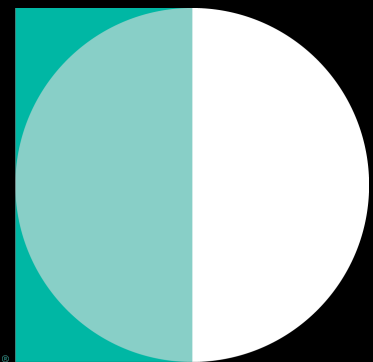


# Guide to working from home

By roundPegz CEO  
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theDesk

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# Introduction

**Black Swans are extremely rare events, so the probability of a specific Black Swan event occurring is low. However this does not mean that the probability of any Black Swan event occurring is low.**

Right now Black Swans appear to be arriving in flocks. In the past year, Hong Kong businesses have had to struggle with the US-China Trade War, social unrest and the Coronavirus outbreak. Instead of wallowing in the misery of the situation, this article examines what can be learned from the experience. Its aim is to help business leaders to understand how best to support people so that they can work well in today's disruptive world, and become more future-ready in doing so.

It examines:

1. The dimensions of flexible and remote working;
2. The human desire for routine and what a good routine would look like;
3. Why the modern workplace disrupts such routines;
4. The possible downsides of remote working;
5. Possible learnings in leadership, organizations, strategy and transformation.

# 1. Dimensions of flexible and remote work

The obvious starting point is will employees be productive when working from home during the crisis?

This is a tricky question to answer because there is already a great deal of disagreement in the productivity gains to be made from remote and flexible working. The other things that need to be addressed prior to making any clear predictions are time-spatial job crafting and media job crafting.

**Time-spatial job crafting** is providing employees with the flexibility to work from different spaces and at different times. In some instances, this improves productivity. In others, it doesn't. In most cases, when remote working is first offered, people reject it because they are too worried about the optics, and how their manager and team mates might react if they do so. In such cases, productivity does not improve. Until the gap between perception and availability closes, productivity will not shift. It can take more than two years for this gap to reduce to the level at which productivity gains can be observed.\*

In the current circumstances, however, there is zero gap between the availability of working from home and the perception of working from home, because there is no choice. People simply have to work from home, so they do. Consequently this enforced, no gap situation, offers a learning opportunity to employers looking to cross the remote working bridge to leverage the situation and short-cut the pain of implementation.

However, there is a proviso.

**Media job crafting:** Employees working from home in the present crisis are unlikely to have access to appropriate choices of communication media. If their company hasn't already invested in a technology that enables them to communicate effectively, then no productivity gains will be realised. In fact, with the wrong or too few tools in place, productivity might even suffer. Given the enforced nature of the work-from-home experiment, organizations looking to implement flexible working should take the opportunity to find out from their remote working staff what is missing from the current suite of technologies and then remedy the missing elements.

## 2. A natural human routine

One of the impacts of flexible working spaces is the inherent need of employees to have routine and structure in their day.. This is highly impacted by any shift to open-plan, flexible or activities-based working. Until they learn to adjust their routines to the new environment, productivity will not improve. It might even go down if old routines remain embedded and new routines never manifest.

In the present enforced work-from-home situation of the Coronavirus crisis, employees will no longer be able to rely on established workplace routines. In order to combat the stress that will cause, following a routine that aligns with the human body clock or circadian rhythm is a possible solution

- **Morning:** the blue-light of morning and low levels of melatonin mean this is the ideal time for focused work. Spend the morning working on core tasks that require concentration. If you have a young child at home and both parents work, share the childcare over a five-hour period. This allows each of you 2.5 hours of uninterrupted, focused work, which will result in high levels of productivity.

- **Lunch:** we humans are social animals, so the enforced lack of social connection throughout the day will increase the likelihood of mental distress. To prevent this, turn your phone off at lunch and eat with your family.
- **Early Afternoon:** after lunch, you will begin to feel more lazy and lethargic. This is the time to do shallow work (emails, admin, messaging, etc), which require little concentration and can be done reasonably well even in distracting environments.
- **Mid-Afternoon:** once your food has digested, your alertness will peak again for an hour or so. This is the time to return to any high-concentration work. Let your children watch a movie and get to it before your alertness fades again.
- **Late-afternoon:** you will need social communication if you are to stay energetic and focused, so schedule virtual meetings. Use tools like Skype, Zoom or Hangouts to see and talk to your colleagues. Don't just talk about work either. Instead include some social chitchat, find out how they are coping and talk about your own difficulties too.

- **Evening:** rest and recuperate, exercise, avoid blue screens, and make sure you get plenty of sleep. These simple rules, which are based on the proven fluctuations of your circadian rhythm, will help you maintain a daily routine while keeping healthy during this crisis.

If all remote employees can stick to such a schedule, it is likely that productivity will improve. Potentially it will improve significantly. Initial feedback from some of my advisory work in APAC has suggested this is the case.

Engagement might also go up. People who do 'dirty jobs', such as garbage collection, bond much more deeply than those who do 'clean jobs'. Covid-19 has added some dirtiness to all of our jobs. As a consequence, we social bonding and associated engagement, even in physical absence, should go up. Again, feedback from advisory work in APAC suggests this is the case.

*\* This is not to say that a flexible working and open-plan office policy doesn't offer any benefit in these two years because the cost-savings can be significant. It just means there needs to be an ongoing and concerted effort into closing the gap for productivity gains to be realized.*



### 3. Why is this so difficult at work?

The immediate response to this argument is shock. How can I possibly suggest that 2.5 hours of focused productivity will be enough? In response, I'd argue that this is probably more than most employees achieve each day in many contemporary organizations.

In the digitally transforming workplace, three things inhibit productivity.

- **Drag:** Drag happens when traditional workplace practices drag emerging ones backwards, harming productivity in the process. At the heart of this are emails and business-as-usual (BaU) meetings. If the average entry-level manager were to read (not reply to) all emails they receive in a week, and prepare for and go to all the BaU meetings they are invited to, it would add up to a 48-hour week. Not much time left for productive work.\*\*
- **Distraction:** In the contemporary workplace, people switch tasks every three minutes and switch context every ten-and-a-half minutes. Once they've context-switched away from the core task, it takes circa half-an-hour to return to it. Over the

course of an eight-hour day, that means they only spend 126 minutes (slightly over two hours) on their core task. Some of these 126 minutes will involve trying to remember where they left off so they don't make mistakes when continuing, especially if the task is cognitively complex.\*\*\* By now I am sure you can see why an uninterrupted 2.5-hour working window would probably result in productivity improvements. A five-hour one might be spectacular.

- **Drama:** People are so worried about giving the impression of being productive, even when they've finished their core tasks, that they will sometimes continue to sit at their desks in order to look as if they are working hard. Much of this activity merely involves being visible on email chains, which increases drag. The result is increased tiredness and disengagement, both of which have negative impacts on productivity. *Note that if there is a big perception gap about working-from-home, impression management can cripple the performance of a remote worker, as they spend so much time trying to show they are working, they don't actually do much work.*

Minimizing any of the above will boost productivity. The enforced work-from-home experiment is going to reduce all three, perhaps considerably. The output should be more productive work done to a higher standard.

## 4. The downside of remote working

Although I suspect that productivity on core tasks will go up when working remotely, there will be some downsides to working from home for long periods of time. Deep, focused work is not the only work that needs to be done if an organization is to operate at the highest level. Collaborative, learning and connection work are also necessary.

**Collaborative work.** Collaborative work could also be described as the art of complex problem-solving, the skill that the World Economic Forum regards as the most vital for contemporary organizations. It involves a group of people interacting together on complex problems, which are difficult to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are tricky to recognize, and have multiple possible solutions.

Done well, collaborative practice engenders creativity, critical thinking and cognitive flexibility in psychologically safe conditions, resulting in a collective intelligence far greater than the capacity of any individual in the room. Although it is possible to collaborate in online forums, the quality of communication is

almost always compromised. Working together in a space that is custom-designed and equipped for collaboration is going to produce more imaginative ideas, increased levels of sophistication, and it will also boost the social bonding that facilitates quick and error-free productivity.

**NB:** *One of my colleagues, Iva Sladic Keco, will soon publish an article explaining why I'm wrong and collaborative working at home is not always compromised.*

**Learning work.** An organization that cannot learn is not going to cope well in a world of disruptive change. Neurologically, two things need to happen for good learning to occur. Firstly, you need to be able to learn from multiple sources and types of media. This helps encode the information into your brain. Secondly, you need to have access to different environments in which to learn and share the information. This helps trigger the information so you can recall it again with little effort. Something you learned from reading an ebook in your bedroom will be difficult to recall in the workplace a month later.

Working from home will restrict you from accessing a full-range of learning media. You will be able to connect with many digital

sources, but few, if any, analogue ones. There will be almost zero possibility of moving between different environments in order to learn and share knowledge. Consequently, what you learn while working from home, you are likely to forget when you return to work.

**Connection work.** Connection work happens in the informal and semiformal moments and spaces of a usual working day. It might happen over lunch or coffee, or at the water-cooler, or at the bar enjoying an after-work drink. In essence, it is when people talk about work in a social setting. There are three benefits to this..

- **Wellness:** Humans are social animals, and connection work helps with wellness. People who regularly connect with other people are generally in a better psychological and physiological shape than those who don't.
- **Bonding:** Breaking bread together bonds people. Strong bonds in a team improve productivity in all members. Teams that eat and drink together on a regular basis are 10-50% more productive than those that don't.
- **Innovation:** Finally, there is the possibility of boundary-crossing innovative ideas

emerging when people from different backgrounds and interests connect socially. While it is difficult to predict when and where this might happen, cross-functional connection plays a significant role in its possibility.

*\*\* The maths - the average employee spends 3.5 hours per day checking work emails, receives 126 emails per day, and has 199 left unopened at any one time (circa 22 hours if all get read). 37% of the working week is spent in meetings, with circa 30% more time spent preparing for them (circa 26.7 hours).*

*\*\*\* While you might think you are capable of multi-tasking across many cognitively complex tasks, the only historic evidence of anybody being able to do this is Mozart, who would compose multiple musical pieces simultaneously. It's possible you are the Mozart of your career choice, but how much would you want to bet on it?*

## 5. Possible learnings

The measurable part of performance (speed and error rate during production) does not need to be visible. With the right media connections, knowledge workers will probably be more productive in their bedroom or on a beach than they will in a formal workplace.

The non-measurable part of performance needs to be visible. Cross-boundary ideation, sophisticated problem-solving, and productivity-boosting social bonding all occur when people are together in formal, semi-formal and informal workplace settings.

- **Privilege routine** - employees will not be productive unless they have some degree of control over their routine. Ideally, routines will follow body-clock patterns, and organizations should strive to create an environment in which this occurs.
- **Privilege collaboration** - while employees might well be more productive when they work from home, if they aren't given the opportunity to collaborate (whether formally or informally) then the sophistication of solution-building and ideation is likely to decrease. Consequently, it is important to build regular time for collaboration and



connection into the week, and to ensure employees recognize it is not an opt-in activity.

- **Privilege appropriateness of media** - employees working from home cannot boost their productivity unless they can access appropriate media. If IT policy prevents this, then companies will not gain any benefit from remote work. A rich selection of media will also better enable learning.
- **Close the gap** - it will take time and effort to close the gap between availability of flexible work, the perception of flexible work and the uptake of flexible work. **Don't give up too soon.**

# Epilogue

There's one final piece of learning concerning strategy and leadership. The Coronavirus is a Black Swan that is challenging the conventional way of doing business. All the linear processes that underpin traditional business activity are being disrupted. Strategic planning is wiped out, and leadership vision is beginning to look foolish.

In preparation for the next, inevitable, Black Swan, future-ready organizations need to have non-linear processes in place to cope with the resultant volatility and unpredictability. The current chaos means organizations have to act with rapidity to stop irreparable fall out. There is very little time for anyone to stop and think and the shock to the system risks being fatal for some companies, especially those that rely on linear processes.

To be more prepared for future chaos, it would be useful for companies to develop some form of experimental practice, in which employees perform mini-probes into better ways of working on an ongoing basis, and devise safe-to-fail experiments to test their ideas out. At one level, this comes with a wealth of possible advantages, such as increased levels of

engagement, ongoing small improvements to the business that will add up to a competitive advantages over time, and to the possibility of a game-changing idea emerging from one of the experiments (IKEA's idea of flat-packed furniture came from such a moment, as did YouTube). At another level, it creates an entire workforce capable of and used to coming up with innovative ideas, something which is going to be hugely beneficial in a crisis.

# About roundPegz

**roundPegz** is a cultivated community of disruptive thinkers and rebel talents helping leaders and companies better manage the turbulence of and cope with the Black Swans of the contemporary business environment.

**roundPegz** fellows are leaders in the science of work, the art of community and the incubation of ideas. They either have experience running disruptive and collaborative projects within global organizations or written cutting-edge research on leadership, organizations, strategy, and transformation. Our goal is to help business community think differently about work to attract high-potential talent, develop high-performance teams, and disrupt their market before it gets disrupted for them.

# About theDesk

**theDesk** is a cutting-edge interpretation of the co-working movement. While conventional co-working spaces focus primarily on interior design, we are invested in something much more exciting: building communities and enabling business growth, for members and for our wider neighborhoods. Here, people make connections that matter. We curate an immersive co-working environment and diverse experiences that allow ideas to cross-pollinate, businesses to scale, and everyone to reap the full benefit of the sharing economy.

# About Dr. Richard Claydon



Dr. Richard Claydon is the CEO of roundPegz.

His research on the dimensions of high-performance during long-term organizational transformation has been reviewed as “outstanding”, “daring and imaginative” and “a touchstone for the

future of management”.

His MBA module on the “Future of Leadership” for Macquarie Business School’s online GMBA is one of the highest-rated fully-accredited leadership modules on the Coursera learning platform.

**Want to know about other roundPegz fellows and their work? Check [this newsDesk article to learn more.](#)**

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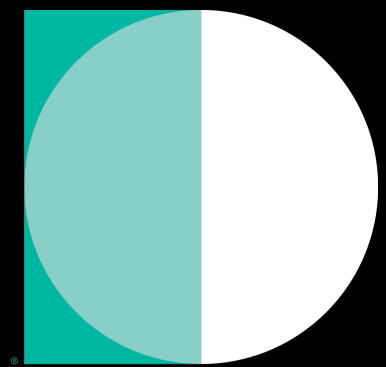
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