Remote-first:

the guide to unlocking your global potential

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Remote work is here to stay

Whether spurred by circumstance or employee preference, the notion of the workplace has evolved.

In early 2020, 3.4% of the U.S. population was working from home.[1] Now, just over one-third of people who can work remotely do so all the time — while 41% are at least part-time remote on a hybrid setup.[2] While not everyone who left the office will continue working from home long-term, the pandemic-fueled global experiment proved to many organizations that a remote workforce is not only plausible, it's often preferable. This is evident from 42% of office workers being willing to take a 10% pay cut to have the flexibility to work remotely.[3]

Working from home (WFH) has been trending in this direction for more than a decade. Between 2005 and 2018, the U.S. saw a 173% increase in employees working remotely at least part-time.[4] It turns out that a remote workforce offers a lot of benefits for employees and employers alike, which means it's here to stay. It's estimated that more than one in five Americans will work remotely by 2025.[5]

Remote can mean more than just not working in the office. It gives you permission to reimagine where and how your team collaborates, when they work, where you hire and how you expand. In some organizations, that means allowing employees to work the hours that best suit them or live wherever they want in the world.

Leading the way:
These tech companies are pushing remote-first into the mainstream.

Dropbox | This 3,000-member organization adopted a "virtual first" policy, meaning that employees will work primarily from home. Offices have been renovated, ditching desks in favor of collaborative spaces to be used for specific purposes like leadership training and team building.[6]

Gitlab | The world's largest all-remote company is an open book when it comes to remote collaboration. With over 1,200 employees in 67 countries, this open-source software maker has published a how-to guide on its website.[7]

Microsoft | Not always known for innovation, this behemoth adopted a hybrid work model centered around "flexibility." Some must remain on-site but others can choose where and even when they log on, depending on the unique circumstances of each employee.[8]

Zapier | As the leader in automation technology, Zapier empowers businesses to streamline workflows and move data across 7,000+ apps. With strong automations and workflows in place, Zapier embraces a remote-first approach to attract top-tier talent.[9]

Suddenly, you aren't limited to wherever headquarters is located. Geography and time zones become irrelevant. And now you can find the just-right person for every job, every time.

Whether you're ready to go totally remote or you simply want to learn how to make it work better, there's a lot to gain, as well as a lot to consider, as you move ahead.

No matter the rationale, embracing remote work policies sets you up for opportunities you haven't been able to take advantage of—until now.

Defining our terms

Remote-friendly

These workplaces offer employees the option to WFH some of the time. There may or may not be dedicated processes and tools in place to make it more effective. This is a hybrid model where most people go into the office at least some of the time, and working from home is considered a perk.

Remote-first

In these organizations, employees are set up to work from home as the default. Some may work onsite—retail employees, for example, or data center staff—but most will work virtually except for when there's an express need to collaborate face to face, such as a team-building event. Like remote-friendly, it's a hybrid model, but with considerably more emphasis on virtual work.

Remote-only

This is exactly what it sounds like—a fully distributed model of employment with no physical office. Employees work in their native time zones and collaborate virtually. Over 16% of global organizations[10] already fall into this category, including Bandcamp, Gitlab and Duck, Duck, Go, and today, more and more companies are considering taking the leap.

By the numbers

When it comes to how we work, organizations are constantly evolving.

16%

Global companies operate entirely remotely

Source

98%

Workers want to work remotely, at least some of the time, for the rest of their careers

Source

9 of 10

Workers have positive experiences with remote working environments

Source

More upside than you can imagine

Going remote can give your organization a huge competitive advantage. Cost savings is one advantage you've probably thought about, but that's only the beginning. From employee satisfaction to a wider talent pool, the benefits of going remote are many.

Cost savings

There are a number of ways to save money when you go remote. The most obvious is on overhead like office space, furniture and supplies. By divesting yourself of real estate you'll save an estimated $10,000 per remote worker each year.[11] Even if you offer employees a budget to support setting up a home office or purchasing office supplies, or you retain some of your office spaces for collaborative projects, you'll still see big savings.

Here are some other places where you can expect savings:

EFFICIENCY

Working from home lowers the number of sick days you're paying for, which saves organizations $1,800 per employee per year.[12] After Alpine Access implemented a WFH policy, agents closed 30% more sales year over year. An added bonus: Customer complaints went down by 90%, and happy customers are repeat customers.[13] (Read more about the rewards of increased productivity on the next page.)

HEALTHCARE

WFH makes for healthier employees. One study found that home workers reported 25% less stress, ate healthier and felt they had a better work-life balance.[14] Together, that adds up to health benefits that can, in turn, reduce the cost of healthcare for employers and employees alike.

TRAVEL

Companies that operate virtually may still have travel expenditures, such as team building meetups once a year or business leaders crisscrossing the globe to meet with their teams face to face. Nevertheless, when you learn to collaborate remotely, you don't require all the travel of a traditional company, and that adds up.

SALARY

When you go virtual, you can recruit anywhere. Not only does this open up your hiring options both at home and abroad, but by recruiting in markets where average salaries are lower, you can also save on payroll. Plus, there's no need to fund relocation.

Productivity

If you're worried that your team might get sucked into watching Netflix or doing chores during the day, never fear. Nearly half of remote workers—44%—report that they worked more in 2023 compared to the year prior. Meanwhile, 32% report working the same amount.[15] In fact, research shows that employees are 20% to 25% more productive than their office-based colleagues. It's likely because they're less distracted and more engaged; Gallup found that "optimal engagement" happens when employees work offsite 60% to 80% of the time.[16] That translates to three to four days out of every workweek. And engaged employees are productive employees. They take less time off, make fewer mistakes and increase profitability. Cisco estimates that it saves $277 million a year based on increased productivity alone.[17]

Employee satisfaction

People who don't have to go into the office every day like their jobs more. One study showed that remote workers are 57% more likely to be satisfied.[18] Working from home means fewer distractions, no commute and having greater control over your own schedule.
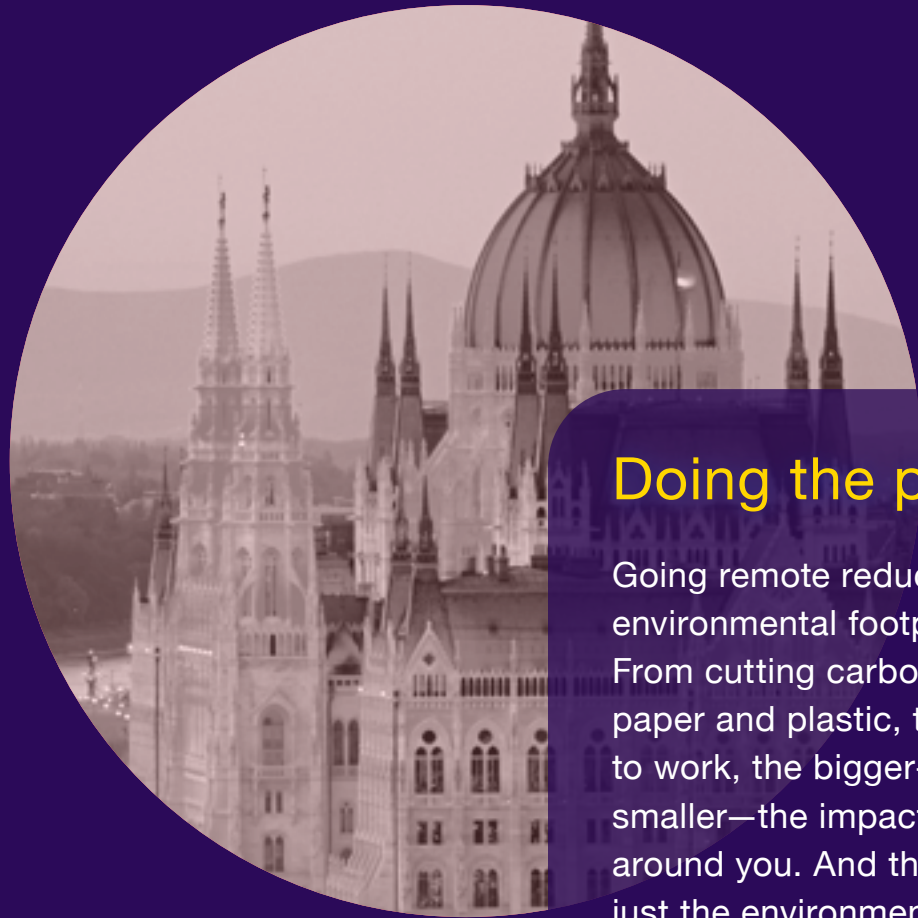

Employee retention

Happy, engaged employees are less likely to go looking for greener pastures (or be lured away). In fact, people value a flexible workplace so much that 80% would turn down a job, and more than one-third would take a less prestigious position in exchange for the option.[19] In companies with flexible work options, turnover is 25% lower.[20] And increased retention isn't just a perk in and of itself: It also saves you money by not having to recruit and onboard due to turnover.

Expanded talent pool

Don't underestimate the value of being able to hire in nearly any market, anywhere in the world. Organizations can reap several benefits from this opportunity. To begin with, it means it's easier to find the right person for the job, which translates into positions being filled faster and higher retention rates. Remote work is especially attractive to Millennials and Gen Z, and that's a big deal, since together they will comprise 75% of the workforce by 2030.[21]

Increased diversity

Greater access to global talent allows companies to expand the diversity of their team. Research has shown that corporations identified as more diverse and inclusive are 35% more likely to outperform their competitors.[22] That makes sense, since the mingling of different religions, languages, cultures and experiences generates ideas in a way that a homogenous culture cannot. But innovation isn't an end in and of itself; it's also directly tied to economic performance. One study found that organizations with diverse leadership teams report 19% higher revenues due to innovation.[23]

FEWER EMISSIONS

Sun Microsystems saved 32,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide from being released into the atmosphere in one year, and Xerox saved 41,000 metric tons, when they let their employees work from home.[24] It is estimated that if Londoners worked from home, that could cut greenhouse gas emissions 3.3 million tons in London alone. Given the way climate change is already affecting our lives, this is an important side benefit.

MORE TIME

The average American spends nine days in their car each year commuting. Working from home translates into a seemingly impossible gift—getting time back in your day. CoPilot estimates that 15.2% of time would be gained back in New York City alone.

LESS WASTE

Making coffee at home means fewer plastic lids, coffee cups and stirrers in the landfill. Ditto drinking water from a glass instead of a plastic water bottle at work or making a sandwich versus getting takeout for lunch five days a week. Digitizing work processes to make remote work possible also means less paper being used and fewer trees being cut down.

Doing the planet good

Going remote reduces your company's environmental footprint in a number of ways. From cutting carbon emissions to using less paper and plastic, the fewer people who drive to work, the bigger—or, more accurately, smaller—the impact you'll have on the world around you. And this matters for more than just the environment; Millennials and Gen Z want to work for companies whose values align with theirs. This is a way to ensure you're an attractive company to work for.

Rethinking perks for a reimagined workplace

When you go remote, you'll need to think through some of the perks you offer. Here are some suggestions.

Home office stipend | Take some of the money you'll save on office space and dole it out to employees so they can outfit their home workspace with an ergonomic desk and chair, or help them pay for a co-working space.

Annual summit | There's still a lot of value in spending time together, especially when it comes to culture and morale. Duck, Duck, Go sends employees on a global meetup every year so they can get to know one another better (and have some fun along the way).

Unlimited vacation | This is a trend in companies both remote and traditional. Remote workers as a rule take fewer days off for illness or personal time. Trust your team to put in the time required to do their jobs well, and reward them with unlimited paid time off.

Making it work

It's important to be aware of the considerations you'll need to think through as you pivot toward a primarily remote workplace. Planning for these challenges will go a long way to making your transition successful.

Communication and collaboration

By now most organizations are familiar with collaborating via videoconferencing, as well as cloud-based collaboration, instant messaging and project management apps. But you'll need to do more than equip your team with the right tools. You'll also need to establish processes for what you document and how, or when you call meetings versus when you address something over instant message or email.

Gitlab, which has been fully remote since 2014, has employees spread across 67 countries and multiple time zones and has established a meeting-optional policy. Because Gitlab engages in asynchronous work, meaning that people work in their native time zones and at whatever time is most effective for them, some team members may be sleeping while others are working. As a result, meetings are always optional, always accompanied by an agenda and meticulously documented in real time by the participants so that anyone who didn't attend can read through the notes to understand the discussion and decision-making rationale.

"In all-remote settings, where you may never meet a colleague in person, leveraging visual tools to convey nuance in tone, emphasis, and emotion can lead to more empathy and a tighter human connection. Emojis can create a more inclusive communication environment.

When you're working with colleagues where the business language isn't someone's first language, more universal indicators (e.g. "eyes" for "I've seen this" or "smile" for positivity) can reduce the mental burden of deciphering a message."

— GITLAB, "THE REMOTE PLAYBOOK"

Source

HIRE THE RIGHT PEOPLE

When you interview candidates, talk to them about how your remote office operates, encourage them to ask questions and help prepare them for some of the challenges they'll face as they adjust. Gitlab assigns each new employee an onboarding buddy to help them with the transition.

SCHEDULE COMMUNICATION

From an always-on videoconference room where teams can come and go and company-wide meetings to one-on-one work sessions or grabbing a virtual coffee with someone you don't know well, establish ways to connect both formally and informally to replicate friendship-building chit chat and water cooler knowledge-sharing.

PRIORITIZE MENTAL HEALTH

Working from home can be isolating, and catching burnout in a team member can be more difficult when you're spread out. There are things you can look for in others and ways to prevent it from happening, all of which should be covered in the onboarding process, with resources easily available. Make sure employees take vacation and mental health days, coach them in how to separate work life from home life, turn off notifications when you need to focus or it's time to stop working.

PICK UP THE PHONE

We've become so reliant on email and instant messaging to communicate with one another that we often forget the value of talking live. Not only can it lead to quicker resolutions or decisions, but it also gives you the opportunity to connect on a more human level and establish trust and connection.

Culture, camaraderie and morale

How do you establish a common culture and help people connect when they're not working in the same place? Establish your values, publish them and train your teams to live them. The employee handbook captures not only its values but also processes and policies. At Gitlab, for example, the handbook is a living document that's open to everyone in the company, and all are expected to contribute so that knowledge doesn't disappear when an employee moves on. These are some of their tips for building camaraderie and morale:

Employee advancement

If yours is a hybrid work environment where some people are in the office more than others, it's possible for those who work face to face can end up with advantages and opportunities that those who WFH lack. Developing relationships with colleagues builds trust within an organization, and trust influences who gets promotions, raises and other rewards.

This is why Dropbox opted to go virtual first—with the exception of on-site team building and leadership training events—rather than hybrid.[26] No matter which option you choose it's important to have well-defined criteria for success, train managers to adapt to managing off-site employees, and ensure that managers understand each team member's career goals. It's also vital to establish ways to share knowledge so that newer or junior employees don't miss out on the exchange of information that occurs more casually when people work in close proximity.

Real estate

Unless you're starting a new company, you have office space and other assets and expenditures that you'll have to make decisions about. Part of planning for the transition should include crafting a real estate strategy. Will you sell your space? Rent it out? Transform it into collaboration hubs like Dropbox did? This should not be an afterthought.

International recruiting

The good news is that you can hire almost anywhere in the world. The bad news is you may not have any idea how to get started or where to look.

From figuring out where the people you need are located to understanding how to write contracts and handle payroll in accordance with local employment regulations, there's a lot to learn, and mistakes can be accompanied by costly fines.

There are a few ways to handle this. One is hiring an HR director with experience in international recruiting and hiring. Another is to work with a local agency in the cities and countries where you plan to hire. A third is to work with a workforce solutions provider that can recruit, hire and pay employees globally.

"Turning Dropbox into this lab for the future of distributed work has been awesome. It's a working model we've been able to build a few years in the future, and stub our toes on problems and then design this whole portfolio."

— DREW HOUSTON, DROPBOX FOUNDER AND CEO

Source

Remote and reimagined

Remote-first or remote-only is the present as well as the future of the workplace. Transiting is a process rather than a switch you flip. It takes time, and it requires planning and constant re-evaluation, but it can ultimately deliver an organization whose employees are engaged, productive and happy. And who, in turn, deliver the kind of innovation and efficiency that produce growth, expand your opportunities and generate revenue. Now is the time to reimagine what's possible.

Does your organizational strategy include a remote-first or hybrid way of work?

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Connect with a global solutions advisor today to tell us about your needs and learn how we can support your remote work needs.

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