

# The Remote Work Revolution

## with Tsedal Neeley

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The rapid and unprecedented changes brought on by COVID-19 have accelerated the transition to remote working. City halls around the world have scrambled to take public hearings, city services, and much of the day-to-day work of municipal government online.

Over the past year, city officials and employees, like their private sector counterparts, have experienced the best and the worst of remote work. Gone is the stress and time suck of commuting. Some of us, for the first time in years, are sitting down for regular family dinners or meeting our kids at the school bus stop. On the other hand, blurred boundaries between work and non-work are causing us to work longer hours and multitask endlessly. Our work to-dos and household to-dos seem to snowball.

### WHY A REVOLUTION?

What makes this shift revolutionary is that the speed, scale, and intensity with which it happened completely disrupted our cultural norms of work and social interaction. We were drawn into an **unprecedented social experiment**. So, what are we learning?

Most research to date has looked at three major questions:

1. Does remote work make us more or less productive?
2. How do we establish and maintain trust in a digital environment?
3. What kinds of digital tools work best for which purposes?

### PRODUCTIVITY

The data shows that remote work increases productivity. Conditions that ensures that productivity is maintained include:

- **Autonomy matters.** If you trust your people to deliver on the objectives, letting them do so from home, on their own schedule, without the hassles of a commute or the distractions of office activity, there is a good chance you will see increased productivity.:
- **Working conditions matter.** Workers need the right tools and space to get things done. They need fast internet, reliable technology, and a reasonably comfortable and quiet place to work.
- **Connection matters.** Workers need effective ways to be in touch with one another across space and time to stay in synch and connected.

- **Rest matters.** For many, especially team and organizational leaders, hyperproductivity becomes a problem. Many people have added a day's worth of hours or more to already long work weeks. This leads to burnout and deteriorating mental and physical health.

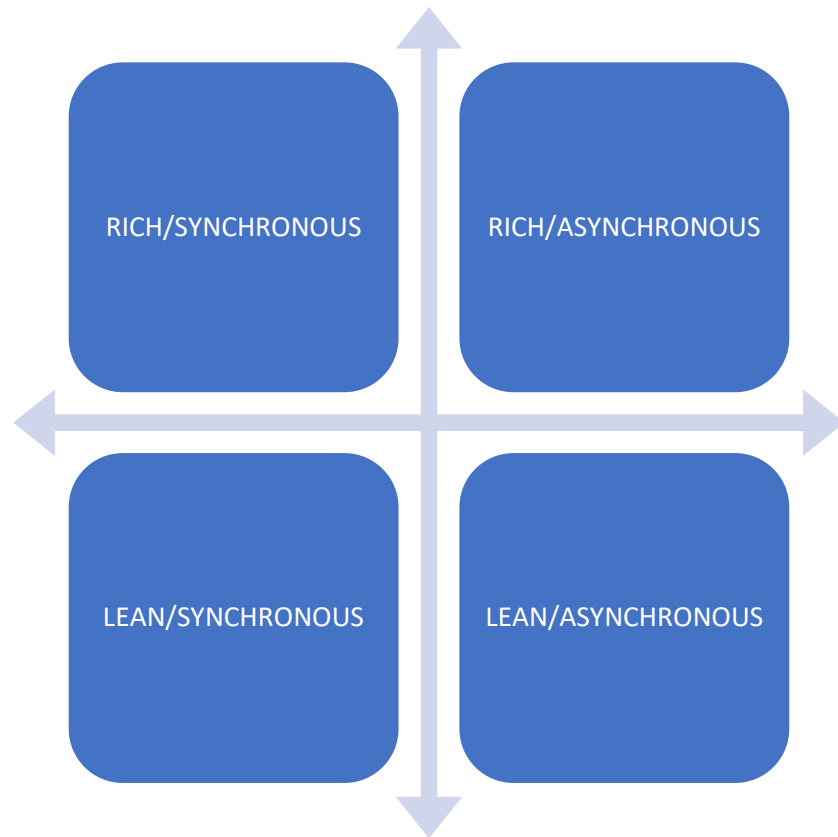
Leaders need to both **model and communicate boundaries**. The immediate crisis has waned, leaving us in a prolonged liminal phase, but the sense of urgency and associated behaviors linger, even as many of us are running on fumes. It is essential for managers and leaders to make clear that people are not expected to work in off hours in non-emergent scenarios.

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT TOOLS

Choosing the right tools for remote work can help you compensate for some of the challenges remote work poses.

There are five conundrums to address in choosing communication methods and tools:

1. **Mutual knowledge problem:** Our communications across a remote work space cannot assume the kind of mutual understandings of context and emotion that occur when we work in proximity.
2. **Social presence:** Similarly, remote work dissolves the collective energy and social signaling that comes from being in one another's presence—we lose much of the intimacy, urgency, or conviviality that we share when we come together to work on something.
3. **Geographical/cultural differences:** Remote work has us collaborating increasing across time zones and cultures. We have to be sensitive about these differences and make accommodation.
4. **Rich vs. lean media:** We have to make conscious and thoughtful choices about when to use what forms of media for communication. The leanest media is email, where the risk of misunderstanding is high. The richest media available during remote work, of course, is the video calls we have all become so familiar with in the last year, which have their own pitfalls. Research shows that looking at ourselves during these conversations adds an extra cognitive load—in other words “Zoom fatigue.”
5. **Synchronous vs. Asynchronous:** We have to understand when we need to work together directly on something and when we are more effective working in sequence or in parallel.



We have learned a lot about our own communication and collaboration preferences in the past year, but we also need to **understand others' preferences**. It is important to ask and have these conversations intentionally with one another.

### TRUST IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

How do we develop and maintain trust in virtual environments? It's important to recognize that there are **two types of trust** we need to work effectively together: swift trust and emotional trust.

**Swift trust** can be conferred more or less immediately between coworkers based on the understanding that our colleague is reliable, qualified, and competent to do their job. This is the kind of trust that keeps the gears of remote work spinning. Team members can generally operate well remotely as long as there is a sufficient amount of this kind of trust between them

**Emotional trust** develops more slowly, but it is the essence of good leadership. Leaders must earn emotional trust from those who work for them. Emotional trust is grounded in the belief that you, as a leader, care about the other person. It builds over time as we disclose what matters to us and show our fundamental humanity. This is the key to being approachable, likeable, and (therefore) trustworthy servant-leaders.

## LAUNCHES AND RELAUNCHES

What do you do when you form a team? You launch! This is the meeting where you come together, discuss shared goals, share key resources, clarify boundaries and constraints, and establish norms for how you will work together toward a common goal and protect [psychological safety within the team](#).

The future success of the team generally depends 60 percent on the team's composition, 30 percent on the launch, and just 10 percent on the actual collaboration effort. But in remote work, when we are out of sight, the risk of becoming out of synch is elevated.

One way to help make teamwork sustainable across space and time is through **regular relaunches** every 6-8 weeks. Groups and teams are dynamic. Composition can change. Context can change. Retaining cohesion means bringing the whole group together to regroup on a recurring basis.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Where do we go from here? We've learned what's possible to do remotely. We've learned what is hard or impossible to do remotely. What is worth keeping? What should we stop, start, and keep doing?

Surveys in the private sector show that up to 87 percent of workers want to retain remote work options. Of those workers, about a quarter are happy to work remotely full time. These numbers, however, are flipped for employers, who overwhelmingly want their workers back on site.

To find a happy compromise, four steps are recommended:

1. **Survey employees** anonymously to learn their preference.
2. Use what you learn to **develop a policy for hybrid work**. Think through the possible scenarios carefully: What are the critical tasks? What do we need to do really well to be effective? What's optimal for your particular workplace?
3. **Establish systems and structures to operationalize the policy**, and actively **revise your cultural norms**. How will you handle mixed remote/in-person meetings?
4. **Invest in the technology and digital tools needed** for a digital workforce and a virtual city hall. Consider hiring a chief remote officer, especially for a complex hybrid structure.