

# The art of effectively managing remote teams

By [Steven Pieterse](#)

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A recent PwC survey showed that 87% of employees prefer a mix of face-to-face and remote working, where working from home, in the office or from a co-working space is their own choice. Companies, too, have realised that this hybrid structure benefits people, profit and the planet; suffice to say the pandemic has certainly shifted our working environment for good (and good).



Steven Pieterse

The human resources industry has coined our new setup as the 'hub and spoke' model, which has (after getting used to the idea of meetings in your slippers, on a screen, with the odd dog barking in the background) been embraced by workforce and big corporation alike. The good news is, the pandemic has forced us into positive progress. Face it – we've spent more than 50 years married to a very old-fashioned, clock-watching way of doing things. While technology has advanced (computers to laptops, to rocket ships), mankind has been left in the office, waiting for a tea-break or to escape the confines of his or her desk and go forth into the traffic.

But, what about the manager in the middle? With the traditional office setup being a lot more conducive to managing people, team leaders now have a whole new set of challenges in managing staff in these environments, especially those who are a lot more comfortable in a sociable, personable old-school office.

At Metisware (being the geeks we are), we've always used the hub and spoke model, our teams have always worked remotely in seven different sites, relying on a strong central base (hub). In fact, some of our staff have never set foot in our office; key personnel such as accounts and administration have always been remote, with our engine room (development, infrastructure, media and virtual learning management) always in the office, relying on one another, the banter, the brainstorming and output benefits an office environment provides. With the Level 5 lockdown our 'office cog' was forced to work remotely, which required many adaptations and lessons learned. We've assisted many companies to move from Zoom-doom to an effective and valuable new way of working, discovering along the way the common difficulties and challenges that arise, and how to overcome them.

## **Communication let me down**

Problems in communication are the origin of most work (and life) set-backs. Poor communication results in mistakes, delays, conflict and unproductivity. Remote working exacerbates the potential for problems, especially if discussions happen via email, instant messaging or Zoom instead of face-to-face.

Having a strong communicator at the head of each team is critical. Some key staff (and human beings for that matter) relate better to computers than to humans so managers need to treat individuals differently. Create a communication 'rules of engagement' system and make sure that all your staff are using the same tools. We are huge proponents of one or two key business communication systems, whether it is Telegram or MS Teams for communication, Asana, Trello or Monday.com for project management; the most important aspect is that you need to make it easy for your teams to speak to each other and manage their workload.

Do not mix personal social channels with communicating business matters. Using WhatsApp to communicate with your team is a killer; it mixes business with pleasure and leaves granny wondering when her double blue tick will be answered.

Pick a system and stick with it. Yes, we were all thrown into the Zoom end, but a little research and homework will be very worth your while. We found that Monday.com works well for our team and our best instant messaging system is Telegram. MS Teams also has a great Walkie Talkie feature that our project managers use when working under pressure. Take the time to find your solution – flip-flopping through different tools will not only make your team uneasy but will also provide the proverbial alibi to escape responsibility.

## **Culture club**

Establishing a sense of shared purpose is not an easy undertaking in a hybrid working environment. The feeling of belonging and working together as a team requires significant connecting. Taking a few small steps towards making sure everyone feels included will go a long way towards keeping a team's mind-set positive.

We love the fact that remote working is super-flexible and our managers have had to adapt to different people's time-zones, peak periods and privacy. Our in/out system shows us who is available and working and who isn't. We don't clock-watch or check in at 8 and check out at 5, but we do give our people the freedom of choice and expect that they will deliver and deliver their best version. I've learnt that one of my key staff members produces incredible work when she's working in the evenings. Maybe her house is quieter or her creativity peaking later in the day; whatever the reason, I support the technique. Understanding that each person beats to a different drum will save you unnecessary stress.

## **I'll meet you at midnight**

Regular meetings are not important if the right framework is in place. However, regular meetings are important to keep the team going. Insist on video mode; that way you can check in on staff attitudes, moods and disposition. Encourage pre-meeting banter and chats, open the meeting early so that those who are online can chat while you wait. Do not start 'talking

shop' before everyone is online. Find fun things to do, questions to ask, tasks to assign or competitions to introduce in the virtual space. Encourage staff to meet at the company office or hub; face-to-face sessions are useful in terms of work as well as relationship-building. Arrange social sessions and meet-ups – some online and some in the flesh.

## **Micro row your boat ashore**

Building trust is paramount and you will not be successful if you micro-manage. I've heard horrendous reports of corporations using web-based monitoring tools to police their staff during lockdown. How demotivating!

Assign tasks and deadlines, open dialogue and allow your staff the freedom to speak up when they are struggling.

## **The show must go on**

There's a certain knowing grin on the unmasked faces of many an IT or tech team out there. Some of us have been ahead of the game when it comes to working virtually. The nature of our work (and often our personalities) means that we've been socially distancing for decades. The computer-nerds stuck at the back of the office are now shining through, and on bigger, better screens to boot.

Take a leaf.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Steven Peterse, a self-confessed tech geek and founder of Metisware, was inspired to pursue a career in IT whilst working as a teacher for most of his life. He began writing software in an attempt to make education more accessible and relatable, using technology. Steven hails from Cape Town but grew up and completed his schooling in Johannesburg where he spent his free time at the local PC shop - he taught youngsters and the elderly how to send emails and navigate their way around a computer. But, his first real job was as a print programmer for the Readers Digest Sweepstakes - yip, he was the guy that sent good old fashioned spam before it went digital! His career path took a few turns - he taught at the AAA School of Advertising and City Varsity for a good few years - Steven learnt that anyone can learn just about anything and that you just have to access their "learning socket". He did a stint at the UCT Graduate School of Business heading up their software development division and there he got it that absolutely anything is possible. Steven has a deep desire to save the world from itself through education and technology and thus the vision of Metisware was born - helping companies solve their business problems through technology; uncomplicated, smart, user-friendly systems and solutions for any and all business, done right, with his team of the ultimate tech-geeks, who really know their stuff!

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