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# Crisis-driven Change: How to Prepare Your Team for Remote Work, Fast

**By Andrew Upah,**
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With new cases of coronavirus being confirmed daily, is your team ready to go 100% remote overnight? As major corporations clamp down on travel and ask employees to work from home to minimize the spread of the disease, remote working is having a moment.

A volatile stock market is underlining the need for agility in adversity— and companies with an existing flexible culture will transition to remote with ease. Making the leap to nomadic teams is no longer a trend, it's a survival skill. Here's what you need to know to go from 0-60 on the remote working speedometer in a flash.

## Navigating the Unpredictable

With full containment of the COVID-19 pandemic no longer possible in the US, it's anything but business as usual. In a bid to keep employees safe and halt the spread of the disease, travel bans are being implemented, conferences cancelled, and remote working enforced.

Pre-crisis, 43% of employees worked remotely in some capacity. For companies with existing remote cultures, the shift to a distributed workforce has been relatively straightforward. However, 44% of global companies don't allow remote work at all. And there are plenty of businesses without remote policies and practices to fall back on. However, the transition can be easier than you think when you overcome three common challenges.
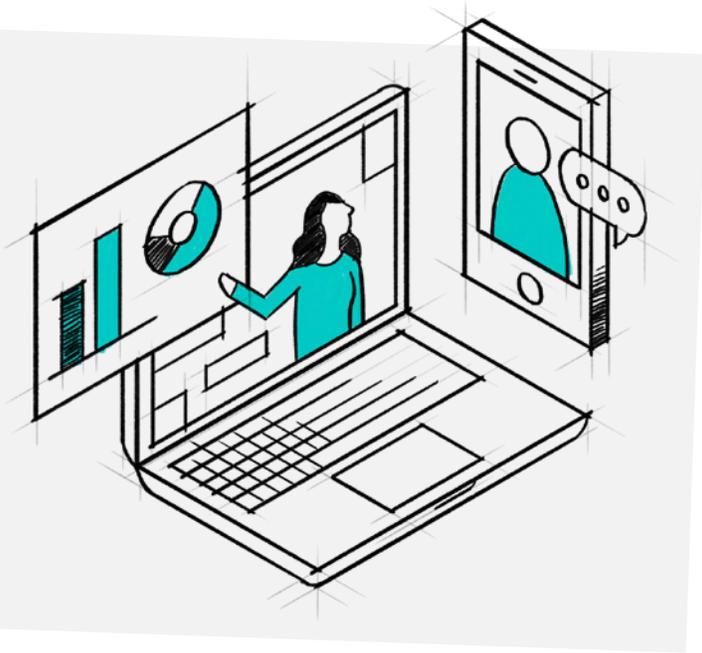


**43%**

**Of employees worked remotely some or all of the time pre-crisis.**

**44%**

**Of global companies don't allow remote work at all.**

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## 3 Challenges to Rapid Remote Transformation (And How to Solve Them)

Working remotely under any circumstances will be difficult or impossible for some such as manufacturers. But even traditionally "in-person" roles are challenging the status quo. For example, patient-facing healthcare professionals are experimenting more with "Telamedicine" services and video-based care where possible. Even financial institutions, which have otherwise shown next to zero enthusiasm for remote, are telling select staff to work from home.

The stance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is that it's not 'if', but 'when' the virus spreads across the US. The need for remote working will only grow. Adaptable leadership and elastic thinking will separate those who thrive and those who do not. Here are three of the biggest hurdles to switching into remote mode quickly:

# 1. Basic Hardware

Not all employees will have a laptop, suitable home office space or adequate internet. While sometimes headache-inducing, these issues are straightforward to address.
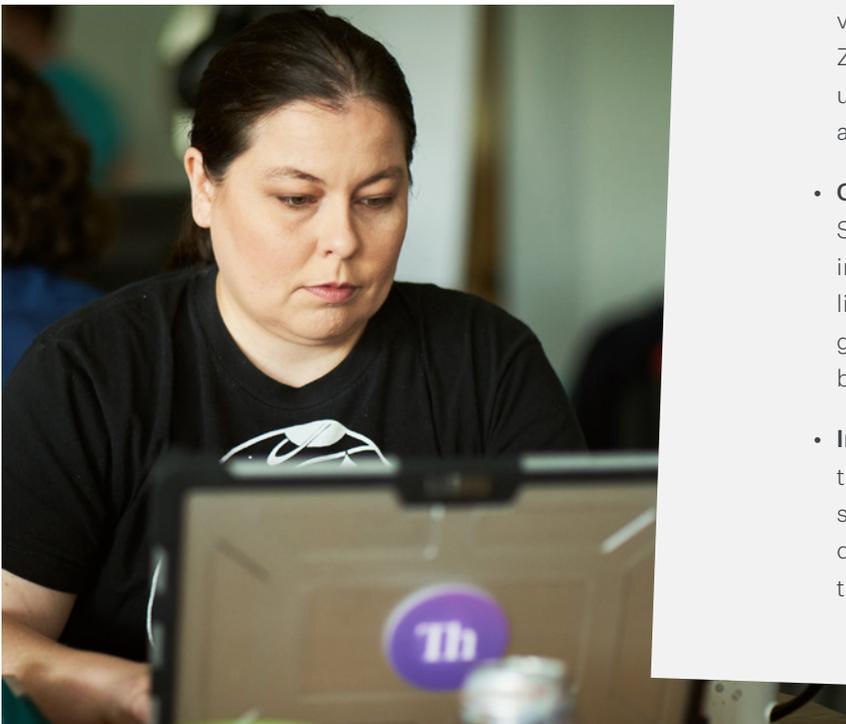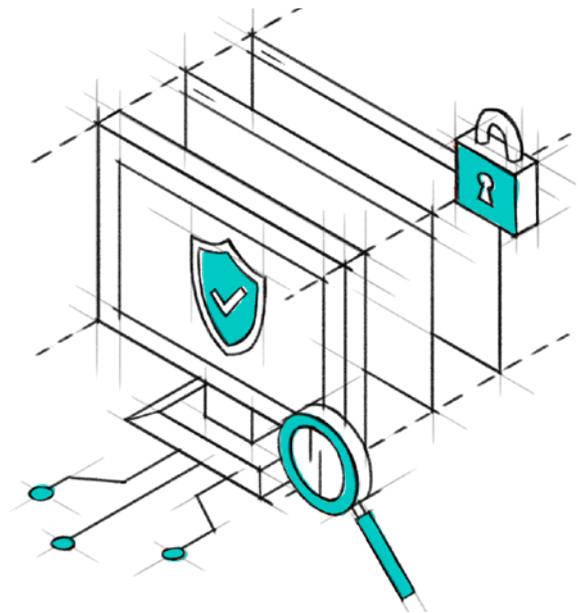


**QUICK FIX**

- **Hardware:** Issue laptops to employees who may not have them and consider other tools requisite to employees' day-to-day responsibilities.

- **Technology:** A remote team—particularly one that's scaling—needs the right tools with which to communicate. And speed is of the essence.

  - **Team Tools:** Stay connected with group collaboration tools like Slack and Microsoft Teams; share real-time documents via the Google Suite; video chat using FaceTime, Google Hangouts, Zoom or UberConference; and organize projects using simple but effective Trello boards. All are easy to set up and free to low-cost.

  - **Conferencing:** Google Voice, WhatsApp, and Skype are still effective, low-cost options for international calling. Free conference call services like UberConference allow large, international groups a full suite of videoconferencing benefits, including screen share.

  - **Internet:** If home Wi-Fi bandwidth turns out to be an issue, move closer to the router, bribe screen-addicted kids to minimize slowdowns during work time, or get a dongle and switch to ethernet for better connectivity.

## 2. Security

A distributed workforce adds complexity to your organization's cybersecurity. Ideally, all employees would be issued company laptops with the appropriate VPN and login to access your network securely from offsite. People rarely knowingly expose companies to risk so good communication goes a long way. If there's a chance that employees are unaware of the security risk posed by unsecured networks, explain why they should avoid using public Wi-Fi or comparable networks.

### QUICK FIX

- **Interim measures:** Depending on the nature of your business, a bring-your-own-device approach may or may not be appropriate. If you're unable to provide company-issued devices with security measures in place then your only options are to a) allow people to use their own hardware or b) cease functions that may compromise security until you can provision secure devices.

- **VPN:** Have employees log in using an encrypted virtual private network (VPN).

- **Multi-factor authentication:** Passwords are vulnerable to being stolen or easily guessed. Multi-factor authentication requires additional information such as a fingerprint, pin number or the answer to a security question. Two-factor authentication is commonly used by many organizations.

- **Cloud-based storage:** Store work applications in the cloud so that data remains on your company server wherever employees are located. Just remember to rescind access when employees move on.

- **Protocols:** Training isn't going to happen overnight but it's wise to make employees aware of best practices so they can take the right precautions (like not sharing sensitive information across unsecured public networks).

# 3. Trust

No longer working alongside your team brings a new set of challenges. For example, how will your boss know you're working and that your colleagues are engaged? Trust is key and there's little room for micromanaging. If you're anxious about making the transition to remote, employ a few tried and tested practices to set the stage for success.

QUICK FIX

Lay the foundations for smart and supportive virtual work environments:

- **Daily standup:** Typically held one or two times each day, this short meeting provides a forum for team updates and issue escalation. It also builds accountability by setting individual expectations and reporting back on results.

- **Weekly share outs:** Track team progress and learnings via Slack and email, or short conference call. Record them and give all team members access.

- **Video check-ins:** Social connection and camaraderie remain vital to an effective workplace, but new tactics will be required when you go remote.

- **Emphasize results:** Establishing a results-based culture improves clarity throughout the team, allows for alignment on expectations, and simplifies measurement of success.

# Employee cheat sheet: 5 ways to set yourself up for remote success

**Establish good habits:** Whether at your apartment or local coffee shop, distractions are everywhere and discipline is important. Noise-canceling headphones might help you focus in a loud cafe, but at home, a quiet space with limited background noise helps keep conference calls professional. Treat video calls like in-person meetings: avoid multitasking, look professional, and consider what's in the frame.

**Communicate more:** When remote, the importance of good communication doubles. You're working without non-verbal cues like body language, expression or tone of voice. It's harder to detect when a colleague is stressed or distracted. Also, your boss can't walk by your desk to see that you're working. To maintain team rapport and accountability:

- Leverage video during meetings.

- Take extra care to convey meaning and sentiment in emails.

- Share regular progress updates with your manager and across your team collaboration channel.

- Take a few minutes to chat informally at the beginning of calls, or set up a dedicated time to catch up outside of work.

**Never assume emotion is implied:** It's all too easy to misinterpret someone's true intention over email and text. To avoid confusion, take care to ensure you're direct but not rude, include a descriptive subject header, be polite, and use emojis with discretion.

**Be responsive:** Quick responses to communications show that you're engaged—an easy way to build trust in a remote environment.

**Commit to deadlines:** Meeting deadlines is an easy way to demonstrate that you're reliable and consistent whether you're in the same room or at four corners of the globe.
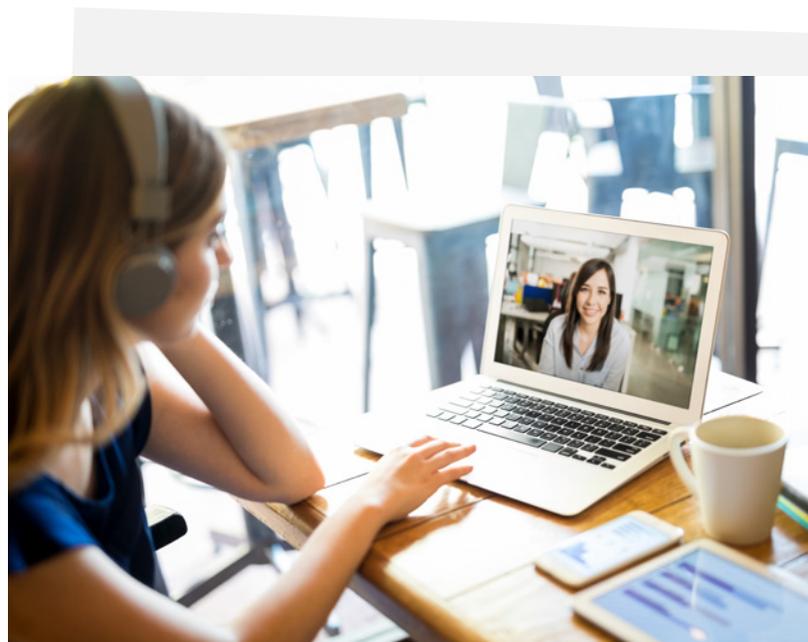
# Manager cheat sheet:
# 5 tactics to get your team remote-ready overnight

**Commit:** Regardless of your comfort level managing a distributed team, view it as an opportunity to up your game. Embrace early disruption and focus on implementing the infrastructure, revised processes and new rituals that will enable your team's success. As the world moves towards more distributed models, your efforts won't be wasted.

**Set clear objectives / get faster feedback:** Be prepared for new team dynamics and a different way of operating. Emphasize clarity in the direction you provide. Solicit frequent feedback from your team about how things are going, what you can do to better enable them, and if new processes are effective. Don't be afraid to fail fast and try new tactics.

**Find the right tools:** From online collaboration tools like Slack, Microsoft Teams, Asana, and Trello to conferencing platforms like Zoom, UberConference, and Google Hangouts—there's no shortage of options for staying in touch. You'll also need hardware essentials like laptops and smartphones. A great first step is to identify what your team will need, complete an inventory, and fill in the gaps.

**Quality time vs. 'water cooler' time:** Passing colleagues in the hallway, chatting before or after meetings, going to lunch—these informal encounters are tough to replicate virtually but they're vitally important. Set daily intentions and reminders to make time for friendly exchanges, but stick to a timeframe. Create separate Slack channels for casual conversation, dedicate time on your calendar for office hours or try a town hall-style meeting.

**Establish highly effective new habits:** Maintain trust and accountability remotely by establishing short "stand-up" meetings morning and afternoon. It's part of an agile philosophy that many teams already employ. Lead by example. Ask team members to share their goals for the day—requesting help where needed—and later, what they achieved. Send Monday morning emails to orient on high-level goals and deadlines, host weekly team get-togethers across your conferencing platform, and encourage regular employee feedback to find out what's working and what's not.

Ultimately, have confidence in knowing that you've hired good people. They have everything they need to do their job. Now step back and let them get on with it.
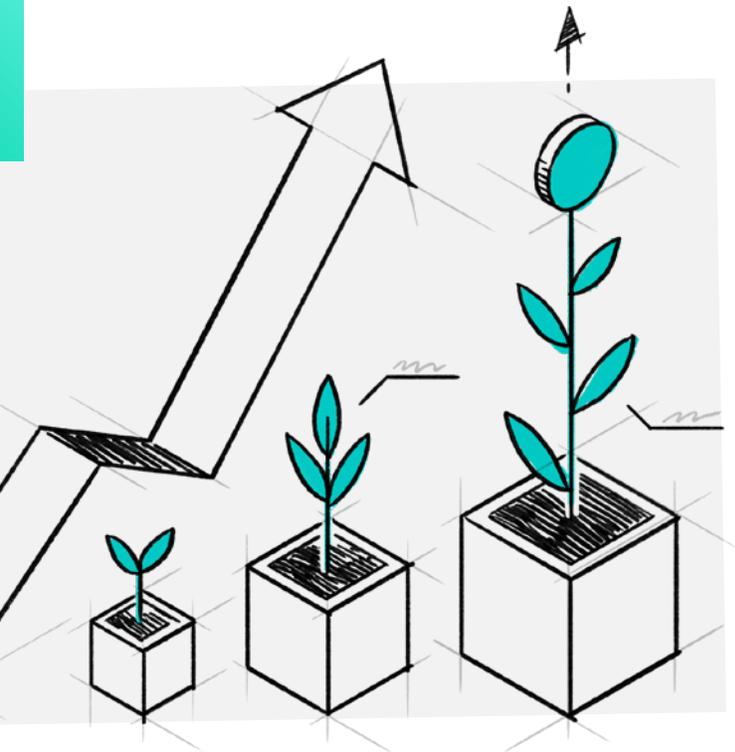
## Capitalize on crisis-driven change for long term benefits

As COVID-19 spreads, business leaders will continue to face tough decisions. While 100% remote companies are still rare, concerns for employee safety and business continuity are driving a market-wide shift to remote working—a shift that [many predict could stick for the long term](#). And while we won't pretend that remote transformation is without its challenges, it may be easier than you may think. In an uncertain world, remote could be the remedy.

Theorem is an innovation and engineering company that advises and partners with clients on product strategy, engineering, design, and culture to build and launch technology-driven solutions for their most complex problems.

Theorem designs and builds effective frameworks for innovation that transform the way businesses think about and solve problems from the inside out.

Recently named one of the top-40 fastest-growing remote companies, Theorem is a 100% remote organization.

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Andrew leads Theorem's marketing efforts as it ushers in a new era of consulting and redefines what it means to serve as an innovation partner to the world's biggest companies. He's worked remotely his entire career and is an avid supporter of distributed work models.

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## Let's Talk

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