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Michaela Voller, Dimension Data

You're on mute

After more than a year of working from home, Zoom fatigue is ripe. But colleague engagement tools aren't really helping.

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Our dining room table has been our office for over a year now, and fatigue is starting to set in. Not being able to chat with colleagues while grabbing a cup of coffee or catch up on weekends over the printer is taking its toll.

Companies were forced to move quickly when the hard lockdown hit to make sure that staff could work from home (WFH). Technology that was in planning stages, or years away from being implemented, had to be rolled out at speed. Everyone needed data, a laptop, microphones or headsets, and access to the company's network.

Although lockdown restrictions at the time of writing allow employees to return to the office, most people who can are still working from home. And this is likely to be the case moving forward according to Gartner research, which states that 70% of customer service and support employees want to continue working from home after the pandemic.

Michaela Voller, chief HR executive at Dimension Data, says the implementation

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of a hybrid working approach seems to have been one of the most successful industry fixes rolled out, which provides employees with the option to work both remotely and in-office.

But this comes with its challenges. The World Economic Forum has pointed out that, with billions of people around the world in lockdown of some sort, 'we are conducting arguably the largest psychological experiment ever'.

Dr Elke van Hoof, professor of health psychology and primary care psychology at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, says this 'experiment' will result in a secondary epidemic of burnouts and stress-related absenteeism in the not-too-distant future.

"Employees are struggling to find time for personal tasks, opening the door for businesses to step in and be supportive," says Adrian Zanetti, director at Hey Jude, a lifestyle management app.

Engagement

Chris Ogden, CEO of software development house RubiBlue, believes it's likely that a mix of home and office work will help develop and maintain an effective culture. However, he anticipates that things will return to a more office-based environment in the future. "It's not really sustainable to work 100% from home – our culture is built on community and needs face-to-face engagements and fun."

Working from home has been hard for leaders, as they learn how to manage more loosely defined job descriptions, working longer days, missing interaction with their peers and their own managers, says Leona Mentz, regional operations manager for Asia, Middle East, and Africa at BT.

There are many tools that companies are employing to interact with employees, to help them feel engaged. Yammer, Facebook's Workplace, and team meetings via Zoom or Microsoft Teams are just some of the ways companies try to make staff feel involved.

Internal communications expert Werna Oberholzer says there is no shortage of technology solutions to choose from, with new apps and tools being launched regularly, and new features being added to existing tools and platforms.

However, these tools aren't working as they should, and don't have the sort of uptake that companies would like because people are

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>
> **Chris Ogden,** RubiBlue

overwhelmed and are experiencing an exponential increase in the volume of communication they receive, she says.

"Before the pandemic, organisations were 'noisy' with many messages competing for employee attention. One year later and communication overload is leaving people exhausted. This is partly a factor of management and leadership practices, but also a result of not having clear communication channel strategies in place and taking a holistic view of how communication impacts the employee experience."

The reason for this, says Oberholzer, is that companies introduced channels and communication programmes to help them transition into a remote working world very quickly. "Now is the time to look at what worked, what didn't work and make adjustments to support flexible working, which will bring different challenges and add to the communication complexity in organisations."

Lessons learnt

It is, says Mentz, important to learn from the experiences of the past year, especially when it comes to what leaders have learnt about their workforce and how their teams like to operate. "Going forward, a one-size-fits-all approach won't work. Rather, taking a people-first, design-led approach is key to getting the roles, work design and tools mapped together correctly."

Speaking to what Dimension Data has done, Voller says, since Covid began, it has been focussed on wellbeing by offering employees access to weekly 'Wellness Wednesday' sessions, including tips and tools, focusing on financial, physical, and emotional wellbeing. These, she says, are in line with broader industry conversations as businesses amend policies, manage shifts to culture and employee happiness, and identify new areas that HR needs be aware off and place emphasis on managing because of WFH.

Ogden adds that there are numerous systems being implemented to support the WFH mix, such as new key performance indicators, metrics, digital tools, and outcomes-based assessments.

"HR really needs to bring in new ways of thinking to engage with employees and reward the dedicated. Hard workers need to be taught about burnout as they are the ones you need to protect and retain. Those taking chances need firm guidance and support to keep them on the straight and narrow. While productivity tools are helpful, they can be fooled by some people."

KING PRICE'S ADVICE TO COPE WITH WFH

Double down on your values
Make sure you are living your company's values each day as this will help you stay focused.

Take the time to connect
In times of uncertainty, we all want to know we're not alone. So it's vital to make sure that we stay connected. Set a standard check-in time for your team every day, and stick to it.

Get some sun every day
Sitting at home alone for 21 days can be depressing for some people, especially the extroverts among us. That's why it's vital to get out into the sun every day. Get your body moving. It's vital that we stay in a good space emotionally, and to look after our physical and mental health.
Source: King Price

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