



## PSYCHOLOGY OF VIRTUAL WORKING PART 2: CONNECTING WITH EACH OTHER IN VIRTUAL WORKING

As social distancing becomes the new norm for the foreseeable future, the Covid-19 pandemic is threatening our very way of being and interacting. Virtual working poses challenges for communication, primarily because it offers us fewer opportunities to talk, network and simply connect with colleagues. The subtle nuances of non-verbal cues that facilitate deeper connection, understanding and influence can be lost and the organic daily interactions that reinforce a sense of wellbeing, belonging and community in the organisation are missing.

### How can we best support and connect with colleagues and teams, at a time when our people face personal and social disruption?

In terms of how best to connect with colleagues and conduct business meetings virtually, the current context of enforced virtual working presents conflicting evidence for us to consider. Research demonstrates that facilitating virtual meetings via face-to-face video calls, enables us to pick up on 'rich information' i.e. social, non-verbal and feedback cues which are particularly valuable when conducting uncertain and nonroutine tasks<sup>1</sup>. The benefits provided by video conferencing software in supporting our virtual workplaces are undeniable. However, the experience of constant video calls over the course of our working week, is for many proving to be energy draining, with recent publications noting the emerging concept of "Zoom Fatigue"<sup>2</sup>. Information processing over video and the need to engage in a "constant gaze" can result in us feeling uncomfortable and tired.

Helpful considerations when scheduling your virtual week include:

- On longer video calls, build breaks into the agenda so people have an opportunity to reset.
- While video calls are highly beneficial for virtual connections, consider when switching to a phone call will be just as effective.



- Consider your transitions between meetings; constant virtual meetings mean we miss out on the natural transition cues we would experience with physical meetings (e.g. simply moving from one physical space to another). Try to have some time between your virtual meetings so you can create the space to transition and prepare.
- While periods of silence can feel awkward on video call, silence is a normal component of conversation and interaction. Resist the urge to always fill the silence and move on quickly, why not suggest taking a moment to reflect on and consider items discussed before moving to the next agenda item?
- The pandemic disruption is affecting people in different ways; everyone's situation is unique, why not schedule virtual coffee breaks with colleagues to check in on how they are doing outside of work commitments?

### What is it that feels 'missing' from our virtual interactions?

While video conferencing software is a great enabler of positive virtual interactions, and certainly helps us to pick up some on some non-verbal cues, the reality is that video calling doesn't capture the complexity of human interactions. If we consider the Psychology of Influence and the role that Reciprocity plays in how we perceive and understand others, the virtual world offers less to reciprocate. Take for example the subtleties of emotional expression. Psychological research tells that as humans we have a tendency to align emotionally with those we are interacting with by mimicking and synchronising facial expressions, vocalisations and postures, known as 'Emotional Contagion'<sup>3</sup>. On a virtual meeting, it's far more difficult to naturally perceive these subtleties and arguably more difficult to align with and influence those we are interacting with. Additionally, in a virtual meeting, we are missing the contextual clues from the physical world. For example, a meeting to discuss a promotion you've been offered; in 'normal times' your leader may have discussed this with you over a nice lunch, or in the boardroom with the great view – the physical location signifies something, it signifies a moment of praise, recognition and celebration. Similarly, in the virtual world we're missing the fundamental sense of the other person/people (movement, gestures, postures etc.); we're missing all of the sensory input from their physical context.

### So what can we do to counteract these limitations of virtual interactions?

We can use our words more consciously and deliberately. Knowing that virtual calls make it harder to perceive and reciprocate emotions and deeper meaning, be conscious to question others and articulate yourself with this in mind. Why not open and close meetings with an

emotional check-in “How are you feeling? / How are you feeling about...”. While you might not be able to bring a colleague to lunch to celebrate a promotion, or welcome a new starter to the team over coffee, make a conscious effort to express this verbally.

In addition, a useful technique is to try creating more of a shared space by trying to understand the other person’s situation more (e.g. show via camera or ask: where are you/what’s in view etc.). This activity can create more awareness of others’ context, contributing to a more realistic and connected feeling.

### **Boundaries & Work Intensification**

For many, the Covid-19 Crisis has resulted in our home becoming our full-time workplace, which presents another complexity for us to navigate. While research<sup>4</sup> indicates that virtual working is often associated with higher organisational commitment, job satisfaction and job-related well-being, these benefits can come at the cost of work intensification and a greater inability to switch off<sup>5</sup>.

With this comes the blurring of work-life boundaries. There are individual differences and preferences in terms of work life balance<sup>6</sup>; some – the ‘integrators’ - are in favour of keeping the lines blurred and like to have a lot of easy transitions between both work and home domains, whereas others - ‘segmentors’- prefer very clear boundaries between work and home life.

Four useful tactics to manage boundaries between work and home life are outlined below; use these tactics to brainstorm with your team how you can individually and collectively design a virtual working environment that is optimal to each members’ preferences.

**Physical:** Focus on creating a dedicated physical environment where you can immerse yourself in your work. Few people have the luxury of an enclosed private office, so this may mean manipulating physical space to define a border between work and home domains. Also noteworthy is research on ‘Encloded Cognition’ suggesting that the clothes we wear influence our thinking<sup>7</sup>; getting dressed for work, even when working remotely, gets us in the right frame of mind.

**Behavioural:** These include managing information technology such as switching your phone off at close of business, logging off computer systems and shutting down the laptop, thus removing the temptation to check messages.

**Timing:** Time-related strategies could include walking the dogs at 6pm or completing a lunch-time workout at 1pm. Unsurprisingly, commitments to other people appear to produce stronger boundaries than being accountable only to oneself. In essence, create a routine for yourself; start and finish times, breaks etc. Behavioural and Timing strategies will support individuals to create ‘stopping cues’ in their routine, which may be less likely to naturally emerge in virtual working.

**Communicative:** Communicative strategies involve setting expectations, for example asking family members to knock before entering your workspace. Share your strategies and preferences with your colleagues and learn from each other.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

While there are valuable psychological insights to draw on as we navigate the Covid-19 Crisis, the nature of the pandemic means that there are many unknowns. The unexpected nature of the situation we find ourselves in means we don’t have best-practice, evidence-based guidelines to follow as we adjust to working and leading virtually amid a global crisis. Our situation requires us to listen, learn, experiment and show compassion and empathy for ourselves and others as we strive to do the best we can do.

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- 2.How to Combat Zoom Fatigue, Harvard Business Review, 2020
3. The Social Neuroscience of Empathy, The Year In Cognitive Neuroscience 2009, New York Academy of Sciences.
- 4.Assessing the growth of remote working and its consequences for effort, well-being and work-life Balance. New Technology, Work and Employment. Felstead and Henseke 2017. Doing more with less? Flexible working practices and the intensification of work. Human Relations. Kelliher & Anderson 2010
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- 6.Balancing Borders and Bridges: Negotiating The Work-Home Interface Via Boundary Work Tactics. Academy of Management Journal. Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep 2009
- 7.Adam, H. & Galinsky, A. D. (2012). Encloded Cognition. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology. Volume 48, 4, 918-925

