

Managing Risks and Reaping the Rewards of Remote Teams



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Remote work—a facet of the working landscape for three-plus decades—quickly became the default construct for businesses and nonprofits alike in 2020. In short order, leaders across the nonprofit sector learned that remote work was not only *possible* but also practical at a fantastic scale. Experience corroborated what the research indicated—many people are *more* productive, comfortable, and content working from home, even *with* added distractions of family life, roommates, pets, and parcel deliveries.

Nonprofit HR, a leading US talent management firm focused exclusively on the social sector, conducted a pulse survey in 2021 after many organizations had been practicing remote work solutions for over 18 months. 635 participating organizations with various missions responded. Survey findings included:

- The top concern for organizations regarding partially or fully remote work strategies is maintaining company culture (64%).
- 51% of respondents are considering future remote work for any position that could reasonably accommodate this strategy.
- As a result of the pandemic, 70% of nonprofit staff work primarily from home, including 50% of nonprofits who provide direct community service.
- 78% reported experiencing unexpected positive benefits resulting from remote or hybrid work schedules.

With these overwhelming benefits, it's no wonder that many nonprofits are considering making remote work arrangements permanent or embracing 'hybrid' as the default model of their future work environment. Yet, this gratefully embraced model is not without risk for employer and employee alike. When teams are geographically dispersed, everyone must recognize the need for intentionality. Infusing remote and hybrid teams with purposeful actions is critical to maintaining and building trust, ensuring employment law compliance, and supporting high levels of engagement and productivity.

Without purpose and intentionality, remote teams go from a richly rewarding experience to a risky business practice. Below, we explore a handful of top-of-mind risks for nonprofit leaders and share tips and insights to infuse new and existing remote and hybrid teams with the intentionality needed for success.

Anchor Everything in Trust

Tsedal Neeley succinctly describes trust's role in connecting with team members in her recent book *Remote Work Revolution: Succeeding from Anywhere*. She writes, "Trust is the glue that binds a team together, drives performance, and enables collaboration and coordination, but you can't force trust. It is a judgment people must reach on their own." Nonprofit teams making a shift to a fully remote work arrangement or exploring a hybrid approach where team members are working off-site *and* in person—but rarely at the same time—must carefully cultivate and build trust between leaders of the team and among team members themselves.

- **Focus on outcomes rather than process.**

Supervisors in a traditional work environment often employ the tactic of 'management by walking around' (MBWA). These impromptu interactions allow teams to raise questions and hone their process while maintaining connection and team cohesiveness. But MBWA can also erode trust if employees feel at risk of being caught in an unproductive moment. In the virtual environment, MBWA isn't possible. Instead, leaders can earn team member trust by focusing on the outcomes rather than the process. Encourage hybrid and entirely virtual teams to examine outcome-driven goals and provide freedom and flexibility for each team member to work towards these milestones through a process that fits their individual needs. With specific, measurable, transparent goals and associated outcomes, the team can quickly assess what's working and what's not and make course corrections along the way.

- **Intentionally build interpersonal trust among team members.**

Deep, lasting trust comes when people know one another on a personal level. Traditionally, teams built these relationships around the office coffee bar, by running into colleagues in the hallway, and with casual conversations over lunch. Absent the ability to bump into someone in the hall, hybrid and remote teams must be intentional about including 'get to know you' interactions into their work routines. Start by making your first agenda item on team touch-base meetings a "Take 5" moment. Use this time to go around the virtual table and allow each team member to share something exciting or challenging that's happening in their lives – home or work-related! Meeting facilitators and leaders should make this exercise routine and ensure everyone has an opportunity to share. One tactic would be to start with the person who usually speaks the least. During times of stress, remember to end all team meetings with a second "Take 5" moment. Go around the virtual table and ask each team member to identify one of the following:

- Something they need help on, or
- Something they are worried about for which they need reassurance or understanding.

- **Soak in the power of owning mistakes.**

Tsem Tulku Rinpoche, a Buddhist philosopher, reminds us that, "We must be open to our mistakes and grow. Growth isn't based on being perfect, but moving toward the best we can be by being honest." Mistakes, deviations from the plan, and errors should be expected in any organization willing to take risks to achieve ambitious missions. Often, the best strategies are untested and have elements of the unknown. When things go awry, there is a lot of power in discussing mistakes, finding the opportunities for growth within, and owning your part in them. Build your remote and hybrid teams' trust by promoting learning and growth rather than fixing blame and harboring shame. Nonprofit leaders should teach this skill through openly owning and discussing their mistakes and errors.

- **Take advantage of transparency.**

In a world dominated by video conferences, it's never been more important to be transparent with your colleagues, partners, community members, and clients! Webcams have given us the ability to be present with each other despite a physical distance. However, when the cameras are on, our actions and expressions take center stage whether we intend them to or not. Taking notes during an in-person meeting is obvious to all participants. However, a pause in the conversation as you catch up or collect your thoughts on a video conference could easily be interpreted as disengagement. It's risky to assume your fellow meeting participants know exactly what you're up to—they could 'check out' from your meeting, or at worst, they could begin to question their trust for you! Instead, be transparent about what you're doing. If you suddenly go quiet, let your teammates know that you've paused to make a note of something you don't want to forget, or that you need a minute to consider that great new idea, or that you're double-checking the agenda on your other screen. These types of interjections will likely feel stilted at first. After practicing them, they'll become more natural parts of your virtual communication toolkit, and they will add a new layer to the ways your team continues to build trust.

Encourage Communication and Establish Cadence

Communication is critically important for any nonprofit team, and it may be even more so for those who are contending with geographical distance. Because colleagues are no longer an arms-length away, teams need to form regular communication patterns, carefully select—and use—tools, and purposefully reach out as situations present themselves.

- **Leverage asynchronous work.**

Asynchronous work often begets concern among teams used to having frequent, casual interactions. Coworkers have been traditionally accustomed to popping into each other's offices to ask a quick question or solicit someone to weigh in on a decision. If your team is new to asynchronous activities, there might be concern over quickly receiving essential feedback. Used correctly, this strategy can increase team productivity and cohesion! To maximize asynchronous communication methods, first consider how urgent, sensitive, and critical the feedback is. Take advantage of establishing an async 'pre-work' period before brainstorming meetings or risk action plan development. Teams can take advantage of creating collaborative documents with tools like Google Docs or Microsoft 365 to gather ideas and rank them before coming together to decide on a plan of action.

- **Know the value of the one-on-one.**

Without the luxury of being physically accessible to their teams, leaders should consider increasing the number of routine one-on-ones they have with their staff. Ideally, these one-on-ones would be short, routine conversations team members can count on to voice concerns and solicit feedback. Ensuring these meetings happen at a predictable day and time makes it more likely that issues will quickly rise to the surface before becoming a significant obstacle. Reluctant team members might find this form a safer, more comfortable way of voicing concerns, talking through technical difficulties, or requesting additional support without feeling like they're on the spot in a large group meeting. Conversely, ardent speakers will find confidence in sharing ideas with leaders without monopolizing the speaking floor during larger team meetings when it's important to provide all participants the ability to share.

- **Establish team norms.**

Outline norms for new and existing remote and hybrid teams. These 'rules of engagement' help team members understand everything from communication tools to meeting schedules to what work can be asynchronous and what should be conducted in real-time. Use this opportunity to set expectations for team communications. By establishing a regular schedule for check-ins, the team will now be able to quickly identify risks as they emerge and take a baked-in approach to developing action plans going forward. Another critical consideration is the etiquette for camera use during video conferencing. 'Zoom fatigue' is a very real consequence of heavy use of this communication form. Therefore, there are many benefits to establishing set meeting schedules where cameras are optional. Such as, ensuring team members have the freedom to relax and be relieved of the stress that arises when personal challenges are happening in the background (kids, partners, pets, or parents). Also, for some, processing information is easier without a constant video stream to monitor.

Navigating Compliance Conundrums

Opening your doors to team members across the nation (or the world!) increases your nonprofit's capacity for recruiting talented, mission-committed individuals. Organizations large and small must be mindful of employment law implications of a geographically dispersed team. Not knowing *which* laws apply to your global workforce can quickly turn smooth sailing into turbulent seas!

- **Use a notification system if employees move out of state.**

It's abundantly clear when you onboard a new hire who lives out of state. But what happens when an existing team member moves to a new state and remains in their current position with your nonprofit? Teams who have implemented fully remote work arrangements should consider developing a simple notification system that allows leaders or their human resources team to collect important information about their staff's residence. Brief all teams on where to find forms and give periodic reminders of the change of residence notifications procedure. Some jurisdictions provided waivers during the pandemic for telework employees. Many of these waivers have since expired. Conduct an audit of your team's residential addresses to ensure anyone remaining on permanent remote work will have withholding taxes appropriately withdrawn.

- **Consult trusted advisors.**

Knowing which employment laws apply in every situation can be tricky, even when all of your employees live in the same state. However, when staff's home office locations are in a different state from your

nonprofit's headquarters, the requirements may be very different from what you're accustomed to. Keep in mind that your remote and hybrid employees might have different protected leave available, you may need to use non-traditional methods for posting employment notifications, and even wage-and-hour laws may change. Touching base with in-house or retained counsel is an appropriate step to ensure you are compliant with relevant employment laws and haven't overlooked anything.

- **Allow additional time for onboarding.**

Conventional onboarding strategies often include loads of paperwork new employees are expected to complete, a walk around the workplace with casual introductions, and possibly a sit-down with the new supervisor or HR to review policies and procedures. Hybrid and virtual work arrangements dictate that we shake up the onboarding process and explore new, creative ways to acquaint recruits with their duties and teammates. Because casual meet-ups around the office aren't a viable expectation for remote and many hybrid team members, consider extending the onboarding period and use intentional virtual meet-ups like coffee breaks or 'get-to-know' everyone sessions. These informal meetings are an excellent way for the team to meet each other personally, begin to develop interpersonal trust, and stave off feelings of isolation while building community. Another strategy to create comfort for new employees who never meet their team or supervisors in person is to develop a ramping-up plan that extends far beyond the typical one week or 30 days that was customary when teams worked primarily in the office. A series of established touch-base meetings with a mentor in addition to a supervisor can help new team members become comfortable with the role and your nonprofit's culture and mission. This personalized plan will look different for each new recruit and creates a solid foundation for success and engagement.

The foundation to grow a successful remote or hybrid team is built on unwavering trust. Trust between the team members and trust between leadership and the team. At the first hint of fracture or frustration, teams should look to this foundation of trust and ask:

- Are all members of the team comfortable admitting mistakes? Or is there a tendency to place blame when something doesn't go as planned?
- Are we actively listening with curiosity to learn when others are sharing during touch-base meetings?
- Are the expectations for team members clear? Do we need to clarify or change our communications—the tool, schedule, or frequency?
- Take a team pulse check. How high is the stress level? Have we skipped the personal 'check-in' time at meetings too often? Do we have enough one-on-one sessions?

While it's true that many nonprofits were forced to enter a grand experiment with remote work in 2020 and 2021, this arrangement and its counterpart—hybrid work— isn't a quick or easy fix for employee retention, engagement, productivity, or recruiting top talent for your mission. However, it can be a powerful solution when leaders are intentional, open, and recognize these arrangements are nuanced.

Whitney Thomey is Lead Consultant and Risk Ethnologist at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions and comments about developing and engaging a remote workforce at your nonprofit at 703.777.3504 or Whitney@nonprofitrisk.org.

Additional Reading & Resources

- [Remote Work Revolution: Succeeding from Anywhere](#), Tsedal Neeley
- [You're On Mute - How the Shift from In-person to Virtual Board Meetings Impacts Board Governance and Communication in Nonprofit Associations](#), Theresa Hurley
- ["Safe and Supported: The Intersection of Psychological Safety and Fruitful Risk Practice,"](#) *Risk Management Essentials*
- ["Async Wins: What Teams Gain By Going Async,"](#) Workplaceless
- ["Stanford researchers identify four causes for 'Zoom fatigue' and their simple fixes,"](#) Stanford News
- ["The Fatiguing Effects of Camera Use in Virtual Meetings: A Within-Person Field Experiment,"](#) *Journal of Applied Psychology*
- ["4 Ways To Balance Under And Over-Communication As A Remote Work Manager,"](#) Trello
- ["Multistate Compliance for Employers with Out-of-State Remote Employees,"](#) *National Law*

Review

- [“When Your Workforce Is No Longer Local, Which Employment Laws Apply?”](#) *JD Supra*
- [“6 strategies to improve the onboarding process for hybrid workers,”](#) Human Resources Executive