

Working In Contemporary Teams

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Lecture - 17

Welcome to lecture 3 of module 4. In the previous lectures, we had seen what are agile teams and how they work. The last contemporary team that we are going to see in this module is that of remote and hybrid work teams. So let us see what we are going to discuss in this lecture. First, we will be looking at what is remote work and what is hybrid work. We will be giving a brief history of remote work, that is, previous occasions where industry has tried dabbling with remote work.

Then we are going to look at how we can design teams so they can successfully work remotely or hybrid work. Then we are going to look at what are the challenges people face in remote work teams and what the future holds for remote work teams. Remote work is a flexible working arrangement where organizations permit their employees to work from a location outside of office. Remote work is also known by other names like work from home, work from anywhere, telework, remote work, mobile work and distance work.

If a person is working primarily from his or her home, then it is called as work from home. But a person could also be teleworking, that is, using or leveraging technology to work from a location outside of the office. So if the person is working from home using technology that becomes telework. There is another kind of remote work as well where employees are sent to the offices of the organization of their customers and they work there. So all these come under the ambit of remote work.

And research has its own name for each kind of work which makes it a little complicated. But there are nuances in terms of what kind of characteristics there are in this kind of and each kind of work and what are the challenges that employees face in each kind of work. So it is important to take the nuance and the context into consideration when we are looking at different types of remote work. Another important point which I would like to stress here is that remote work is different from virtual work. The focus often when we talk about remote work is that the person is working in a location outside

of a professional setup.

However, if you look at virtual teams or virtual work, the focus is on employees who are working in distributed locations or different locations but within the offices of the same organization. The focus of research and practice when it comes to virtual work and virtual teams is to understand how technology can be leveraged to help people work together when they are distributed across different locations. However, when we talk about remote work, there is an additional constraint. It may not be just technology but it may also be that a person is working from home. The challenge of working from home and connecting to other people to technology is quite different from working in another office and connecting to other people using technology.

So let us dive in and see what are the characteristics of remote work and what are the challenges of working remote. But before we go there, let me introduce you to hybrid work. The concept of hybrid work rose as an antidote to the lack of social interactions employees face due to remote work. When people began to work remote, they began to really miss out the opportunity to meet their colleagues and to also have those informal communications and interactions which make office life so pleasurable. And therefore, organizations came up with the concept of hybrid work.

That is, it is a flexible work model where organizations offer employees the chance to work remotely for part of their work and work the rest of the time in the office premises. So here, the employees have the flexibility as to when they are working and where they are working. In terms of where they are working, they could be working at home and maybe smaller satellite offices of the organization or even shared working spaces. They may also have the liberty to have flexible timings as in they have to clock in say eight hours of work every day or they have to work till the task is done compared to having to work or being available to other co-workers from say eight in the morning to five in the evening. So they have flexibility in terms of deciding when they work and where they work.

If we look at the history of work, people began working individually from their homes. It was with the birth of the industrial revolution that people began to come together in cities and towns and work together in groups. After that, with the invention of the computer and also networking, it became possible for organizations to offer employees the opportunity to telecommute as early as 1970s. Many huge organizations offered some of its employees the ability to work from their home using the telephone as early as 1970s, but it did not take off. The technology was not strong enough to help the team members communicate and coordinate as much as they would have loved to.

Therefore, after the 1970s, telecommuting saw a small drop in popularity. In the 1990s and the early 2000s, there was a lot of focus on entrepreneurship. People starting new companies in their garage offered people a chance to work from their homes again. And the start of the revolution also began to give a lot of importance to working in places other than the office buildings. In the 2010s, 2011 to 2013, another great dip was seen in remote work.

Many organizations cancelled the opportunity for remote work from their employees, citing low productivity. Many organizations were very vehement that their employees should come to their office regularly and in certain timings. The next level of popularity for remote work happened during the 2020s, that is with the hit of the COVID. That is when remote work took off like never before. Of course, the technology was advanced enough to help us communicate, collaborate and coordinate with each other.

And also the advent of the cloud, which meant that almost all information could be stored and accessed remotely, which allowed people the opportunity to work remotely. So this is a very brief history of remote work. And you can see here that there are certain peaks and valleys in which organizations seem to adopt and then later let go of remote work. However, one of the outcomes of COVID has been that a large majority of organizations have seen that it is possible for their employees to work productively from their homes. Therefore, work from home and hybrid work seem to be work in progress for both researchers and practitioners.

However, is remote work and hybrid work the lasting solution to all problems which people face? No, of course not. Collaboration between remote employees and their integration into one single team, which is cohesive is extremely tough unless we have very explicit structures and practices to maintain the team cohesiveness. There are certain simple processes which we take for granted, which cannot happen completely and effectively in remote work. For example, socialization of new employees. Employees who are joining an organization new may feel out of touch with the organization and they may not completely imbibe the culture of the organization unless they have a chance to come and see some of the employees and see the working spaces.

There has to be explicit policies and structures which help the employees communicate, coordinate and collaborate with each other. Organizations also have to provide tools which help people collaborate and it is very important that we train the employees on how to use these tools to collaborate well. Often, employees come into collaborative environments with the intention to collaborate, but they do not have an idea where to start. And this is where training is important to help the team members learn how to collaborate effectively. Another very important aspect which we need to keep in mind is

that remote and hybrid work is not suitable for all kinds of industries.

The adoption of remote work has significantly gone up after COVID, but not all industries have adopted remote work. The highest level of adoption of remote work is in the service industry where as of 2022, 17% of the organizations had had some part of their employees doing remote work. Then came healthcare, finance and finally my industry, the education sector. Only 7.5% of the education industry is working remote as of now.

Therefore, different industries adopt remote work on different levels and it is not possible to work remote in, work in remote in all the industries. So, given the advantages and the compulsions of business and business environment which force our organizations to adopt remote work, how is it that we can go about designing effective remote teams? Well, first let us look at the structure. Organizations go on a continuum wherein at one end of the continuum you have remote only organizations and the other end we have remote friendly organizations. Remote only organizations say that all teams at all times work remotely while remote friendly organizations give their employees the flexibility to work part of their time at least from a location outside the office. Another important aspect when it comes to structure is the proportion of team members who have the remote or hybrid option.

Sometimes you would find entire teams working remotely and on other occasions you would see that one or two members of the team are working remotely while the others are co-located. Remote workers who are working on site are some examples for this. So, you would see a team of 10 people, two of them will be working in the customer location while the rest of the team members will be working in the parent organization. The last aspect when we have to decide the structure is the choice for hybrid. Is it hybrid at will wherein team members can decide when they come into office and when they stay at home and they just have to communicate this to the rest of the team or is it a hybrid split week where the team members decide what days of the week they will come to the office and what days of the week they will work from home.

So, it could be like they decide that they come on the first three days of the week to the office and work the rest two days from home or vice versa or it could even be that in a month only one week they work from the office while the other three months, three weeks they work from their homes. Another one is the hybrid manager scheduling where the manager decides when the team members come need to come to office to work and when they can stay at home and work. So, it is not really just about when you work in office and when you work at home but also another important aspect as to when you would be available to the other team members when you are working from home. That is

during what hours of the day would you be available to answer queries or have team meetings with the rest of the team members. So, these are the considerations that people need to keep in mind when they are designing the structure of the remote team.

The second important aspect of remote work is leadership. Now, traditional leadership depends upon physical proximity, social and organizational propinquity and networks of open channels of communication. Alas, when we come to remote work none of these are present completely. For example, you are no longer in a position where you can turn around and face your boss. It is not possible that you can walk out of your office and into your boss's office to check whether he or she is available for a quick talk.

So, it becomes difficult to be able to have access to the leaders as well as to the other team members when you are working in remote work. So, what kind of leadership structures would be effective in remote work? Research shows us that contemporary leadership styles are more effective when it comes to remote work and these contemporary leadership styles include shared leadership and transformational leadership. So, what are the strategies that leaders need to adopt when they are managing remote teams? Well, first of all, they have to focus and make sure that team members are frequently communicating with each other. They also need to leverage technology to make sure that people are connected and are able to collaborate. The leaders have to be astute enough to realize that the technologies which serve them very well when they were co-located is not going to work in remote teams.

An email could have served the purpose when you are co-located because it is very likely that you might meet your team member when you go out for lunch and you can share that same information. But when you are in a remote work, how do you ensure that you have connected instantly with the other team member? Well, you have to go in for instant messaging. So, it is very important that leaders realize that technologies which are effective in co-located work may not work that well in remote work. Another important aspect which leaders need to keep in mind is that they have to provide emotional and social support to their remotely located team members. It is so easy for us to empathize and relate to people when we meet them face to face and frequently.

However, when we are not having that kind of access to our employees because of remote work, managers have to go an extra mile to offer emotional and social support. Managers also have to ensure that they promote work-life balance for their employees. Now, remote work provides a lot of advantages to employees. Like for example, it reduces the amount of time the employees spend in commuting, but it also kind of blurs the boundary between professional and private life and therefore, the managers and the leaders have to step in to make sure that there is work-life balance for the employees.

And another additional aspect which they also have to take care is to ensure the well-being of the employees.

Employees who are working remotely might feel isolated from the rest of the team and may have anxiety and other issues and therefore, leaders have to explicitly ask the employees and help them to ensure that their well-being is maintained. So, from the last few slides, we would have seen that technical factors play a huge role in ensuring that remote work goes on smoothly. It's very important to look at the adequacy of tools. Different tools are required when compared to co-located teams for carrying out coordination and communication. For example, instant messaging becomes more important as a coordination and collaboration tool than when considering email.

Collaboration tools like shared documents on the cloud also help employees to work simultaneously and also keep track of how they are improving on their work. A very crucial point here is to ensure that the technology that we are using is easily accessible at home. Challenges in bandwidth in many cities and villages can become an additional burden for the employees and the organisation has to make sure that there is proper access to technology at the homes of the individual workers. And it's not just important that they should look at what kind of tools they are using, but also the competence of using these tools. Like I mentioned earlier, most people do not know how to use many of these virtual tools and therefore, training becomes very important to show them special features in each of these tools which can make work that bit more easier to do.

Another consideration which organisations need to keep in mind is how to structure the office space. Now the thing here is that you cannot have fixed cubicles assigned to individuals anymore because they are not going to be using that space all the time. So how do you split the office space among different people? Well, one way is to make sure that the workspace is flexible so that when different people come into the office at different times, they can use this common working area effectively. Another thing to keep in mind is to provide workspaces for team meetings and informal meetings. For example, in hybrid work, managers try to assign work in such a way that when the employees are working from home or working out of office, they can do independent work which does not require collaboration.

And when the employees come into the organisation to work in the office, then they usually have to work on something which requires the entire team or part of the team to be together. So some part of the workspace in an office should now be dedicated to holding team meetings and encouraging informal gatherings. So let us look at some of the tools which can help in remote and hybrid work. Instant messaging, video conferencing, mobile work management platforms, project management tools and productivity and

collaboration tools become really important for remote work. And I have given examples for some of these in the slide.

Next, we look at what are the different processes which are seen in remote teams. Traditional theories of teamwork are usually based on traditional teams which are co-located or virtual teams. However, the challenges faced by employees and managers in remote and hybrid teams are different from those faced by employees in traditional teams. So the established methodologies and practices which are followed in traditional teams may not be very effective when it comes to remote teams. Let us see how the different team processes change when it comes to remote teams.

When we come to communication, organizations need to have a clearly defined communication policy. It could be simple things like availability of team members. If you are working in a hybrid team and part of the time you are going to spend in a location away from the office, then it has to be clearly spelled out what time the person would be available for team collaboration meetings or to answer queries from other team members. It should also be clearly spelled out as to when we can expect a reply from a team member who is working remotely. It should also be specified as to what kinds of tools should be used for different kinds of communication.

That is, if we are scheduling a meeting, would it be more easier to block the team members time and space on a calendar or would it be more appropriate to send him or her a mail saying that we are going to have a team meeting. This is something which the team has to decide together and implement as a team. Also, the team leaders and the team members have to encourage regular meetings and regular communication. At least some part of the work has to happen face to face to help the team members develop team knowledge. That is, an understanding about the strengths and weaknesses of each team member.

Having a good knowledge about the team and not about the task can be very useful in helping team members face challenges related to the task. That is, if you are facing a problem or a challenge and you don't know how to solve it, who is the person that you can turn to in the team to help you. This kind of understanding and this kind of knowledge only builds when there is some amount of face to face communication or when it is programmed explicitly and coordinated with all the team members using some kind of virtual tool. The strong pillars of coordination are open communication and mutual adjustment.

Two very difficult things to achieve in remote teams. Well, we can program explicit coordination using shared documents and explicit policies. However, implicit

coordination becomes difficult. Please recall what is implicit coordination. Implicit coordination happens when team members can predict the future requirements of the task or other team members and take action before somebody else verbally requests help from the other person. For example, you see that one of your team members is struggling with a problem and you offer to help before that member reaches out to you or that person reads a clarification and you go out and speak to him or her before he or she seeks the clarification.

So this is implicit coordination and implicit coordination can become extremely difficult in remote work. So how do we go around this problem? Well, one, we can choose stars according to the location. We can assign independent activities, that is, activities which team members can do independently without depending on anybody else when they are distributed. While we can give activities which require collaboration and coordination to co-located teams. Or tasks and activities which require collaboration can be done when the team meets for in-office while independent activities can be carried out by team members when they are working from their remote locations.

Another important consideration which can be taken into mind is the team size which is involved in a particular meeting. If the team is going to be large and the same amount of same kind of information has to be shared with all team members a large virtual team meeting can be very helpful. But if the team size is small and a high degree of collaboration and coordination is required it would make more sense to have the team members come into office and speak face to face. Organization-wide work practices can also be very useful in managing remote work. For example, there should be guidelines for planning and approval.

Something as simple as taking a leave when it is easily defined, (sorry, when it is clearly defined) can help the team members manage their hybrid work time. Also, organization should have clear policies as to how team members can manage everyday occurrences. Like for example, if a few team members have planned to come into the office to have a team meeting where will they meet? How easy is it for them to identify a space where they can sit and have the discussion? Or is there a facility wherein they can log in and block a space or a room where they can have a team meeting? So these are some of the organization-wide work practices and policies which organizations can adopt to help their remote teams. What are the outcomes for remote work teams? Research and organizations are giving mixed signals about how performance has been affected because of remote work. There are organizations where individuals claim that their efficiency and effectiveness have actually improved because of remote work.

However, many organizations have now taken a call and asked some of their remote

workforce to report back to office. So what is the real impact of remote work on employee efficiency and effectiveness? Well, we are still learning and we will probably keep on learning for a few more years to come. However, research has given us some indications of how it might pan out. There is a clear improvement in performance in terms of efficiency and effectiveness when the teams are able to balance their office and remote work. That is, earlier I had said that to improve communication we should allocate tasks according to whether the team is going to be working remotely or whether they are going to work in office.

When managers and team members are able to make this balance proper, then it seems to improve the performance of the team. There also doesn't seem to be a significant difference in terms of innovation between remote teams and co-located teams. Research also gives us some insight as to how we can achieve satisfaction in remote work teams. When team members are able to learn and leverage the digital technology to work with the team members and to socialize with team members in an informal manner, the level of satisfaction of individual team members goes up. However, people who are not able to leverage or learn how to use new technologies actually struggle when they have to work remotely.

Another important aspect which we have to look at in terms of performance is the outcomes for individuals who work remotely. Well, at the outset, remote work gives better work-life balance for individuals. Not only does it cut down the time which individuals spend in commuting, but it also helps them take care of whatever personal factors that are affecting their life. It's also very important to concede that remote work does afford more time for focused work for individuals. That is, individuals have now the independence and the freedom to completely focus on their work as they are not going to be disturbed by anybody else when they work remotely.

However, there are some other aspects as well. Remote working can blur the boundaries between work and life. Some people end up working more because they are not able to understand when to stop working and when to start taking care of the family. They are not able to identify a barrier between their personal life and their professional life. Another problem which individuals face is the lack of social connections with their co-workers which leads to high level of isolation. These informal connections and social connections are so important especially when employees face challenges which they naturally will when they are working on something. Who do we turn to for help when we are stuck with the job? Who are the people who are most likely to help us when we are facing challenges? These are all very important information which people gather through informal and social interactions at the workplace.

When this gets cut off, it can become extremely challenging for people to reach out for help. I had said that remote work affords more time for focused work for individuals when they are remotely working. However, working from home or working from spaces other than professional space can pose certain challenges as well. The main challenges are that of space, furniture and technological issues. Since we are working from home, what happens if a child or a sibling or a parent or even a pet decides to crash into your party and say hi to your team members? It can afford serious distractions to the team members when they are having a team meeting.

Another important constraint could be that of furniture. Not all team members or not all employees in an organisation may have comfortable furniture to sit and work for long hours. Therefore, organisations have to ensure that they give employees enough budget to equip themselves properly when they are at home. The last issue here is that of technology. That is, do the networks which are there available at the employee's house afford the bandwidth for using all the technologies which the organisation has adopted? So, these are some of the benefits and challenges which individuals will face when they do remote work. What are the challenges which organisations are going to face when they implement remote and hybrid work? The first question is that of deciding which jobs can be offered for remote work.

Can all jobs be done remotely or can some part of some jobs be done remotely? Research and practitioners are still identifying what are the best kind of jobs which can be offered on remote and hybrid work. And the question is, how do we break up the time between in-office and remote work? Like I said, some very good directions given by research is that we should break up remote and in-office work taking into consideration the characteristics of the work at hand. Another big challenge which organisations are going to face is how to create a collaborative team which has a good sense of team identity. One of the last challenges is dealing with the effects of remote work on individual team members, which I discussed in the last slide. So, research offers us some very clear indicators as to how we can manage remote and hybrid work in the future.

When it comes to where you have to work, it would be best to keep in-office work for those tasks which require collaboration, while keeping those tasks which require the individual to work focused for remote work. That is, when individuals are working remotely it should be on those tasks which allow them to work independently and focus their time and energy solely on that task. The question of when is next. Asynchronous work should be assigned on those tasks where again the employees are working independently to boost employees focus, while synchronous work should be done when it is important to boost coordination. So, in-office work for tasks which require collaboration and coordination and remote and asynchronous work for those tasks which

require independent work and where the employees have to work in a focused manner.

To summarize, in this lecture we have looked at the last kind of contemporary teams which is the remote work and the hybrid work teams. We looked at a brief history of remote work and we also examined the team design factors and the technical factors to build a good remote work team. Then we looked at how team processes change when compared to traditional work teams and at the final level we looked at individual level outcomes of remote work for individual level outcomes of remote work. As usual, I leave you with some interesting topics that you may want to look up. Research is still very much nascent when it comes to hybrid work and practitioners and researchers are still figuring out what are the mechanisms and processes which are going to be effective for hybrid work.

Please continue to follow this and please share your thoughts on the forums so that other members who have also taken up this course can learn from your experiences. You may also find it interesting to look up telecommuting and on-site work which has its own research dedicated to that topic. Another important topic which is also very interesting is team emergence states in remote work. With these topics I leave you till we see again. Bye.