Challenges and Costs Transcript

This is video three in the managing remotely module that enables you to harness the value of remote work and reduce the cost of virtual distance. In this video we are looking at what are some of those challenges. And what are some of the costs of virtual distance.

Welcome back to the module for the college development network on managing remotely. Now, I hope that you took an opportunity there to really think about what are some of the challenges that you're facing around managing remotely. And what aspects of them are specifically due to working remotely, whether that's yourself working remotely or your colleagues working remotely? Or both. And what aspects of it are part and parcel of the normal challenges we might face managing a team and that will help you think bit more around what would you want to do for mitigating them.

Now I'll just share with you at the moment as some of the challenges that came up when we did these sessions live in May. So managers and working in colleges that are part of the College Development Network mentioned challenges such as multiple interruptions. It was very sunny weather so that actually is a distraction when people are working at home, they're not feeling like working on meetings.

An inability to focus. And the difficulty of having staff available around the home commitments, and much, much more difficult if you need to have some difficult conversations with your staff, particularly around performance when they're on video and you're not actually in the same room. Very often came up the comment that there is this feeling of isolation and it's really difficult. The communication issues become a barrier. It's difficult to have good communication. One of the issues is many staff actually working from the sofa, they don't have a suitable service to work from, and they're constantly having to clear things away to make space for the family. This is quite a big issue actually. It’s not having a dedicated workspace and we did talk about that in the working remotely module. Another aspect that came up specific for the COVID-19 restrictions is that many staff were furloughed and nobody knew what the future was holding. And still not really. So it's quite difficult when we're working in such an uncertain situation. If you're not knowing what the future is holding, how are you planning for future classes, but they don't even know if they are going to be held. So those, the uncertainty of our specific situation now is exacerbated when everyone is working remotely. And the lack of communication, particularly with some staff members when IT becomes a barrier.

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So those are just some of the challenges that were specifically mentioned, for college managers during our live sessions. Some of the other typical challenges that come up in the research are things like just generally the lack of organisational infrastructure, the lack of systems and processes operated remotely, because when you're used to all working systems in operations, the way they work together has developed and designed to be perfect for when you're all in the same place. And part of that is that you're all in the same time, you're all working typical working hours. So you can expect people to respond fairly promptly or within the working day. And when you're working more flexibly with different Flexi hours and working remotely, that instancy isn't necessarily there. And because you're working at different times, that adds to the time it takes to get responses from colleagues, as well as just the physical fact that you're not just at the desk next door, or in the same room.

One of the things that comes up very often both on the side of managers and on the side of their staff is the lack of sight, the face to face supervision. So there's a sense that if are out of sight, you're out of mind. And managers and supervisors worried that people are just not being as efficient because you can't see them. You're not seeing them getting the work done. So how do you know it's being done? And that means you need to come up with ways that you can create ways of both knowing what the work is, been doing without micromanaging because that then ends up being a trap that managers fall into. It’s the need to know what's going on ends up feeling like micromanagement. Equally, staff who are working remotely, very often report that they feel a lack of support from their manager. Because of the way the communication is poorer, they feel the managers is out of touch with their needs, and just simply not as supportive. And staff frequently report they feel more micromanaged, less valued, that their manager doesn't trust them, and there are lack of opportunities for development. So these are all things to keep in mind to think about actually, as a manager, what do I need to do to ensure these challenges are reduced?

We talked a bit about you know, just the change in the infrastructure and the timings can mean there's a much, much higher time and effort to both locate information to get everything done and information flow takes longer. There's a real sense of information inequality, people feel out of the loop and remote staff are at a major disadvantage because a lot of informal knowledge gets exchanged in the workplace in the informal conversations between desks, at coffee breaks. And remote workers miss out on that. And very often the manager will say, “Look, I don't want you to waste time of other people in the office by having chitchat when you phone in. Just focus on the work.” And actually, that that's a very unproductive attitude, because people need to feel part of the team and know what's going on informally, in order to really feel committed to giving their best work, and performing at their best on the things that matter to the team.

This sense of social isolation is one of the most common complaints about working from home and a sense of loneliness, and that you're not involved with the office. Even if you've got your whole family around you, the fact that you're not having, being involved in all the conversations in the office, you just don't feel part of it. It can really exacerbate a sense of loneliness.

And there are enormous distractions from home. When you've got a sudden transition to working from home, as of now or whether you're, you know, permanently working from home, you're used to it, there is still the distractions of everything else. You're in your home environment. So there needs to be something around creating a way of feeling at work when you're in at home. Very often the suffering from suboptimal working space, and we talked more about this in the working from home module.

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And there's a need to manage your family expectations as well.

So these challenges… and the reason we measure all of these challenges, because you as a manager, do need to have real understanding. You know, even if you're the manager working in the office, you really need to have a full understanding of the experience remotely from your team members’ perspective as well, your own staff perspective. So that you can adjust the way you work to create a positive experience for them, so you can create an environment where they do feel supported, even if they're not in the environment, even if they're feeling left out if the rest of the team are in the office space. So we’re inviting you as a manager, think of the challenges both from your own perspective as a manager, and also step into the shoes of your staff and look at these challenges from their perspective as well. Have those open and honest conversations with them to understand it from that perspective too. And then together you’ll be really much better placed to come up with solutions that work for them, as well as for you as their manager.

Now, the research is showing that many of these challenges of working remotely come up from virtual distance. And when we think about this, we normally think it's due to the separation. We’re geographically separated. We’re dispersed across the country. So in actual fact, that's what we think about as the cause of the problems and the challenges that we face when working and managing remotely.

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However, the research shows actually, it's a bit more subtle than that. The geographic distance that we expect is part of the physical distance. And there are some other things in there as well. But it also includes operational distance, and infinity distance. These are two other aspects that make up the whole of virtual distance.

So physical distance includes geographic distance, not just being in different parts of the country. But this can also apply within an organisation where you've got different departments and that adds to this contribution, in the sense of different departments may work in silos, you're not having the conversations between departments. So physical distance can apply even within a whole organisation where everyone is working in the same general location, but in different offices and departments within the company.

Time Zones add to a physical distance. Well time as a factor, not just time zones of different countries. Also, time when people are working Flexi hours to and particularly when we're working remotely and half the reason , if it's not enforced on us as it has been in COVID situation, much of the time people are working remotely want the flexibility to be able to fit their work hours around other commitments. And that means we need to get used to working at times, at different times from each other. Now, the term for this is Asynchronous working. If everyone is working in the office from nine to five, then that synchronous working. And it does require a shift in mindset, what we expect from each other.

The operational distance is all about the way we get things done. It's about systems and processes. And as I mentioned earlier, when you are working all in the same space, you've come up with a way of working that works for that. And it creates barriers for when working remotely that you need to recognise and address and do things to make it work better for both situations. And it's particularly important to reduce the miscommunications.

Affinity distance is one of the most interesting and this is the one that's most often overlooked and addressing this can really make a massive difference to reduce the challenges you face when working remotely. So I really invite you to pay strong attention to this form. And affinity distance is caused by problems that get in the way of maintaining strong relationships or building those relationships in the first place. This is where people are feeling out of the loop, they’re feeling disconnected. And the trouble with this is that it starts to reduce trust. And trust is so important for us to believe in each other as team members, to trust that everybody is pulling their weight, and even though we're all dispersed and working from home, each of us doing all that we can to ensure that together as a team, we're achieving our collective objectives. And we'll be talking a bit later on about the Lencioni model. Because trust is absolutely vital for the foundations of creating a high performing team. Not only when we’re working remotely. It’s all the time, especially. You know, whenever you are trying to create a team if you want to get things done well, trust is the foundation for all of that. And it's especially important when we’re working remotely and you have to consciously think about how do we start getting to know each other well, to trust each other that we're all doing our work. And that's not just as our colleagues, but between yourself as a manager and the people that you are line managing. There needs to be trust both ways and a lot of that comes through the social interactions and this affinity distance we want to reduce.

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And as you can imagine, there’s been research done, that discovers there are real costs to virtual distance. And that means that we have got to address this in order to really take advantage of the actual benefits. There can be real benefits to working remotely. However, these are lost unless we address the cost of virtual distance.

So these costs: innovative behaviours are down by over 90%. Now, that is shocking. That is enormous. And that's where people are coming up with, they're being resourceful and coming up with ideas of how do we do things slightly differently for the better. And as I was just talking, trust is lost by over 80%. And that is fundamentally critical to how you perform well as a team and how you as a manager can help your people get, deliver their best, to work at their best. So things that you can do to improve trust while you’re working remotely are going to pay dividends to you being able to more effectively manage remotely.

Cooperative and helping behaviours are down by 80%. And I think, personally, that trust comes down to some of this as well. Because if we're not trusting that our colleagues are doing all that they can, and as we are, that we're less likely to want to cooperate with them.

This is interesting that the role and your goal clarity is reduced by about three quarters. And as a manager, this is something that you will want to really pay attention to because this is something where you can make a real difference to help your people really have good clarity about what is it they're expected to do. How is their role shape? How, what does their role really look like? Even now that they’re working remotely? How do they still feel part of the whole team? And what is it they're expected to be doing now that they're working remotely.

13:05

And as a result for this project success drops by half. And interestingly, the sense of commitment that people feel towards the organisation and the satisfaction in their work.

So this is why we are going to focus during this session, especially on the two things that are fundamental to addressing all of these costs. And to help you create a high performing team and the first of those is trust. And the other is about how do you help people improve on their role and goal clarity in working remotely. And when you can improve on these, you'll improve on the other costs and you will reduce your challenges and you make working remotely a much more enjoyable and effective process for everybody involved – whoever is left in the office, whoever is working from home or working remotely – and more effective for the organisation as a whole.

So what I'd like you to think about just now, before we go to the next session is to consider, to what extent do you feel you've seen some of these costs? Are there any other challenges that have come up for you that, as we've been talking about it, you’re thinking “Oh, yes, I hadn’t really recognised that”? Add that to your list of some of the challenges that you would like to address. And what are some of the costs that you might have noticed already, while working remotely that you feel actually if we could address some of that, that would make a big difference to performance of how we’re getting on?

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So have a think about those and then come back and join the next video, looking at how we start reducing the cost of virtual payments by planning how we work together.