

#RemoteMentalHealth

How has remote and hybrid working affected employee mental health?

Berlin, September 2022

The team from People Mobility Alliance put on another lively discussion around one of the hottest topics in global and talent mobility: remote work. In collaboration with deel, we have started a whole series dedicated to shedding light on different aspects of remote work. While the inaugural event of the series concentrated on compensation considerations, the second was dedicated to the equally important topic of mental health. The event was held at deel's Berlin offices, and once more chaired by Philipp Krogmann, who extended a warm welcome to the over 30 participants from a wide variety of industries.

The Event

Moderators, Mira Pathak and Daniel Zinner were joined by three panelists - Lorna Ather from Delivery Hero, Tobias Schönborn from visumPOINT and Kimberly Breuer from LIKEMINDED, an organisation that advises and supports companies with their mental health programmes. Kimberly shared market trends and evidence-based research data, while Lorna and Tobias were able to discuss practical examples of what their companies are doing to ensure employee wellbeing. With the three panel members coming from startup-, SME- and enterprise-size organisations the needs of companies at different levels of development were well-represented.

The audience too was highly representative, with roughly 50% working fully remotely and the rest in a hybrid working model. As well as the panel discussion, the event also involved networking both before and after, and active input from the audience.

Remote work – a blessing or a curse?

Remote work has changed the world of business forever. It has opened up endless possibilities for companies to grow and develop a truly global network of employees, while giving employees the chance to work for companies they may not have considered before due to location or other aspects.

While essentially being 'forced' to introduce remote work during the pandemic, working from home or in a hybrid models has now become the norm in many companies. There are lots of different models out there and it depends on industry, company culture, employee demographics and much more to determine which model works for your organisation.

In short, it is not a "one size fits all" approach. During our discussion we looked more deeply into the pros and cons of remote work. The mindset that people who work from home are less productive than those who are in the office is on its way out. Most managers and leaders now realise that employees are actually very productive at home; indeed, many work too much. And that's one of the biggest challenges. But how do you tackle these challenges? It can be very difficult, even for the most perceptive managers, to realise that their team members may be struggling not only with the workload but maybe even more with the work-life and home-life balance.

Our panelists discussed how employees and employers can make remote work a success and what structures can be put in place to ensure that this all-important balance is met.

International remote work, domestic remote work and the hybrid model

Working from home for a company in the same country you live in is different to working from home in a different country. Factors like time differences must be taken into the equation with international remote work. Too many late or early calls can have a significant effect on the productivity and mental wellbeing of employees. And since those employees may not have the option to come into an office regularly, it is important to ensure that they feel connected to their globally distributed colleagues. Virtual coffee chats where you get paired up with colleagues you may not routinely talk to are a popular and effective measure to create and maintain a feeling of belonging and company culture.

Domestic remote work and/or working from home often lends itself to working in a hybrid model. Many employees enjoy the flexibility that this approach gives them and are

able to feel more relaxed by combining the advantages of less commuting while still keeping up face-to-face interactions with colleagues.

Employers, employees and awareness raising

Being open about mental health issues is becoming more and more accepted in our society and therefore also in working life. While being far from where we should be, the topic is not as stigmatised anymore as it was a few years ago. Kimberly shared that consequently it may seem like more people are suffering from mental health issues when the truth is actually that people are just more open to talking about their issues.

This also means that employers are more aware of having to look out for signs of burnout or depression in their employees. But that can be hard if you only see your employees virtually. Creating a work environment in which employees feel safe to share potential issues is key. As a manager it's also important to lead by example; if you can, be open about your own feelings and have healthy and open conversation with your managees. Regular check-ins in which you do not talk about work can be as important as employee surveys that can flag issues to managers and allow you to put measures in place before it's too late.

But it's not all up to the employers; employees should also watch out for signs and find out what structures work for them and their individual circumstances. Looking at individual circumstances and preferences is extremely important. Age may play a role, and how much experience of working in an office an employee may actually have already. A fully remote working model suits many who have had years of office experience but probably not newcomers to a city who may have moved for their first job, also hoping to find some new friends through work. For these kinds of employees, it's important to have the option to come into an office. And not only that, it might actually be necessary to make sure they do come in regularly, rain or shine!

Questions from the audience

The audience actively engaged in conversation and had many questions for the panelists. The main points raised were the importance of taking regular breaks, closing the door to your home office, making sure the flexibility in deciding when you work does not mean you never actually stop working to 'just get the job done'.

The topic of having the right tools and ergonomic equipment in place was briefly touched upon, but it soon became clear it would require its own follow-up event. The same is true for the challenging topic of promotion decisions based on remote performance.

Conclusion and key takeaways

The event gave valuable insights into how remote work is affecting both employees and employers. It's encouraging to see that more and more employers care about employee mental health. This positive trend will hopefully continue, and organisations such as LIKEMINDED can be a huge asset to companies' benefits schemes; prevention is better than cure, as the saying goes.

Remote work continues to evolve and it was great to see that the focus has shifted from aspects such as compensation and compliance to 'softer' yet crucial topics like mental health; which are almost more important than the former: satisfied employees make for more productive employees. Caring about employee mental health makes them feel valued and seen by the company, and in turn this fosters loyalty and ultimately benefits the business.

So remember to look at the full picture, with mental health as an important cornerstone in your company policies. Implementing a successful and working set of guidelines could include:

1. Creating awareness amongst your organisation on the topic of mental health.
2. Providing and fostering appropriate communication.
3. Bringing transparency to the topic of mental health and emphasising that talking about it is not a sign of weakness.
4. Educating your people and leadership on the topic, pros and cons and actions to take.
5. Encouraging and empowering your leadership as role models in communicating, walking the talk and living remote work.
6. Creating opportunities for socialising in different formats.
7. Offering continuous support options and help to your people.

The People Mobility Alliance brings together like-minded individuals who put people at the centre of their activities.



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