how to manage your remote workforce.
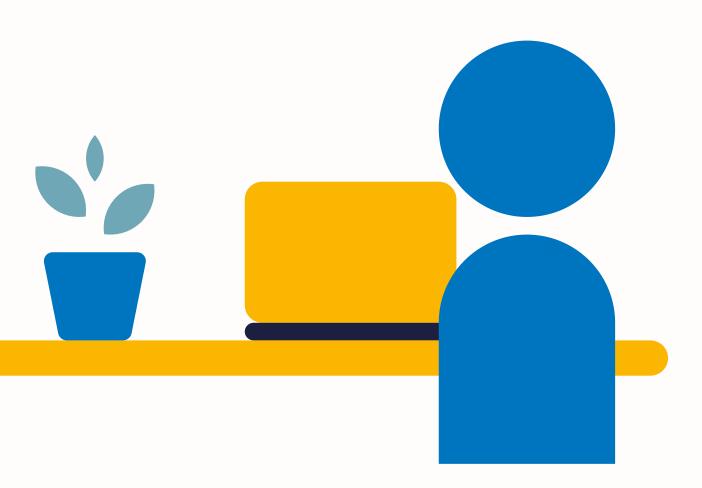
Remote work isn't a new concept in Hong Kong. In the 2021 Randstad Hong Kong Employer Brand Research Report, 61% of respondents said that they worked remotely in 2020. Then the COVID-19 pandemic struck in early 2020, and a sizable portion of the Hong Kong workforce went from office-based to remote almost overnight.

Life is notoriously filled with curveballs — and coronavirus is a doozy. The most intense part of the COVID-19 pandemic is that employees are constantly faced with new challenges such as technology difficulties, burnouts from long working hours as well as mental health challenges from prolonged isolation.

So, is remote work a coronavirus fad? Will employees simply head back into the office after the pandemic? Industry analysts don't think so. In fact, pundits believe that more people than ever might work remotely in Canada in the future. Lower overhead costs and better team management tools have made telecommuting a viable option for a larger-than-ever swathe of the labour force.

Managing a remote team means thinking outside the box. We'll begin this guide with a definition of two remote work models, and then we'll explore how you can help your team adapt to remote work. Finally, we'll tackle a few top telecommuting best practices.

remote work models.

At the beginning of the pandemic, many Hong Kong companies were thrown headlong into the remote work world. Managers weren't given much opportunity to prepare, and workers had no idea what they were expected to do. Over the ensuing months, most teams found new rhythms and shifted fully into one of two remote work models: fully remote, or hybrid.
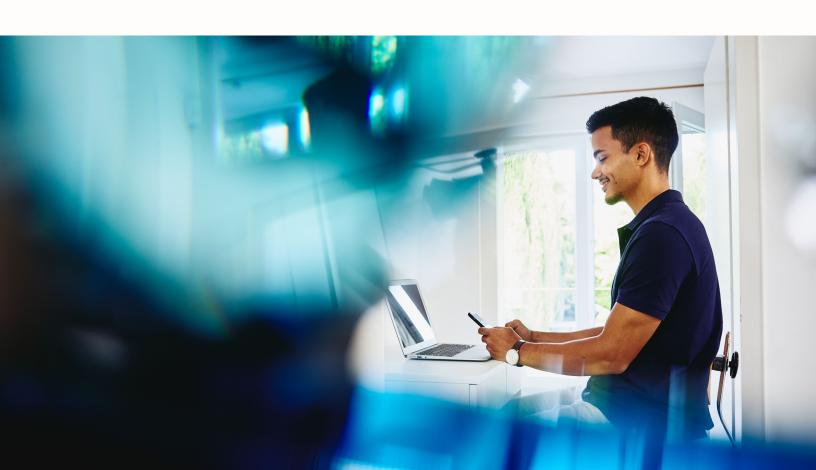
fully remote

In a fully remote model, there is no central company office. Employees — including managers, supervisors and executives — work exclusively from home, or from another location, like a coffee shop. Many fully remote companies also hire and onboard team members remotely; other remote companies have multinational teams and work consecutively in several time zones.

hybrid

Companies with a hybrid model employ some personnel in an office setting and some remote workers. Many hybrid companies use a 60/40 model, where 60% of the workforce exists in a centralised office, while 40% of the workforce works from home. Hybrid companies typically have occasional in-office meetings for remote workers, and teams usually include both remote and on-site workers.

Some organisations decide to go hybrid because they can't find enough terrestrial talent; others drift through a hybrid status as they develop from a traditional company to a fully remote association.

remote work challenges.

There are many upsides to remote work. Companies gain access to a larger talent pool, employees lose their usual commutes and people generally feel more productive. There are also challenges associated with working from home — for example:

potential isolation

When working alone, some people become more susceptible to mental health conditions like depression and anxiety.

lack of engagement

Without solid guidance, teams begin to engage less and ultimately deteriorate.

confusion

When managers don't create goals or share information promptly, workers feel less confident.

poor work-life balance

People who don't know how to draw a line between work and play risk burnout.

constant interruptions

Workers with young children who don't have access to childcare have to multitask almost constantly.

Thankfully, solutions to all of these challenges exist — and we'll reveal them next.

adapting to remote work.

At its best, telecommuting isn't lonely, frustrating or exhausting. Instead, it can be rewarding, empowering and enlivening. Flexible schedules can help working parents cope; targeted training programmes can teach effective team-centric communication. Here are a few more ways you can help your team adapt to remote work.

acknowledge change

When your team first went remote, they probably felt enthusiastic and ready to tackle new challenges. As time went on, a sense of disconnectedness, "remote fatigue", frustration and stress might have crept in — after all, change is stressful and it's tiring to face the unknown. To rekindle that initial energy, you need to address and acknowledge difficulties as they arise.

assess yourself fairly and honestly

Remote work is more flexible than office-based work, but it's a huge adjustment. How are you coping? Can you identify pain points in your home-based work environment? Some people miss talking face-to-face with coworkers and clients; others find peace hard to find at home. If you explore and acknowledge your feelings, you'll be able to support your team more effectively.

recognise your employees' unique needs

Your employees are all unique and their circumstances vary. Some of them juggle remote work with homeschooling and retreat into quiet spaces when Zoom meetings happen. Others have sophisticated home offices and can keep distractions to a minimum. One-size-fits-all remote work solutions don't usually pan out: instead, talk to your employees to discover what they have to contend with and make creative adjustments to meet their needs.

communicate regularly

Risk over-communicating with your team. In a remote work scenario, sharing too much work-centric information is better than sharing too little information. Under these circumstances, a weekly newsletter isn't enough. Make sure you communicate with your people regularly to make up for the lack of daily in-person conversation — and make yourself available via email or phone.

As time goes on, ask your team members if they feel heard and if they feel connected. Regular Zoom meetings, "visibility buddy" partnerships and informal one-to-one chats all help keep teams stay connected and productive.

rethink communication

When teams go remote, they experience a communication overhaul. Emails, phone calls and video chats replace impromptu conversations and spontaneous lunch meetings. We can split communication methods into two main categories:

- synchronous: You make a statement and get an immediate response — examples include phone calls, in-person meetings and Zoom meetings

- asynchronous: You send a message and the other person responds in their own time — examples include letters, emails and work done via project management tools like Basecamp or Trello

Remote teams work best when they combine synchronous with asynchronous communication techniques. Let's see what that might look like in action.

scenario #1

In-person brainstorming sessions are out, but you can still request ideas by email or via your project management tool. Encourage your team to share, view and digest, and then arrange a Zoom meeting to debate and refine your options.

scenario #2

Face-to-face meetings might not be an option at the moment, but you can still create project blueprints and define goals digitally. You'll probably be able to resolve most points in writing, leaving open conversation an option for the most serious issues.

Here are a few more asynchronous communication tips:

- "Urgent" and "important" messages are different from each other. Urgent issues require immediate attention — gas leaks, break-ins or ransomware attacks, for example. Important issues need addressing as soon as possible — a missing bonus, an unauthorized absence or an upcoming deadline, for instance.

- Take time to write detailed, thoughtful messages and try to include all the information your team member might need to know.

foster social connections

Loneliness and a feeling of disconnectedness is a potential remote work pitfall. According to a recent Randstad study, 74% of remote workers miss socialising with coworkers, while 60% miss team collaboration. You can help alleviate feelings of isolation by:

- creating purpose: Arrange regular digital events — activities and meetings — to keep your team connected and on task.

- taking team temperature: Check in with your team members regularly and ask on-point questions to see how they feel about remote work.

- recognising accomplishments: Celebrate team members' achievements, birthdays and other special occasions digitally.

Try to recreate office camaraderie online, too. For example:

- Set up team-building activities: quiz evenings, karaoke nights, virtual happy hours or a book club, for example.

- Create an informal "water cooler" Slack channel and arrange virtual coffee breaks.

- Celebrate wins at a Friday meeting every week, and "go home" an hour early.

build a long-term strategy

Remote work is here to stay, so do plan for the future. Maybe you've been used to in-person client meetings. In that case, try to come up with ways to generate value for your customers online instead. Email marketing, web-based tools and apps all help kindle a connection.

Above all, think of the upsides of remote work and build upon them. Ask employees how they're doing on a regular basis — and encourage client and customer feedback. Anonymous survey tools can help you paint an accurate picture: examples include Surveymonkey and TypeForm.

remote work best practices.

Remote team management isn't simple. Just when you think you're on a roll, you'll hit a snag. Thankfully, these remote work best practices can help you stay ahead of the game.

HR and your hiring pipeline

Work-from-home arrangements are incredibly inclusive and offer access to an entirely new talent pipeline. Far-flung team members and people with disabilities who can't work in traditional office settings suddenly get a seat at the table.

Having said that, traditional hiring processes don't work as well in remote settings. Instead, you'll need to use online tools to find and interview talent. To make a seamless move to digital hiring:

- assess your current hiring process: How can you adapt your previous recruitment steps to match your current business model? Will you need a new go-to set of interview questions? What will your hiring timeline look like?

- change your candidate criteria: Remote staff members need a particular set of IT skills, and they'll have to be comfortable working virtually.

- revise your ads: All your job descriptions will need updating to reflect your new emphasis on remote work.

- find your niche: Post ads on specialist websites and social media sites like LinkedIn as well as your company website.

- use skills assessment tools: Build a questionnaire into your application form to screen candidates on the spot.

onboarding new hires

Instead of relying on a paper trail, try using an online onboarding app to integrate new hires into your system. Digital onboarding might sound intimidating if you're used to a pile of printed forms — but don't worry. Read on to find out how to make your new hires comfortable.

generate a digital onboarding packet

Gather all the information your new hire might need to get going and create an emailable digital onboarding package. You'll need to include:

- Your digital employee handbook or electronic standard operating procedures (SOP) manual

- Any documents that need filling and signing — for example, benefits forms, requests for ID, contracts and non-compete agreements

- Access details for company systems, email accounts

Arrange a video call about a week before you plan to welcome your new hire, and encourage them to ask any questions they might have. If applicable, don't forget to ship laptops, phones and other hardware well in advance.

create a training plan

Schedule online training sessions that begin on day one — and pair your new hire with a team buddy to help them settle in. Prepare existing staff members for your new addition and set up a virtual meet-and-greet. Here are a few other helpful training tips:

- Give your new hire a set of cheat sheets to help them learn the ropes

- Pre-populate your new hire's calendar with meetings and training sessions

- Split training sessions into snackable chunks

Many online training options exist, but the best apps allow screen sharing and two-way communication. A virtual whiteboard can come in handy, too.

leadership development and training

Remote teams benefit from strong, sensitive leadership. Managers have to stay flexible and sensitive to employee needs — especially as the company evolves. You can use a whole systems model to help you engage with and support employees in a dynamic way. Examples of a whole systems approach include:

- Deep listening: Listen to learn, rather than to judge

- Self-awareness: When you know what motivates you, you can make better decisions

- Different perspectives: Inclusivity leads to better insight and greater innovation

- Adaptive action: Analyse everything you do to find a better way forward

providing the right tools and resources

To perform optimally, teams need access to high-quality tools and resources. That can mean hardware — fast, fully functional laptops, for instance — or software. To protect your IT infrastructure, create a company-issued tech database and associate device serial numbers with employees. Then, give your team members access to critical programs via a secure VPN.

data security best practices

Data security is vital. To ensure your client and company information stays under lock and key, train your staff in data security best practices. Remote workers should:

- Take sensitive calls in a private area

- Use headphones to maintain confidentiality

- Avoid printing out sensitive information

- Shred any printed information rather than putting it a waste bin

- Avoid showing other people sensitive information in any format

- Use laptop privacy filters when they work in public places, like coffee shops

- Lock computers when they're not in use

- Password protect company devices

Provide your remote staff with refresher training every year to ensure they stay up to date with the latest advances in data security.

working with an HR partner.

Most companies can't simply stop hiring people, even in the middle of a pandemic when the majority of their existing staff members work remotely. If you're used to traditional face-to-face hiring, remote hiring and onboarding can feel very unfamiliar. In that case, working with an experienced HR partner like Randstad can give you an edge and make you feel more comfortable with remote processes.

Here at Randstad, we blend hiring technology with a human approach. Face-to-face interviews may be off the table, but Randstad's unique approach to talent acquisition offers a personalised experience regardless — for you, and for the candidates on your shortlist.

connect with a recruiter