable. But now, it is the quality of outputs they deliver that they will be evaluated on, not the time they are watched in the office. This promotes efficient use of time and higher productivity, shifting the focus to deliverables and outcomes rather than office dynamics and politics.

Flexibility and Responsiveness

Giving a team the responsibility of working from home remotely and flexibly can in our experience deliver fantastic results. It is liberating rather than oppressive. It means you can go for a walk, visit the gym or do essential tasks when it suits you. This means the team optimise their personal time for their well-being, which in turn supports their productivity at work, but also means that the flexibility is there to ensure that client needs are always able to be prioritised. This also increases flexibility and responsiveness in communicating with each other and clients, something especially important when working with team members and clients across time zones.

The results of the model for our team have been:

- Improved productivity
- Improved responsiveness to clients
- Improved team member well-being
- Improved coverage of working hours

From a client perspective there are a number of linked benefits. Responsiveness, even from a small team working from home can be high and any issues, quickly responded to and dealt with. This responsiveness and high level of customer support has a major impact on strengthening customer relationships and building trust.

Furthermore, having a remote global workforce means costs can be lowered and at the same time development cycles reduced. Work handed off at the end of the day to a different time zone can be progressed overnight, saving client's time as well as producing results more quickly.

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The results for clients are:

- Reduced costs
- Reduced work cycles
- Improved trust
- Improved availability of support

Talent Selection and Retention

The other significant advantage is how such a model opens up a global talent pool. No longer constrained by office location, the best individuals can be selected for. These are often the types of individual that will see flexible working arrangements as a great benefit. The model, therefore, not only helps attract top talent, but can help to retain it, as it will allow them to integrate work with changes in their personal life such as moving home, getting married or moving to a new country to name a few.

"But we need someone onsite… don't we?"

We have sometimes found clients ask about the need to be on site. We have worked on-site and do meet clients from time to time, usually as part of attending their on-site meetings when required. Our experience is though that the increased cost associated with being on-site, combined with the reduced flexibility and the fact that once we start working together trust is rapidly built, usually means clients move to a fully remote model pretty soon after a project kicks off.

There is one occasion on which clients tend to feel more strongly about this and it is usually when technical teams are looking to achieve some skill transfer. This can be because they want to develop new skills or to be able to pick up the systems themselves after the handover of a system or project. However, in reality this is also something that is better managed online. Remote working relationships and arrangements are far more flexible for supporting people in acquiring new skills. This is because the support is available when you need it, just a call away, rather than having someone on site who you watch. Skill transfer is achieved by being supported when you need it, as you try for yourself and get stuck, not when watching someone else work (that's what resources such as Tableau's training videos are for – and they are free!).

Evolving Business Models

The IT sector includes large Indian outsourcers who operate at scale. Reports suggest that they have struggled to switch to home working in response to Coronvirus COVID-19 and are seeing significantly lower Productivity. Their established cultures and ways of working don't seem to be compatible with remote working. They will need to make a significant cultural and managerial transition. For people used to turning around to talk to a colleague, there is we accept a learning curve, but if you can adapt to writing a chat in Teams or Slack or Skype (and making sure you respond to them), or jumping on a call – it's just a question of habit.

Remote working is clearly safer in a world which is vulnerable to pandemics like Coronavirus COVID-19. But as mindsets evolve and remote home working becomes more prevalent it will prove to be cheaper, easier, simpler and greener. Much existing infrastructure can be simplified and replaced with more cost-efficient web services. Simplifying businesses makes them more focussed, reveals activities which add no value, makes such activities easier to drop, making it easier to reorganise and realign people and activities, making companies leaner and reducing fixed costs.

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Cyber security and privacy are a potential issue, but not insurmountable. Our information policies are already built around remote working and remote data access. Our people are all savvy professionals. Our policies follow the regulations and high standards of the UK, the jurisdiction in which our company is registered. Our clients' data rarely strays beyond their firewalls; as we remotely access it, transform it and develop applications within it.

However, there is one accessibility issue in which remote working causes significant difficulties which are hard to address. And the problem is caused by the accessibility of snacks in the home fridge. That is where there is the greatest challenge to self-discipline in remote working. Everything else is easy by comparison.