

5 Lessons Traditional Companies Can Learn From Remote Companies



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OCTOBER 07, 2015

There is no denying that telecommuting and remote work is increasingly becoming a reality in 21st century workplaces. According to a new Gallup poll, [37 percent of all American workers have telecommuted](#) during their careers. In 1995, that number was just 9 percent. In another 20 years, as this

trend continues -- or more likely accelerates -- [the vast majority of our workforce will telecommute](#) as a part of their regular work routine. For traditional companies without remote options for their workers, this means a dramatic shift in the way they conduct business.

Luckily, hundreds of companies already fully-immersed in telecommuting are sharing lessons every traditional company can learn. My team at [Remote.co](#) has interviewed 61 remote companies to learn more about how they operate, and I've identified five key lessons that traditional companies can learn from these cloud and technology-savvy businesses.

1. The more freedom someone has, the more accountable they feel.

Freedom and accountability go hand-in-hand at remote companies, and this connection is powerful. These two key concepts help support companies as they grow, because they keep everyone focused on what matters while also feeling empowered to work in the ways that are most effective.

[ICUC](#), one of the largest remote companies in the world with over 600 remote workers, has experienced this first-hand. Director of Marketing and Communications Nicole van Zanten says, "With a global client list and service offering, it is critical that we focus on the management of results, not the management of people. The remote work model is very compatible with a results-based management style."

"The freedom that careers at ICUC offer introduces a desire to always have such freedom and as such, people are made aware of just how important their results are to preserving their positions here," van Zanten continues. When the opposite is true, as it often is in traditional companies, managers inadvertently eliminate accountability because workers don't have the freedom, and therefore the responsibility, of choosing things like when and

how to work.

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2. Proactive communication is the key to productive teams.

Every remote company we've talked with says the same thing: communication is king. But they don't necessarily mean lots of scheduled, but often unnecessary, meetings or forced interactions. Instead, communication is an ongoing, daily, organic thing that helps remote workers to be more efficient, productive and engaged, both individually and as a group.

Carri McKeegan, a co-founder of [Greenback Expat Tax Services](#) says, "We don't set communication rules for the team, but we rely on a collaborative approach to accomplish the company's goals. Rarely is one team member working alone on a project, so communication is a must. They rely on each other so heavily to do their jobs that there really isn't a need to specify the terms of communication."

3. Feedback should happen more than once a year.

Remote companies are more likely to provide ongoing feedback throughout the year, and less likely to hold the formal, end-of-year performance reviews so common in traditional companies. At Taksa Technology Solutions, an IT application outsourcing service that operates remotely, they review personal and company goals monthly, and evaluate them quarterly.

"This process not only helps the employees to stay on top of things but also helps us to get better results and stay productive," says Karan Arora, CEO of [Taksa](#).

About reviewing performance, CEO Cliff Pollan of the remote company, [Sococo](#), says, "We're an Agile organization, so self-

examination is built into our workflow very naturally. We set goals, then examine and measure progress and output at regular, discrete intervals.”

In a show of what’s possible for traditional companies, Accenture made headlines this summer when they [got rid of annual performance reviews](#) and instead implemented, “a more fluid system, in which employees receive timely feedback from their managers on an ongoing basis following assignments.”

Instead of waiting to provide important feedback annually, many remote companies use that more traditional format of an annual meeting with team members instead as a chance to review accomplishments, celebrate goals that have been met, and generate excitement for the next year. At [FlexJobs](#), we call these our “Debrief and Dream”, or “D&D” calls because they’re meant to be a source of energy and enthusiasm, not dread or uncertainty.

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4. Work-life integration is a business asset.

Throughout the 21st century, as office work became increasingly common, a misperception gained traction that still exists today: the number of hours you spent at your desk correlates to how efficient, productive and dedicated you are as an employee. But multiple studies have shown that the opposite is true. A Stanford University study found that the tipping point for the [relationship between hours worked and productivity](#) is 49 hours. Any more than that, and a person’s productivity falls. And an analysis of OECD member countries found that, “the more [productive workers put in less time](#) at the office.”

Remote companies tend to place an emphasis on helping their team

members balance work and personal lives. Wes Ward, vice president of strategic growth at [Five Q](#), sums it up: “At our core: we want people to walk away and have amazing families and be whole people. There’s some fun things we do — but at a simplistic level, we just encourage depth of friendships and balance of life.”

5. Change can be a very good thing.

Another lesson remote companies offer is that regular change can be a positive force in an organization, and should be embraced. At [Automattic](#), Sara Rosso, marketing manager, and Lori McLeese, head of human resources, say the structure of their teams and overall organization is always developing. “The teams have evolved over time. We’re open to experimentation with our organization structure, because we want to continue to have as little hierarchy and bureaucracy as possible.”

Whether you’re a remote company or a traditional one, change is vital for scaling. “The tools and habits that work effectively at 80 people are radically different to what works at 300 people. You have no choice but to evolve the tools you use and your habits around them in order to scale well,” says Coby Chappelle, product designer at [GitHub](#). Even though established companies may not experience as big a need for scaling, it’s still a good idea to adopt new tools and habits to support productivity.

I’ve been working remotely, and managing a remote team, since 2007, but before that I had mainly worked in on-site offices--and some pretty great ones at that (with ping pong tables, stocked kitchens, and plenty of other cool perks). But, in thinking about these experiences, while I really enjoyed working on-site at certain times in my life, gone are the days when “the office” should be seen as the be-all and end-all for how work should get done. It has been surprising to me, but my experience working with a remote company has actually been more productive and supported a

fantastic company culture to rival any other work experience I've had.

Remote work is an environment that can help stifle office politics and distractions, while also supporting work-life integration and promoting teamwork and collaboration. For me, and for many others, it is just overall more satisfying, empowering, and effective. Still, the traditional office experience remains the norm for the majority of the workforce. But remember: 37 percent of people have telecommuted, and that's why these lessons are so powerful. Even though most people work in a traditional office environment, remote work is growing. Ideas like trust, freedom, feedback, change, and communication can go a long way to making any work experience, regardless of location, meaningful and fruitful, for both the company and the individual.

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