5 Keys to More Effective Remote Teams

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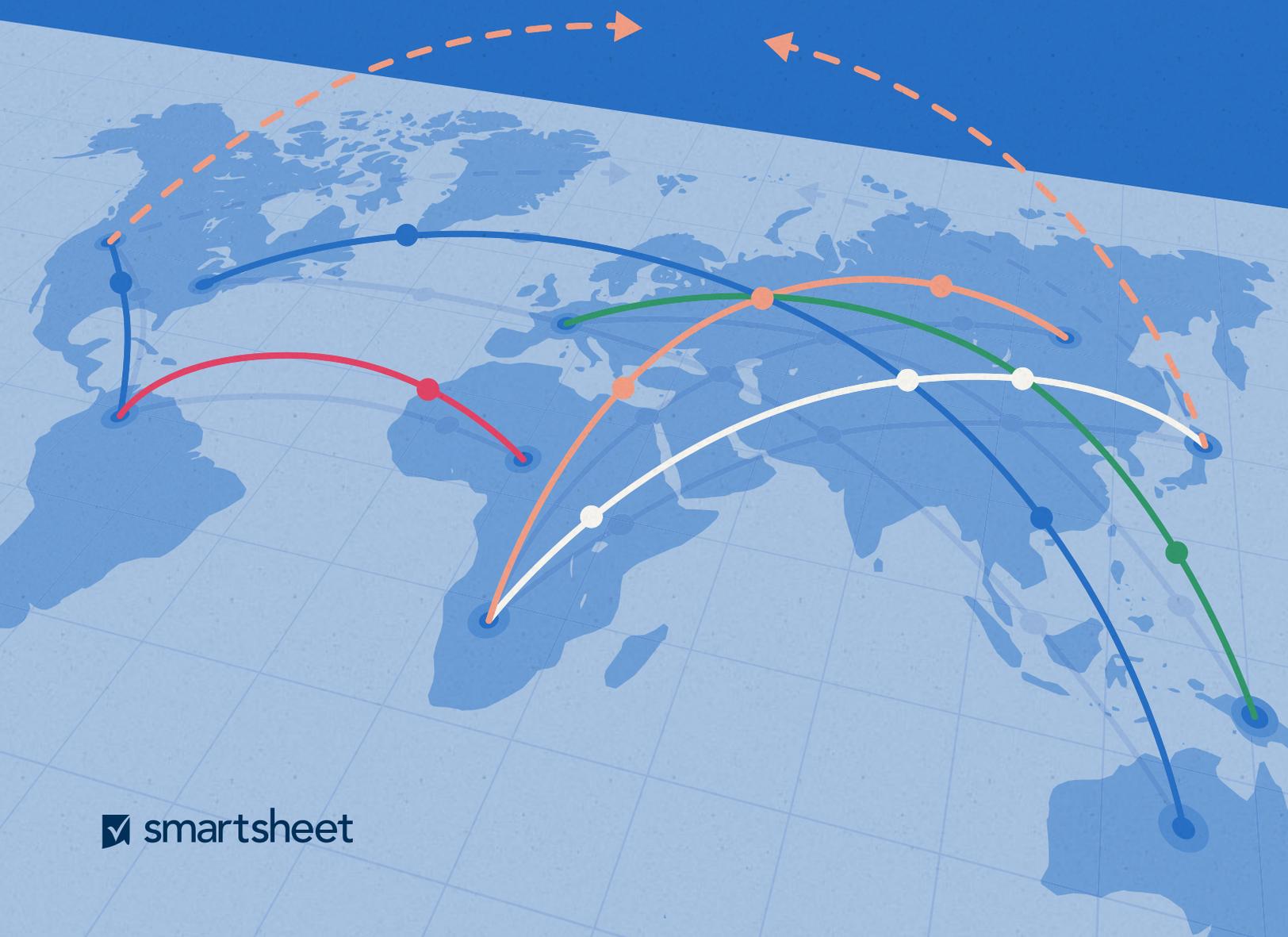
While much of the world changed seemingly overnight, the pressure to shift our approach to work has long been building. New collaborative technologies, a globally connected economy, the rising cost of doing business, and a younger generation shifting expectations in the workplace — along with new, unrivaled change necessitated by a global pandemic — are propelling the evolution of modern work.

In an instant, much of the global workforce has become remote. Not only are we working remotely with our colleagues in different time zones, now we're working remotely with the teammate who used to sit right next to us. The distance is unprecedented, the obstacles are unlike anything we've seen before, stress is unrivaled, and we're all in a complex new work dynamic that spans homes, borders, and continents.

Yet people still have a fundamental need to feel connected to their work, their colleagues, and their leadership. They want to know they can be effective and have an impact. And in today's world, while "business as usual" looks very different, an engaged workforce is more essential than ever before.

With so many variables involved in the changing state of the U.S. workforce, the overall equation can be difficult for some companies to balance. Creating an effective distributed team means evolving everything from your tools to your company's culture — and figuring out a way to manage that team once it's in place.

How can you ensure you're effectively, successfully leading your remote workforce? At Smartsheet, we know how challenging this shift can be, because we've been living it ourselves.

75%

In March, 2020, 75% of companies in the US reported expanded or universal work from home policies.[1]

1.   451 Research's Voice of the Enterprise: Digital Pulse, Coronavirus Flash Survey March 2020

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The challenges and benefits of our new remote reality

Mere months ago, only 13% of the US-based workforce worked remotely full-time,[2] and the benefits of flexible hours and remote work arrangements were seen as competitive differentiators in hiring younger generations. And while most companies acknowledged that employees are increasingly expecting remote and flexible work, according to one study by Harvard Business School and Boston Consulting Group,[3] only 30% reported feeling fully prepared for this trend.

Fast forward to today. Enabling the workforce to effectively work remotely is no longer optional for many companies. And the realities of geographic distancing, less-predictable work hours, and a shared global anxiety demand a new path to success.

Making this work is challenging. Transparency and accountability can be difficult across distances, since it's more challenging to see who's working on what, and when. The nuances of working across time zones remain the same as always, necessitating sensitivity when scheduling meetings around the edges of the work day — and now new variables that include homeschooling, elder care, and other unpredictable factors. In today's new workplace, communication and relationship building require an intentional, empathetic approach — and flexibility takes on new meaning.

Technology at least is keeping up; an ever-growing menu of solutions exists that truly enables teams to come together from anywhere. Unlocking the power of your newly distributed workforce requires you to engage differently with your people, your culture, and your tools. The good news is, with the right mindset, processes, and technologies in place, organizations can overcome the barriers and build a successful, engaged team that is capable of working together effectively and adapting to new conditions, whatever they may be — both now and in the future.

Here's a look at five keys to successfully transforming your organization.

38%

38% of companies believe this shift to a remote workforce will either be long term or permanent.[4]

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2.   451 Research, Voice of the Enterprise: Workforce Productivity & Collaboration: Employee Lifecycle, Q2 2019, Q7.

3.   BCG, Harvard Business School, May 2019. Future Positive: How Companies Can Tap Into Employee Optimism to Navigate Tomorrow's Workplace.

4.   451 Research's Voice of the Enterprise: Digital Pulse, Coronavirus Flash Survey March 2020

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Changing the culture

Effectively leading geographically dispersed teams requires a shift in the mindset of the organization.

Technology has been transforming business operations for decades, but at their core, companies are still fundamentally about people. Any major shift in an organization starts with people and behaviors, rather than tools. How do you approach the mindset of a distributed workforce so that people are effective and feel connected, even while navigating unprecedented circumstances?

A thoughtful approach to your people and your technology has never been more important. For example, in a March 2020 study, 25% of the workforce reported asking for more time to focus on their work, and 33% said they want less time spent in email or messaging apps , so the solution to connecting your team today is not necessarily to schedule days full of video conference calls or launch endless email or chat threads. It goes to show that you can have the tools, but if you don't consider the people you're trying to connect with, the tools don't matter.

This is the mental shift required to operate a distributed team. Everyone needs to work with the entire team in mind, blending your company culture with the empowerment that comes with being able to work with anyone, anywhere, at any time.

Shifting your mindset in this way brings a host of new details to light. Time zones, for example, can work either against you or for you. The technology you use can either bring people together or create silos. Facilities, policies, and even the organization's benefits packages have to be examined to ensure they work for everybody and empower the distributed team to function as one.

In the end, the key is to create an environment where the entire organization is mindful of all these scenarios employees are facing, one that prioritizes empathy, inclusion, connections, and collaboration.

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5. *451 Research, March 26, 2020. Coronavirus quick fixes aren't scalable; business leaders must rethink work itself.*

Rethink your tools

Technology is a major driver of this movement, so you want to empower people with the right tools in the right way.

In a distributed workforce, tools are critical – but they need to be the *right* tools, used with an approach that best fits your company. Being intentional about drawing in remote workers is about creating a virtual workplace where everyone is participating. Getting the tech right is key.

In this regard, most companies fall somewhere along a maturity curve. "A little over three years ago at Smartsheet, we were a one-office company with a strong on-premises mentality," says Kara Hamilton, the Chief People Officer at Smartsheet. "As a result, video conferencing had not been a priority and we were behind that curve. We didn't have high-definition conferencing systems in all of our meeting spaces, and we lacked consistency in the tools we used for collaboration. We realized early on that this was a major hurdle to the connected workforce we envisioned."

Technology is instrumental in creating a sense of community and connection, and enables all team members to feel drawn into meetings and team processes, so they're not just spectators.

In a modern organization, the toolset should include a collaborative work management (CWM) platform that empowers teams to easily collaborate, and provides visibility into projects, processes, and milestones. The right tool will provide a common source of truth, and empower workers to easily share information and results via reporting and dashboards. And the best-in-breed CWM platforms now include conversation functionality within the context of work — closing the geographical gap so that people all over the world can work together in real time. In a moment where information overload is almost impossible to escape and communication silos can easily form, coalescing around a common source of truth and focus is key.

The big challenge lies in overcoming the friction involved with getting those tools into the hands of users. A decade ago, remote employees generally had to VPN into on-premises software. A help desk call to walk an employee through the process of setting up a VPN and connecting back to the mothership could be a painful one indeed. In today's world of SaaS-based applications, it's much easier. With the right solution, employees can use any computer, anywhere, to connect to their work with very low friction.

At Smartsheet, 95% of employees can do their entire job with nothing more than a computer and two-factor authentication, according to Hamilton. For some employees in the field, much of their work can be performed via a smartphone using the Smartsheet mobile app.

To help your organization make the most of your remote environment, encourage your team to invest some time and creativity in their new workspace. Give them tools that are easy to learn and use, and powerful and flexible enough to allow them to design their own workflows — building in simple automated reminders, creating dashboards, and spinning up repeatable project flows — all without help from IT. The best tools are the ones that everyone *wants* to use.

Over the past few years, the technology ecosystem has evolved, and enabling your distributed workforce has become much more practical; it's a lever anybody can pull.

No. 3:

Keeping it personal

From a leadership perspective, being available through a variety of means is important, and so is face time. Don't underestimate the value of a two-minute video chat.

In today's dynamic new reality, connecting with employees on a personal level is critical. Executives and managers need to invest in those relationships and be available for teams. This includes regular conversations, maintaining the same kinds of meetings and 1:1s with all team members, and really investing in virtual connection in new ways.

"It really is the human side of thinking about it," says Gene Farrell, Chief Product Officer at Smartsheet, whose organization extends from Seattle to Boston, London, and Edinburgh. "I've long led people who worked 100% in the field. Every morning when I sat down and my IM showed I was there, I would get a chat, I'd get a video call; just a quick two-minute catch up. And that connectedness, not letting them feel forgotten — it's huge."

Today, leaders of global teams have many tools at their disposal to stay connected across distances. Video conference, chat, and of course good old-fashioned phone calls make keeping up with teams and their needs seamless, no matter where they are.

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> **It's never been more critical to use technology to connect on a personal level.**

In addition, there are many tools available today that provide real-time visibility into projects, milestones, roadblocks, and issues. Getting those kinds of reports automatically can ensure that management and executive leadership are able to keep their finger on the pulse of the organization without relying on proactive reporting from team members. Automated workflows can ensure that projects stay on track across distances and time zones.

These same platforms can help you connect to the emotional wellbeing of your team. Consider providing employees regular opportunity to share their mental state with you through named or anonymous routes, such as regular "pulse" surveys that collect feedback on the overall health and happiness of workers.

Whatever routine or channel you choose, the key to making it all work optimally is building relationships so team members feel comfortable reaching out. Encourage your team to connect with each other, in addition to their management. Virtual coffee chats or book clubs promote connection and sustain relationships at all levels. By making this a priority, leaders can ensure their remote team members stay connected.

No. 4:

Shift from an efficiency mindset to effectiveness

Empower your team with crisp focus on business priorities. This is the time to help your team stay as targeted as possible, rather than working to reach their productivity pinnacle.

We live in a world where anything and everything can be quantified, and as a result, many organizations hyperfocus on data and metrics. Total output has long been a measure of efficiency, but does not reflect true effectiveness. What's needed is a focus on the most business critical outcomes.

While your employees are navigating new circumstances every day, rather than push to eke productivity out of every second, instead, use technology to help prioritize the most important work for the business. While your team flexes their time around homeschool schedules and other anxiety-producing personal priorities, keep top business priorities and status readily visible in the collaborative work management platform your entire team is working from.

Blazing the trail

All organizations are learning as we go, but together we're drafting the playbook for the new work dynamic.

The core tenets of successful remote companies have been evolving in recent years. Over the past three years, Smartsheet grew its Boston office from a handful of people to more than 300, and has opened new locations in Edinburgh, London, and Sydney. Along the way, the company has opened up culturally and hired key executives in remote locations.

"In each case, we listened and did our homework," says Hamilton. "But we also took leaps of faith. Fortunately, those have turned out to be good bets." And those experiences have given the organization more confidence to form the cultural behaviors and cultural motion that propels a global, distributed enterprise. "One of the biggest lessons we've learned is accepting where we've needed to mature, and quickly embracing those opportunities."

There are going to be lessons along the way; your team's needs will evolve, and your organizational strategy will inevitably shift. Change is certain, which makes it all the more critical that you set yourself up for success with your borderless teams by following change-management principles:

Present a solid business case to stakeholders.

Provide effective resources, including a collaborative work management platform that is easy for anyone to quickly learn.

Communicate clear expectations, and facilitate ongoing communication and collaboration across the remote team.

Fearlessly review, revise, and continuously improve processes, resources, and measurement — and celebrate successes.

Changing a culture, workflow, and an organizational dynamic can be a major undertaking, but it won't happen without that first step.

And take the time to celebrate and honor achievements with your team. Though today's workforce is upended, there will be a new tomorrow — with a new outlook and lessons learned about what it truly takes to work from anywhere.

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About Smartsheet

Smartsheet (NYSE: SMAR) is a leading collaborative work management (CWM) platform that empowers distributed organizations to plan, capture, manage, automate, and report on work at scale, enabling them to move faster, drive innovation, and achieve more. An extensible platform backed by enterprise-grade security, Smartsheet is used by more than 75% of the companies in the Fortune 500 to implement, manage, and automate processes across a broad array of use cases. Visit www.smartsheet.com to learn more.

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