

OOO, Out of Mind: The Unintended Impact of Remote Work on Critical Communication

From Short-Term Fixes to Long-Term Shifts: **Why Remote Work Needs New Solutions**



→ Effective communication in the workplace is key for teamwork and engagement between employees. Conversations spur creative thinking, grow connections, build rapport, and drive productivity. But sometimes in a work environment, it is necessary to have not-so-pleasant conversations. Whether a teammate isn't pulling their weight or a manager needs to let an employee go, difficult conversations are a reality in the workplace.

Just because these conversations are necessary doesn't mean they always happen right away, in the way they should be conducted, or even at all. According to a [recent report from Bravely](#), 70% of employees avoid difficult conversations with their boss or colleagues. Even worse, the conversations that are happening aren't all that effective either. A [recent report from Quantum Workplace](#) found that only half of the conversations between employees are "great."

Another layer compounding the challenge of these conversations is the sudden, unexpected rise in remote work. The shift to working from home last year was a catalyst to what is likely a permanent change. This shift has introduced new challenges to having complicated discussions by pushing difficult conversations to new channels like Zoom. The platform will likely survive the pandemic and is poised to become a permanent feature for conducting annual reviews and other critical communications.

In addition to a distributed workforce, a spotlight on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) has raised questions of whether virtual communication tools are adequate or appropriate for addressing highly charged topics.

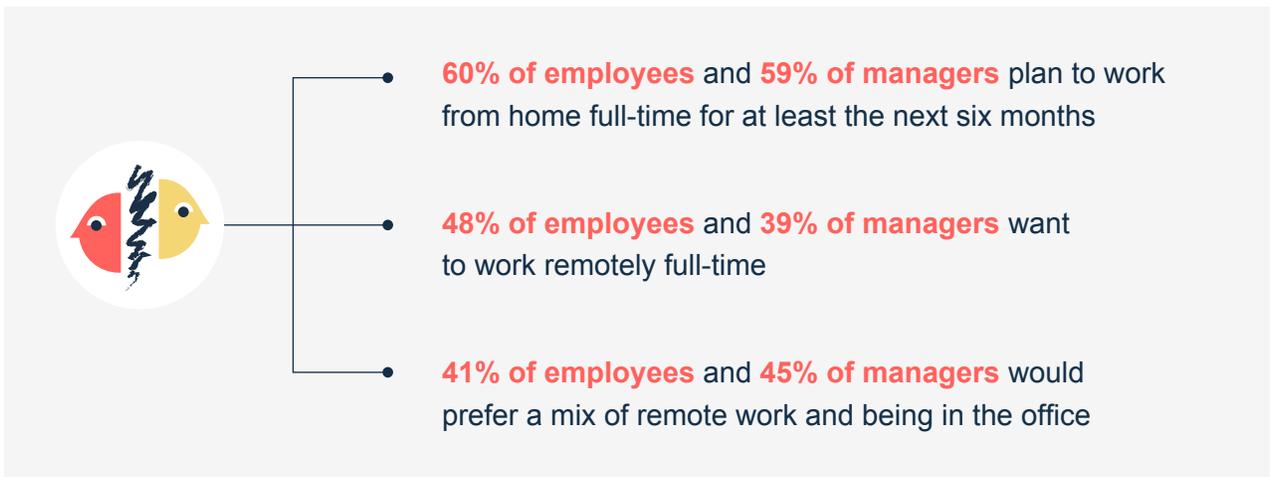
In January 2021, Mursion conducted a dual survey of 400 full-time employees and 250 full-time managers at companies with at least 2500 employees to explore how the shift to a more distributed workforce has changed how employees communicate, whether new, virtual forms of communication have helped or inhibited the initiation of critical conversations, and whether a virtual environment is an effective medium for critical discussions regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Remote Work is Showing Signs of Permanence



Only **9% of managers** and **13% of employees** plan to go back to the office full-time in the next six months

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced most professional workforces into home offices, many saw this as a temporary solution to a short-term problem. Now, however, nearly a year into the work-from-home revolution, it is looking far more lasting than many initially believed.



And while a majority of employees and managers do not plan to return to the office in the near future, many are looking at a long-term hybrid workforce solution to accommodate both sides of the WFH rift.

Old Tools Fail to Accommodate New Conversations



The preferred channels for frequent, day-to-day communication among colleagues and clients for **employees** are **email (71%)** and **instant messages (53%)**



Managers prefer **email (58%)** and **video conferencing (54%)**

With many out of the office and remaining so, workers are changing how they communicate. A walk down the hall to ask a question has been replaced by pings on instant message (IM) services, video-conferences, and, most prominently, email.

The dominance of email for critical conversations can be problematic. For sensitive interactions like reviews and conflict resolution, emails rarely present the opportunity for open dialogue and problem-solving.



The Path of Least Resistance: Managers and Employees Dodging Critical Conversations



The switch to remote work has paved the way for employees and managers to either set aside or completely avoid conversations critical to their professional development and interpersonal relationships, such as reviews and conflict resolution.



29% of employees say when there is a conflict while working remotely, they don't resolve the conflict and just let it go

Only **6% of employees** and **15% of managers** involve HR to resolve conflicts

When difficult conversations do happen, it's not an easy process for managers or employees. Confronting problems head-on isn't happening in the remote work environment, and HR is being left out of the loop almost entirely. When employees and managers are engaging in difficult conversations, they are doing so reluctantly.

70% of employees and **55% of managers** say they are either avoiding having difficult conversations or having them reluctantly

Just **20% of managers** and **12% of employees** said they have had a conversation with a colleague about issues around diversity, equity and inclusion or DE&I¹, even in one of the most charged atmospheres around these issues in recent memory

¹ DE&I - diversity, equity and inclusion. For full definitions, consult the appendix.

Companies Rely on One-Way Communication to Address DE&I Issues — Or They're Just Not Communicating About Them At All

1 in 4 
large companies
(2500 employees or more)
has not formally addressed
issues surrounding DE&I



In those informal conversations, managers and employees are commonly addressing the subject in video conferences, where they can talk face-to-face, but some managers reported discussing the subject via email.

A majority of both parties reported feeling that these virtual tools were completely appropriate channels on which to discuss important topics such as DE&I.

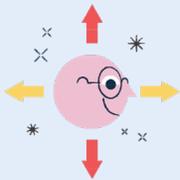
- **68% of managers** said they have had an informal conversation about DE&I, while just **39% of employees** said they have
- Of those who have had informal conversations about DE&I, **46% of managers** and **41% of employees** said they had them via video calls, while **44% of managers** said they had them via email
- **97% of employees** and **90% of managers** said they felt these channels were appropriate for having conversations involving DE&I

Companies Viewing Long-Term Change Through a Short-Term Lens



More than **1/3 of companies** with more than 2500 employees don't have a long-term strategy to accommodate long-term remote work

What began as a reactive solution to a temporary crisis is now cemented into workplace culture. Despite all evidence pointing to some form of remote work becoming standard, more than one-third of large companies do not have a long-term remote work strategy.



80% of employees and **82% of managers** said their company created a communications strategy to accommodate the sudden shift to remote work



However 56% did not name resources or training for employees as a part of that long-term comms strategy

A majority of employees and managers reported their company created a communication strategy to help with the sudden shift to remote work. However, few companies are dedicating resources to more training for employees as a part of their long-term strategy.

→ Remote Work's Long List of Potential Problems Requires New and Creative Solutions

The unexpected shift in remote work has brought some positives to the workplace: more flexibility for workers; the ability to recruit far and wide and find the right talent; as well as the opportunity to develop more innovative models for remote interactions.

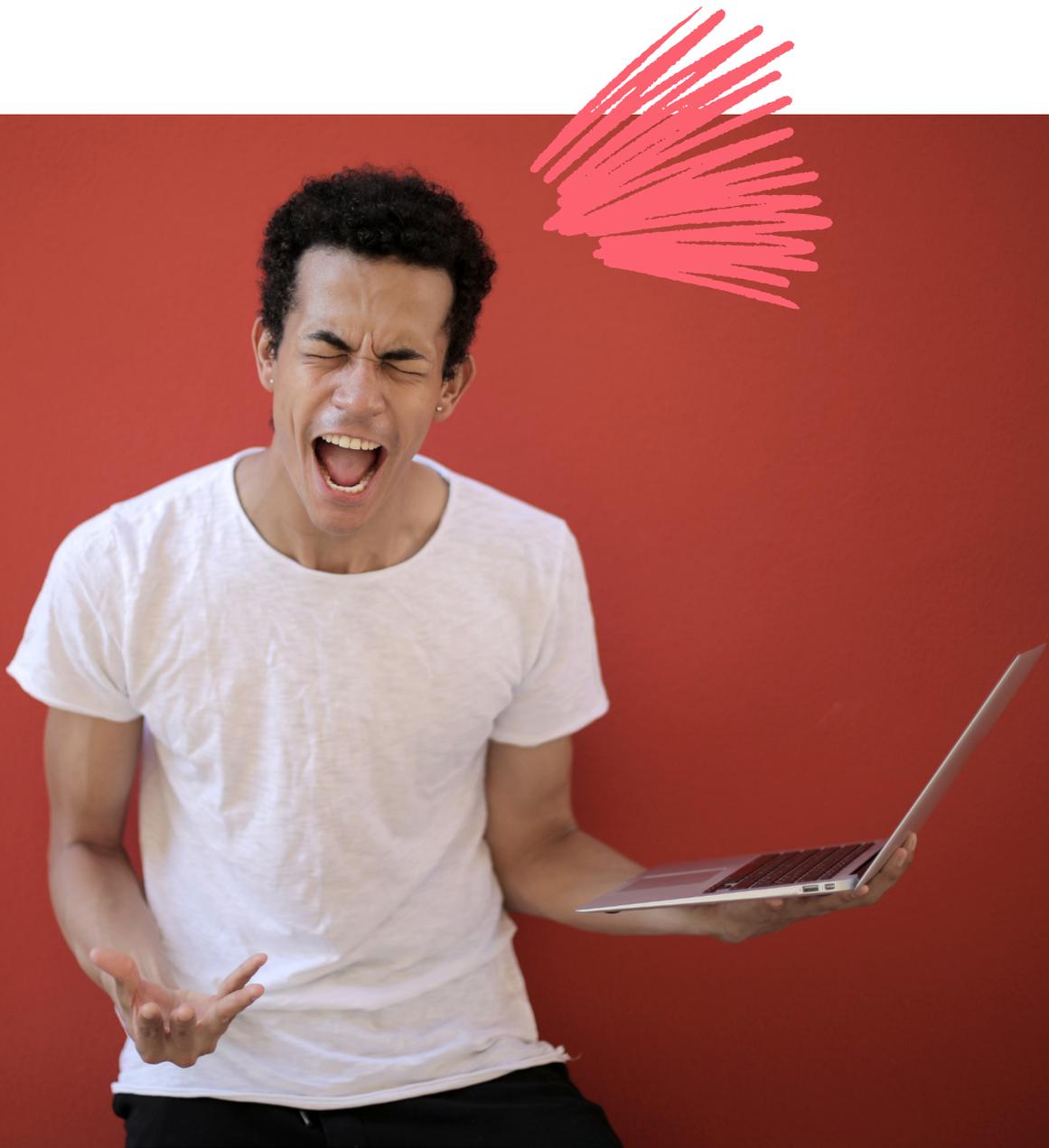
With the majority of the workforce planning to retain some version of remote work for the foreseeable future, the professional sector is faced with adjusting to not just a short-term shift but a long-term change in where and how work is done. A diversified, distributed workforce combined with an ongoing international health crisis has forced new conversations around health and wellness and has made topics as common as travel plans taboo. Additionally, the conversations essential for professional development are forgotten. When it comes to conflict, HR is left out of the loop.

Employees and managers could be avoiding these conversations for a variety of reasons. Whether it is the added logistics of scheduling and conducting conversations virtually, not being able to have quick check-ins, or being able to circumvent conversations easily in a dispersed workforce, avoiding these conversations can be detrimental. If a company is unable to broach difficult conversations, a company cannot grow, either as a whole or its employees, specifically when it comes to approaching sensitive topics like DE&I issues, which require open, two-way dialogue to institute real changes.

As conversations — and even the channels on which they are conducted — shift, so do the tools needed to train employees and managers on how to best approach sometimes sensitive topics, such as conflicts or issues surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion. Be it new internal communication channels, new remote workstyles, or new messaging around DE&I issues, further training is necessary to properly address these incoming scenarios beyond one-way, top-down declarations.

Business leaders and managers, especially those in human resources, are in a unique position to revolutionize in-and-out-of-office training for their employees going forward. However, as the data suggests, not every business intends to restructure its training and development to accommodate this new type of workforce. They are simply choosing to let the sleeping beast lie.

The switch to remote work catalyzed a change in workplace culture never seen before. We now know that this shift isn't temporary but very much a permanent readjustment. Band-aid solutions and old ways of training will no longer suffice. It is up to the business leaders and HR managers to get ahead of the new hybrid-work era and identify and target solutions to bridge this training gap. This means new approaches to training and permanently changing how we communicate day-to-day. Without new and evolved training methods and ways of approaching difficult, and often necessary conversations, even the most unified hybrid workforce can — and will — become fragmented.



METHODOLOGY

In January 2021, Mursion surveyed 400 full-time employees and 250 full-time managers or higher at companies with 2500 or more employees in various industries. This survey was completed online and responses were random, voluntary and completely anonymous.

APPENDIX

Diversity

Diversity is the representation of all our varied identities and differences (race, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, tribe, caste, socio-economic status, thinking and communication styles, etc.), collectively and as individuals.

Equity

Equity seeks to ensure fair treatment, equality of opportunity, and fairness in access to information and resources for all.

Inclusion

Inclusion builds a culture of belonging by actively inviting the contribution and participation of all people.