


# Transparent Communications Vital to Managing a Remote Workforce

BY STEPHANIE SALAVEJUS, CPP



**P**rior to the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, the percentage of employers offering the flexibility to work remotely was just 20%, according to the Pew Research Center. A majority of employers just did not embrace the concept of working from home (WFH). The impact of COVID-19, however, changed all that.

The unprecedented government-mandated, stay-at-home orders resulting from the coronavirus forced employers initially hesitant about adopting remote working to move forward with an investment in technology and hardware in order to keep their operations running. Like many organizations, my company had concerns that remote working would lead to declining customer service levels and negatively impact a team who was accustomed to having access to the same equipment and team support typically available in the office.

My company's information technology (IT) team did an amazing job setting up access through a secure virtual private network (VPN) and providing the necessary hardware needed to work from home. However, it was not long before challenges quickly surfaced, which revealed why clear and transparent communication is important to establishing a good remote working policy.

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*Stephanie Salavejus, CPP, is Chief Operating Officer for PenSoft, an APA Ambassador, and the APA's 2017 Payroll Woman of the Year. She is also a member of the APA's CHAMPS Committee, National Speakers Bureau, Government Relations Task Force (GRTF), Emerging Technologies Subcommittee of the Strategic Payroll Leadership Task Force (SPLTF), and a member of the Board of Contributing Writers for PAYTECH. She is also an APA representative to the IRS Security Summit.*

### Virtual Meetings, Calls—The New Norm

Employees were concerned about using video meeting software to act as a virtual office because they were hesitant about being on camera while at home. Management met with the employees to discuss solutions to their issues and concerns, and explained that the purpose of the video is to see when employees are available for calls or breakout discussions.

While in an office, team members were accustomed to walking to a coworker's desk or calling to request a meeting. But for the remote working environment, the only means to see if an employee was available was through video.

Employees accustomed to calling other coworkers expressed their frustration when employees were not logged into the company's phone system to start the work day. As a part of the transition to work from home, my company installed an internet phone (IP) system that requires employees to log in to their accounts before receiving calls. It took time for non-public facing employees to learn this new behavior. Some employees who logged into the system at the start of the day often forgot to log back in after lunch or breaks. It took time for everyone to get used to the new hardware and the protocol for receiving calls. But with patience and time, most employees found the new IP system a better option than the desk phone.

Broadband Insights reported an increase in internet usage of 47% during the pandemic because of the new remote working environment. Many of our remote employees who live in rural areas or use a basic internet subscription reported having bandwidth issues. It was common for employees experiencing these issues to reboot the conferencing software when the screen froze. Employees complained that bandwidth issues impacted productivity and thus increased their frustration. Most internet service providers managed this growth in internet use, making the bandwidth issue easy to resolve with either a company investment in higher level internet connection or by providing employees with a work hotspot. While it was not 100% perfect, employees reported a better user experience, allowing them to focus more on their work and not the equipment.

### Employee Privacy, Security

Personal privacy was a minimal concern for most, and employees with young children ensured that using video conferencing did not invade their personal lives. In some instances, the IT group helped employees set up the video to limit access to the activities of family members in the house by incorporating the use of a virtual or blurred background that blocked coworkers from seeing inside the employees' homes,

providing an additional level of privacy. Other employees set up their office so that the video only captured the wall behind them. Finally, our management team strongly encouraged employees to turn off the video when not working or completely log out of the system to ensure their privacy.

Security also became a concern with the report of Zoom Bombing during a company's virtual meetings. This is a practice, which [according to the FBI](#), emerged at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and involved internet trolls disrupting Zoom meetings with pornographic messages or threatening language. My company's IT team addressed this issue by adding password-protected access to prevent unauthorized Zoom bombers. When meetings included outside third parties, we used a secondary video conferencing software and not our "virtual office" platform. Any change in the workforce resulted in a password change to join the virtual office.

### Invest in Training, Communication

Communication and training were instrumental in employees being comfortable with the new tools and resources now being used for working from home. In addition, investing in new and up-to-date equipment demonstrated that management was willing to invest resources to ensure a successful transition to working remotely.

This investment is paying off in several ways for the company. Employees use the additional features of the IP system and virtual conferencing platforms to better communicate with customers and coworkers. Customer relations specialists use the secondary conferencing platform to conduct private face-to-face meetings with customers transitioning to setting up their payroll services from their homes during COVID-19. The video software being used provided a level of assurance and confidence as the customers transitioned to their new home offices.

Our employees miss the personal interaction, but the simple use of an emoji or .gif between coworkers brings laughter and smiles. Many have set up "breakouts" on these virtual office platforms to chat and enjoy a bit of downtime with a coworker.

Employers developing a mutually beneficial work from home policy will win because remote working is here to stay. Communication and transparency, however, are vital for its success in order to build a stronger working relationship with your employees.

Everyone is working hard towards finding the right balance between in-office and working from home since it's now here for the foreseeable future. Your goal should be to offer your employees the flexibility to comfortably manage both their professional and personal lives better. ■