Digital Etiquette

Maintaining the gains
and avoiding the pitfalls
of remote working

Adaptavist

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Introduction

COVID-19 has catapulted us into remote working and dramatically accelerated digital transformation in businesses around the globe. In many cases, this has left us scrambling to implement new technologies, processes and ways of working. Whilst many of us were accustomed to occasionally working from home, scheduling calls around partners and home-schooling has created an additional layer of 'invisible work."

To understand how this sudden move to virtual communications and remote work has affected us as employees and leaders, we commissioned the Adaptavist Digital Etiquette Study. The research explores:

- What are the biggest challenges in getting work done in a completely digital world?
- How can businesses future-proof their workforces in an uncertain time?
- Which elements from this experience should we preserve and which should we change?

We worked with research company Propeller Insights, to survey over 2800 global knowledge workers in May 2020 to understand their experiences - both good and bad - of this accelerated transition to remote work. In creating this report, we have also engaged experts in human and computer interactions, business psychology and digital etiquette.

The survey makes it very clear that amidst all this turmoil and disruption, the biggest change for most people has been in how they communicate. This transition to an online-only world has brought the murky world of digital etiquette sharply into focus. As Victoria Turk, author of a book on the subject explains:

"All too often, good manners seem to dissolve in the glare of a smartphone screen or the clicking of a keyboard. This isn't (usually) out of any malice; the problem is that there's very little consensus on what constitutes good conduct in the digital world. You might know your way around a dinner party, but how confident are you on the etiquette of WhatsApp groups?"
- Victoria Turk, author of Digital Etiquette

In the past we grudgingly accepted this as one of the many minor drawbacks of the march of technology. Yet, when all our communications turned virtual, this lack of clarity changes from a nuisance to a significant source of anxiety and inefficiency, which can potentially stifle innovation at a time when it is most urgently needed.

Key Findings

82 percent report they are equally (47 percent), if not more productive (35 percent) working from home

- The same percentage want to work from home at least part of the time in the future.

Communication changes have been the biggest shift for most people

- Most (52 percent) agree company-wide communication has improved (39 percent responded neutrally and 9 percent disagreed).
- Yet 38 percent of survey respondents admitted to worrying at least once a day about how they communicate on digital platforms for work. One in ten worry about this all the time.
- 42 percent say the need to be 'always on' was the greatest source of stress in work-related communication.

Increasingly blurred lines between work and personal lives are the greatest threat to motivation closely followed by the absence of office social interaction

- 21 percent said these blurred lines had the greatest negative impact on their motivation closely followed by working side by side with colleagues (20 percent) and the absence of chance meetings with colleagues they don't work with directly (17 percent).
- 26 percent are finding it hard to switch off from work - largely due to their own temptations to keep working.

Inefficient use of digital channels is increasing complexity and threatening productivity

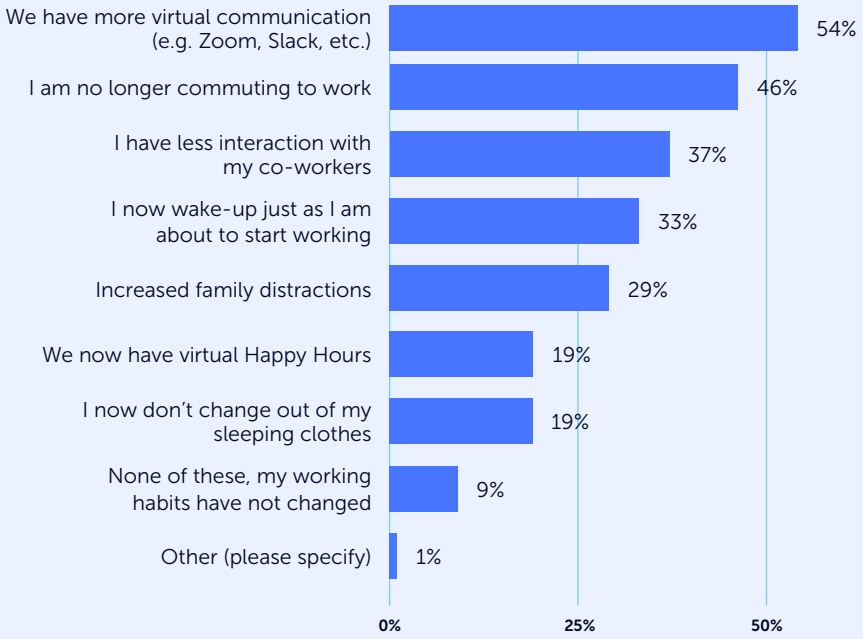
- On average, workers spend 45 minutes per day searching for info between tech platforms and less than half of workers have been given any training on how to use digital channels efficiently.

The key changes in how we work

COVID-19 lockdowns around the world have dramatically shifted our work routines as regular 9-5 norms have gone out the window. Almost a fifth of respondents claim they don't even get changed out of pyjamas in the morning now that the commute has disappeared, but for many the biggest change has been in the dramatic increase of virtual communication in their work.

The biggest change for most workers has been how they communicate

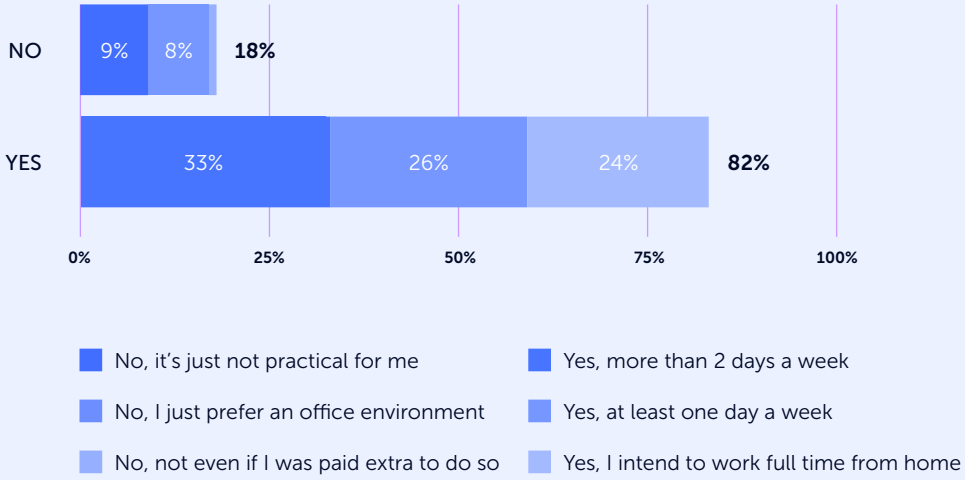
Q. As a result of the lockdown, how have your working habits changed? Please select all that apply.



The shift to remote working is not going away anytime soon with 82 percent of respondents indicating they want to work from home in future.

Whilst most people want to work from home, many struggle to do so full time

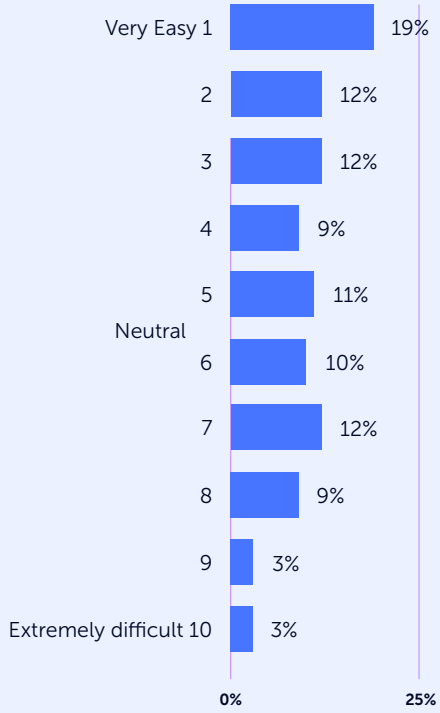
Q. Do you intend to spend more time working remotely in the future?



However, many of us have found it difficult to do so for the majority of the time. Most workers want to work from home part time, rather than full time.

Experience of working from home has been very varied

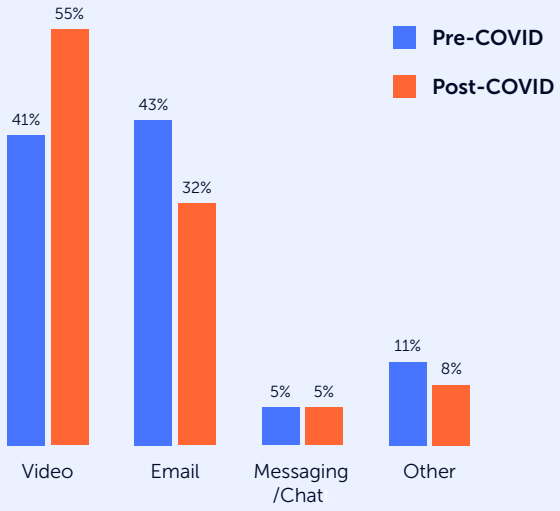
Q. On a scale of 1 to 10, please rate how hard you found it to work from home for the majority of the time / full time?



To make up for the loss of face-to-face interactions in the office, businesses have turned to video conferencing and it's rapidly becoming the main communication channel for businesses. Over 50 percent of respondents said that their company's primary communication channel is now a video conferencing tool like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, BlueJeans or Google Hangouts.

Organisations are shifting from email to video conferencing as their primary company communication channel

Q. What was your company's primary communication channel prior to the changes caused by COVID-19 and what has it been since COVID-19?

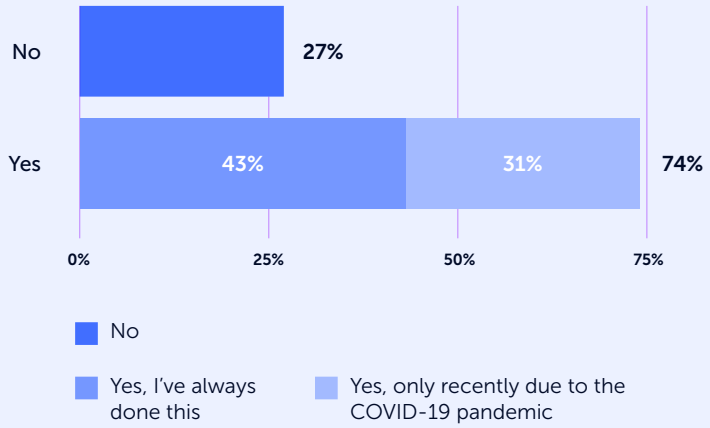


Not only have our professional communications gone virtual, but so too have our personal interactions leading us to coin new phases like “Zoomed out”.

With no time for technology reviews and procurement processes, businesses and individuals have turned to existing, primarily social, communication tools like WhatsApp to plug gaps. At the same time, the tools we formerly used for global meetings have become the setting for family gatherings and birthday celebrations, further blurring the line between our professional and personal lives.

Post-pandemic one in three are using the same platforms for work and personal communications

Q. Do you use the same platforms for work and personal communications (e.g. using WhatsApp for work and personal communications or using a corporate Zoom account to communicate with friends/family)?



The challenges of remote work

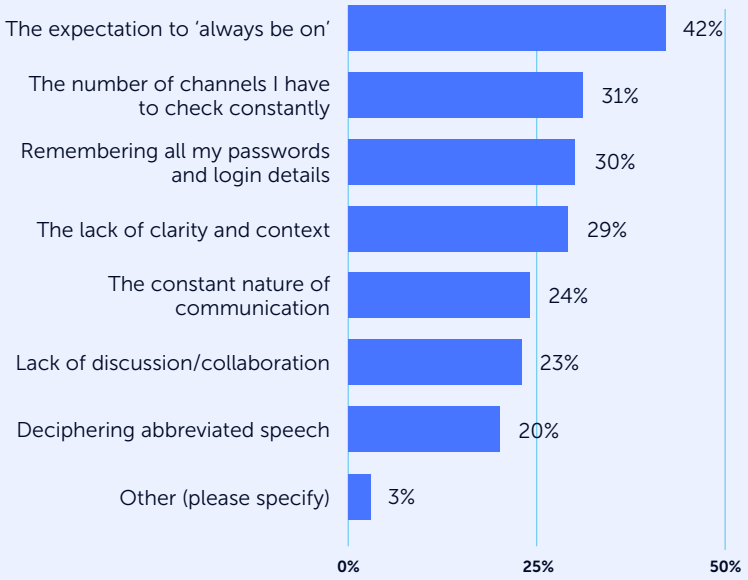
‘Always on’ burn out

The shift away from the constraints of office hours has brought increased flexibility for many, but also added stress.

With children, partners and pets at home with little, if any, external support, parents are now balancing child-care and education with their work responsibilities.

‘Always on’ is the key source of stress from work-related communications platforms

Q. What are the things you find most frustrating and stressful about communications on work-related platforms? Please select all that apply.



This has instantaneously abolished the traditional working day and led to increasingly blurred lines between personal and professional lives. The removal of the temporal boundaries of ‘office hours’ and the fact that your work is always accessible has made switching off challenging for one in four respondents. 15 percent struggled to switch off because they were tempted to keep working and 11 percent felt others expected them to keep working.

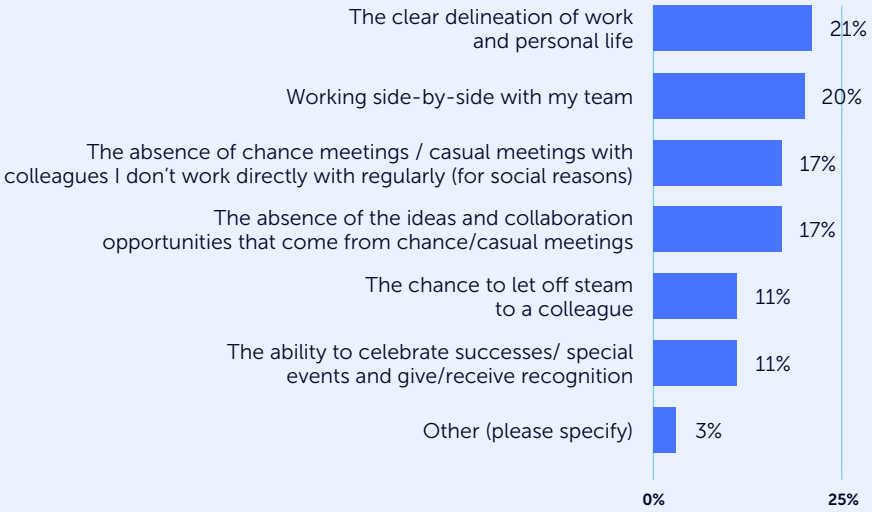
Switching off from work and domestic distractions are the greatest challenges for workers in remote work

Q. What has been your greatest challenge in working from home for the majority of the time?

The setup of our new office also has an impact: 20 percent found that being distracted by domestic matters was the greatest challenge. Our research suggests that the absence of this clear separation of work and personal life can have a very negative impact on motivation and engagement.

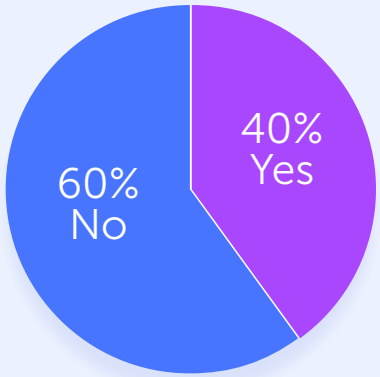
The absence of clear boundaries is the greatest threat to motivation when working remotely

Q. Which of the following had the greatest negative impact on your motivation/engagement?



Only 40 percent of people switch off their notifications, pushing people to be 'always available'

Q. Do you switch off work notifications?



While we can put up with this blurring of boundaries in the short-term, this becomes increasingly important as we look to the long-term solutions. The absence of our traditional 'working day' creates challenges in time management. Internet usage data[1] also suggests that people are working more hours during the pandemic, but what's also happening is that working days are becoming more fragmented as workers juggle domestic affairs between meetings.

[1] *https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-23/working-from-home-in-covid-era-means-three-more-hours-on-the-job*

5 ways to combat the ‘always on’ burn out

So how can organisations help employees avoid the pitfalls of the ‘always on’ work day?

It’s important to provide your employees with some simple tips and tricks to avoid burnout. These include:

1. If we find ourselves struggling to concentrate, Anna Cox, Professor of Human-Computer Interaction in the UCL Interaction Centre (UCLIC), recommends the Pomodoro Method, where you work uninterrupted for 25 minutes then take a break and do this for several iterations and then you might take a longer break.

2. Automatically “switch off” notifications for tools like Slack and Skype after 6 PM.

3. *Create a productive home working environment* in your house and maximise opportunities to get out of the house like making your catch up meetings “walking meetings,” where you can get outside.

4. One of the simplest ways to help curb burnout is clarity and transparency on what’s the highest priority each day or week. Implementing Agile ways of working can help ease some of this burden. The daily ‘stand-up’ is a short, time-boxed team meeting that can provide a sense of clarity and even ‘togetherness’ with the rest of your team in an informal way.

5. Whilst not a quick fix, organisations looking to maintain flexibility should also consider redefining how they measure work. Many organisations have found a transition to a more *value-based approach to tracking work* helpful. This approach places greater emphasis on the value generated by the work rather than the time spent on it.

Technical challenges and failure to use technology effectively

The challenge of managing workloads is compounded for team managers, who need to manage the burnout effect without face-to-face interactions. In our study they ranked this as the top challenge (after technical issues) in remote team management, closely followed by tracking the progress of work.

The research suggests that lack of training may also be leading to inefficient and ineffective uses of existing tools as **less than half of respondents have had training on the digital tools they were using for work.**

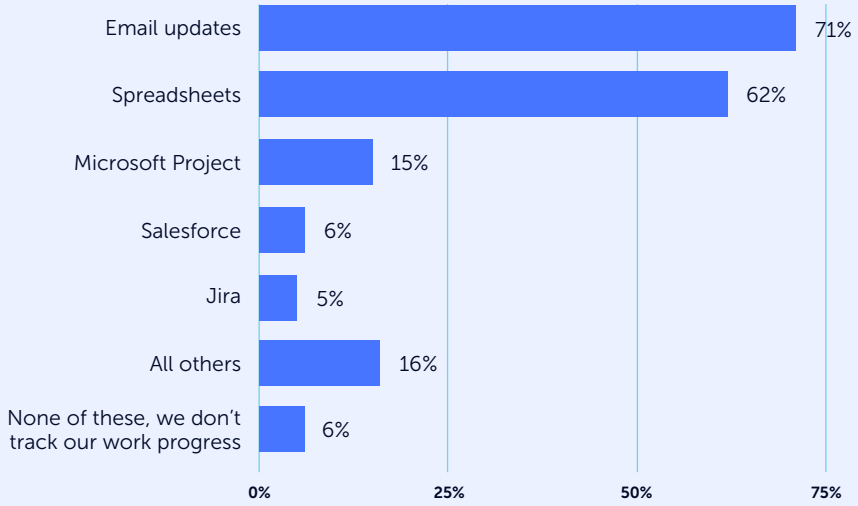
Technical issues and managing workloads and workflows prove the greatest challenges for team management

Q. From the perspective of team management, what have you found to be the greatest challenge in working from home for the majority of the time?

Although there are a number of more suitable tools available which can really help in the transition, spreadsheets and email updates are still by far the most popular means of tracking work. This reflects the technical challenges many are experiencing when switching to more full-time remote work. In many cases the tools are out there, but businesses are not making full use of them.

Email and spreadsheets are still the main tools used to track work

Q. Which of the following tools/systems do you use to track the progress of work? Please select all that apply.



3 ways to overcome the technical challenges of remote work

1. Tracking workloads using the right tools helps provide a central source of truth where people can see where they stand. For example, using Jira for sophisticated workflows or Trello for a high level overview of what people are working on can help. Trello is especially useful for tracking individual work, while Jira helps track work between teams.

- Simple solutions like adding *Time Tracking for Trello* allow you to track the time you spend on project tasks and record it on a Trello card. Your data can then be exported as an Excel or CSV for analysis and reporting.

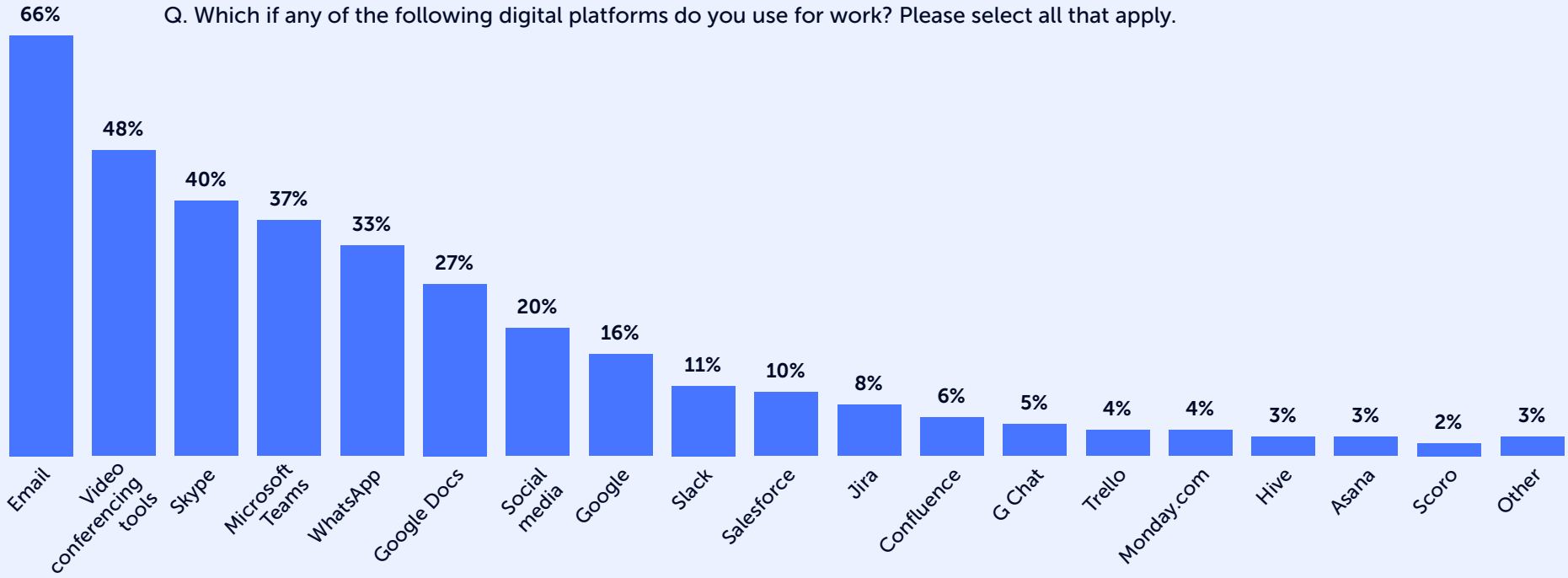
2. Many of the technical challenges of remote work can be solved with simple solutions and businesses should consider investing in apps, tools and access to IT support to offer a seamless transition between office and home. Investing in tools like large monitors can also make a big difference at a relatively low cost. Giving teams the budget to self-serve in the creation of their home office can also save time and ensure everyone can get the right tools for their needs.

3. It's a good idea to offer tool training where possible. The more familiar and comfortable we are with a tool, the less we think about how we are using it. Helping teams to attain this level of familiarity can make the use of these tools less taxing and more intuitive.

Inefficient communications

The line between work and personal communication channels has virtually disappeared overnight. Two in three of us are now using the same channels for work and personal communications. Managers and clients are using WhatsApp and we're greeting grandparents over Zoom. This means that the channels can no longer be used to differentiate between work and personal contexts, so we can find ourselves switching between work and personal contexts in the same channel. These blurred lines can become a security risk as the use of 'unsanctioned' tools (known as *Shadow IT*) increases the pressure on internal support teams to grapple with all the tools an organisation is using.

The number of channels we are using is growing - particularly with the addition of personal channels



One of our greatest frustrations with communications on work-related platforms is the number of channels we have to check, update and add information to every single day.

42 percent of respondents are actively using more than four channels a day and one in three are using social channels like WhatsApp for work, making it harder to avoid the distraction from personal affairs when working and vice versa. Such switching and constant interruptions have serious consequences for productivity.

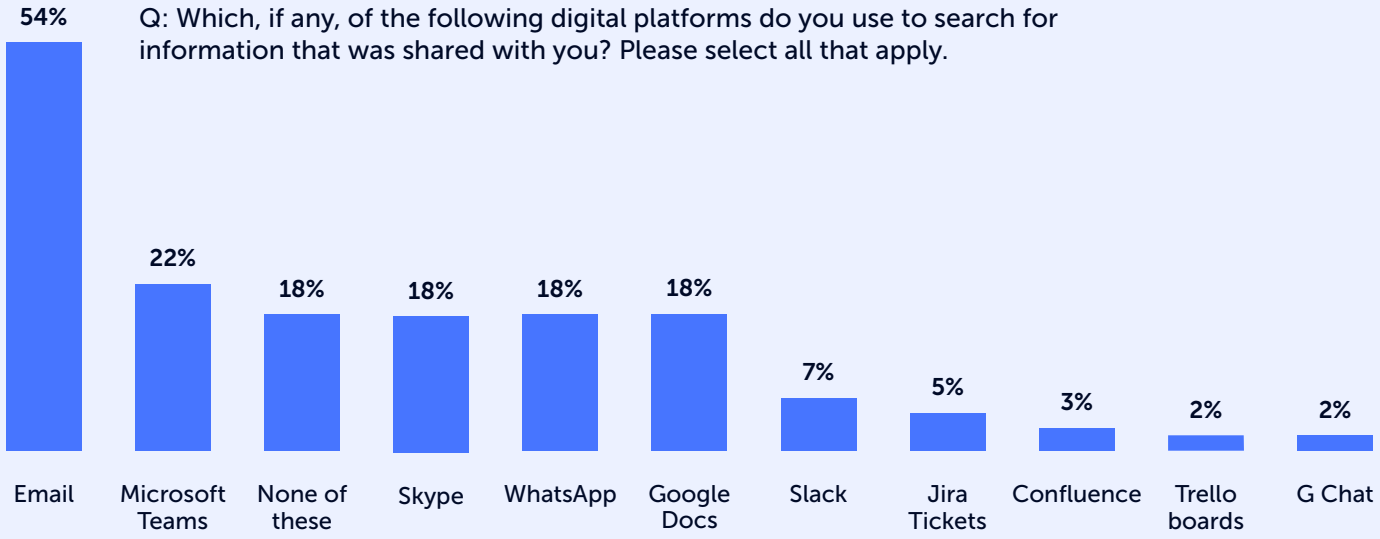
"Attention Economy theory recognises that our attention, or our ability to focus, is a finite resource. So endless noise or careless communication that causes you to switch context uses up this valuable resource. The blurring of work and home communication channels makes this problem worse as our attention and focus is frequently being diverted from the work at hand - whether that's our work or our personal affairs."
- Jari Worsley, Head of Product at Adaptavist

We lose around 30 percent of our time dealing with interruptions and this can increase to 50 percent when we need to focus on an activity that requires us to keep multiple pieces of information in mind[2]. Frequent interruptions create added stress[3] and context switching costs us a significant amount of time and cognitive energy.

> *Most people have a mindset suited to a complicated, rather than complex, environment. So we can handle complicated, but logical systems that have predictable outcomes. However, most of us find it harder to handle the ambiguous and unpredictable nature that characterises more working environments of the 21st century. Confronting this can become a source of anxiety and stress that can ultimately constrain our ability to work effectively, leading us to revert to more controlling behaviours. Such behaviours can stifle a team or organisation's ability to collaborate, innovate and learn together so it's vitally important to support teams in managing and navigating this complexity."*
>
> - John Turley, Adaptavist

[2] https://www.grenoble-em.com/sites/default/files/public/kcfinder/Guide_sursollicitation_numerique.pdf [3] https://www.ics.uci.edu/~gmark/chi08-mark.pdf

Email still dominates, but a wider channel mix leads to more sources of information to check



Average daily time spent searching for information sent to them

This increases when using 4 or more platforms

The Digital Etiquette Study highlights that the more platforms respondents used, the longer they spent searching for information.

On average respondents spend 45 minutes searching between various platforms every single day. Employees that use four or more platforms spend 50 minutes searching for information every single day. So for every team of 10 employees, organisations effectively lose the productivity of one entire employee a week due to the fact that they have to search for information.

Many of us have to search for information across multiple platforms like email, Confluence (a wiki tool), or chat platforms like Slack everytime we start a new task. One in five respondents also mentioned leaving traditional work channels to search for information on WhatsApp.

On the flipside, every time a task has been completed we have to update several platforms such as a Trello board, Jira ticket, email the team and send a message on Slack.

3 ways to improve communication efficiency

1. Automation and integration are great ways to empower teams to move fast and collaborate at scale. For example, when your marketing team publishes a blog, you can trigger a Trello board update and automate a notification in Slack to the right team. Development teams can block code from being shipped until it's been quality checked and support teams can get notified when a critical bug is filed by a customer.

2. Leverage out-of-the-box tools. Slack apps like *Adaptavist's SearchMy* for Slack, which consolidates a user's issues from multiple Jira instances and returns them in Slack, reduce tedious manual effort.

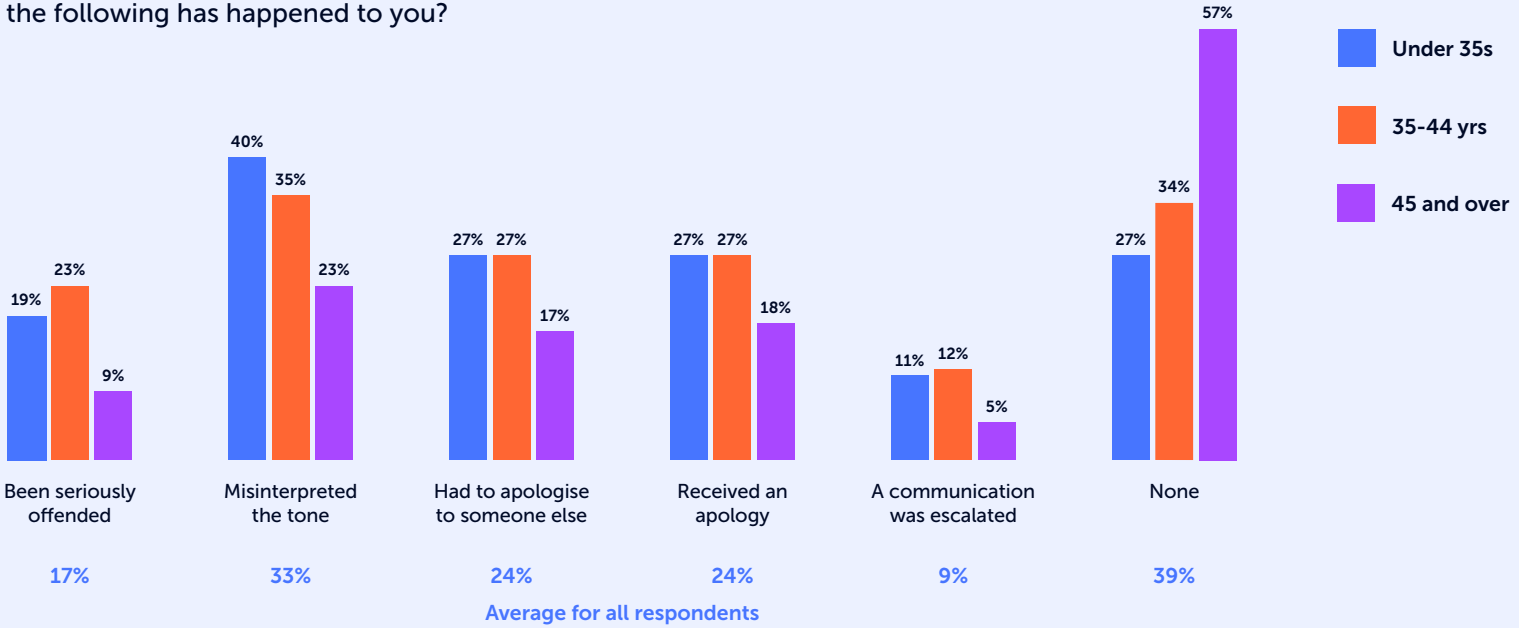
3. Even with best in breed tools, you need people to work together and collaborate effectively to be successful. Solutions like Adaptavist's *Social Insights* provide an analysis of an organisation's communication networks to identify where silos and inefficiencies are hindering progress and provide actionable insights into how teams need to adapt to thrive.

> *You can make decisions about how you're going to work as a team. That might be like, we're going to do everything on Slack and we're not going to use email. That way at least you know that when I'm doing this kind of work, or working for this group of people, I know where to go to find information and I'm not looking across everything."*
>
> - Professor Anna Cox

Lack of clarity on digital etiquette causes anxiety

The younger generation find interpreting tone the hardest and are most likely to experience mistakes in digital communications

Q. In relation to communications on digital platforms, which of the following has happened to you?



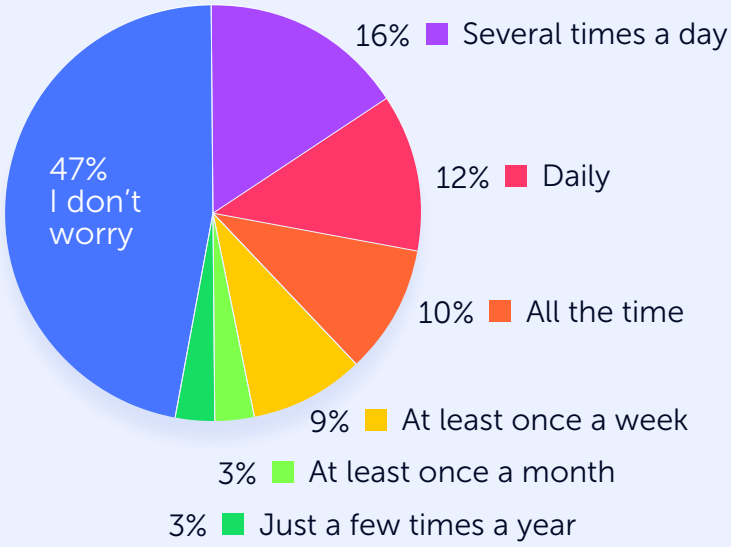
Social cues like body language are difficult to gauge over Zoom and tone is almost impossible to decipher in an email or chat message - these combine to create anxiety over how we collaborate and communicate online.

One in four workers has had to apologise and more than half have seen something unacceptable on a messaging platform. It also seems to be the younger generation who are more likely to have made mistakes. Differing communication styles between demographic groups, industry sectors and cultures serve to further complicate this issue.

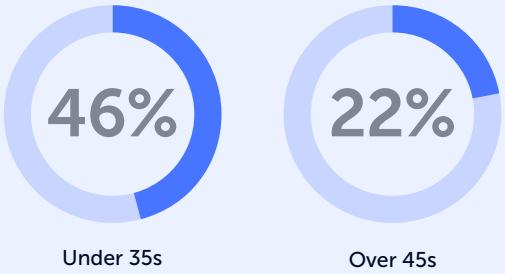
Digital etiquette is becoming a significant source of stress with 38 percent of all respondents saying they worry daily about how to communicate on digital platforms and as many as one in ten worrying constantly. It's the younger generation who are most concerned about this with 46 percent of Millennial workers worrying daily about this as opposed to just 22 percent of over 45s.

38% worry at least once a day about how they communicate on work channels

Q. How often do you worry about how you communicate on work-related channels?



Millennials are more likely to worry daily about their work-related communications



"All too often, good manners seem to dissolve in the glare of a smartphone screen or the clicking of a keyboard. This isn't (usually) out of any malice; the problem is that there's very little consensus on what constitutes good conduct in the digital world. You might know your way around a dinner party, but how confident are you on the etiquette of WhatsApp groups?"

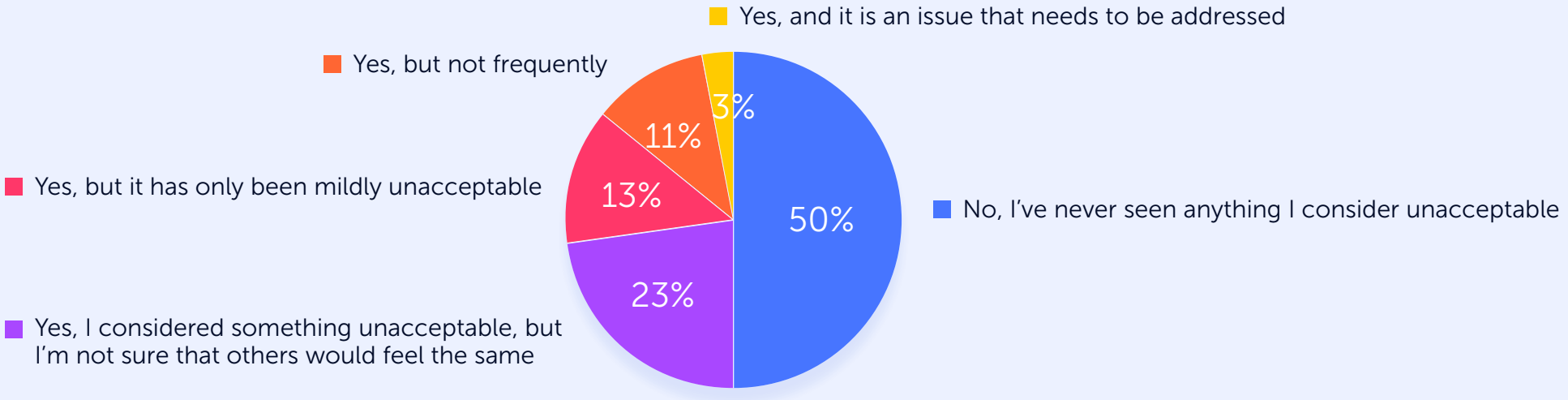
- Victoria Turk, author of Digital Etiquette

Our data certainly suggests that lack of consensus around digital etiquette is a significant part of the problem. Around half of the respondents had witnessed "unacceptable behaviour" and a further 25 percent felt they had, but were unsure whether others would also consider it so. This lack of consensus around what is and isn't deemed acceptable in video conferences and on messaging platforms is something we have explored in more depth here.

As we saw earlier (p8) lack of context was a major frustration in communicating on digital channels and this is likely to be a contributor in both how we interpret messages from others and concerns about how our message might be interpreted.

Lack of consensus on digital etiquette leads to confusion and tension in workplace communication

Q. Have you ever witnessed "unacceptable behaviour" on a messaging platform (Slack, Microsoft teams, GChat)? Which of these statements best reflects your experience?



3 ways to bring clarity to digital etiquette

1. Set the tone and provide clear guidelines. Given the lack of consensus on accepted behaviours, guidance is essential. Clarifying processes like when to use the company alias and what should be posted in each type of Slack channel can help ease communication anxiety, reduce white noise, avoid embarrassment, make your team more efficient, and ensure value information is not missed.

2. Take an agile approach as you build out your digital etiquette strategy. "Sneak up on the answer" as our Agile Consultant, Jon Kern, frequently advises teams to do. What worked pre-pandemic might not work in the new world of remote work and you may not even know that workers are feeling the burden. *"Agile mentoring"* value stream mapping workshops can help teams improve their ways of working.

3. Onboarding and training is key. When organisations adopt new technology platforms, it's crucial to teach everyone (including the tech-savvy interns) how to demonstrate digital maturity and exhibit the right soft skills online. Training doesn't always need to be formal or implemented from the top down and a culture of collaborative learning and support can not only be more effective, but a faster route.

Lack of social interaction

In most working environments people develop personal relationships with colleagues and co-workers and informal networks develop. Such relationships provide valuable support and can help prevent concerns and anxieties escalating. According to our research, this social aspect of office life was what respondents missed most when going remote and the absence of these relationships had a major negative impact on motivation and/or engagement. Research shows[4] these informal networks are not only important support systems, but important drivers of innovation across the business.

The things we miss most about the office also have a significant impact on our motivation and engagement

[4] *Leadership for organizational adaptability: A theoretical synthesis and integrative framework by Mary Uhl-Biena and Michael Arena and also published in Connected Commons*

5 ways to increase social interactions virtually

1. Our *Social Insight* offering can help uncover where these networks exist and particularly when times are tough, where you may have people on the periphery with very little engagement.

2. *Virtual coffee drop-ins* can help to create more informal ways to connect, as well as virtual social evenings organised for teams to spend time together out of work hours.

3. Automate alerts for anniversaries, birthdays and team milestone reminders. With *Slack's handy remind me feature* you can set reminders for yourself and your team (even in different time zones) and set recurring reminders to make sure you never miss important events.

4. Foster watercooler innovation spinning up randomly selected Slack rooms for company pub quizzes or virtual ice breaker activities or *setup a virtual hack day.*

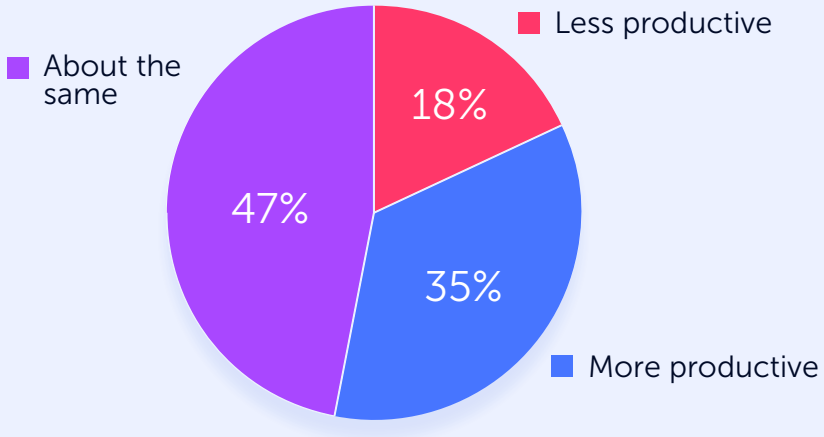
5. If there's an interesting chat thread in a Slack channel and you want to continue it via a video call, try *integrating Zoom and Slack* to do just that.

Benefits of remote work

Despite the exceptional circumstances brought on by COVID-19 and the added 'invisible work' of scheduling and planning, most people still feel equally or more productive when working from home.

82 percent feel equally or more productive working remotely vs. in the office

Q. How productive do you feel you are when you work remotely vs in an office?



The research suggests that respondents welcomed this universal transition and learning that we can be more flexible was voted the biggest benefit. The pandemic has forced many companies to engage with agile transformation overnight and those doing it well are reaping the rewards.

> *Many people are now discovering what numerous software organisations have known for decades: that if you struggled to get work done when co-located, going remote only exacerbates and exaggerates the problems. Learning how to be agile and have an agile mindset is the key to staying competitive in these uncertain times."*
>
> - Jon Kern, Agile Transformation Consultant and co-author of the *Agile Manifesto*

A 100 percent remote staff brought an unexpected advantage: a level playing field. While many teams often had at least one person dialing in to a meeting (whether from home, on the road, or dialing in from a satellite office), for many this is the first time where everyone is remote.

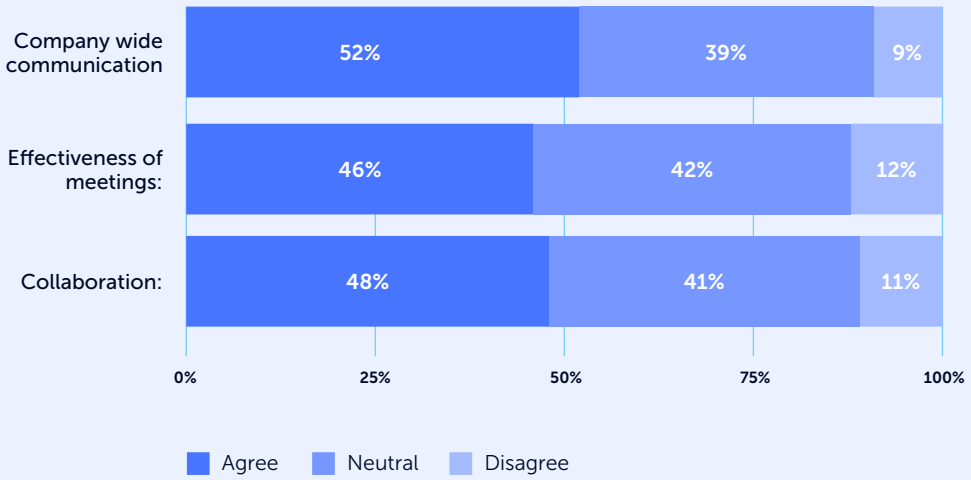
Flexibility, agility, faster decision making and the creation of a level playing field are all key benefits of remote work

Q. Please rank from best to worst, what has been the greatest benefit professionally/as a team in working remotely

RANK

1. Learning that we can be more flexible in how we work
2. It has been easier to coordinate schedules without having to be physically in the same space / with fewer people travelling.
3. Learning how to communicate more effectively with colleagues abroad / levelling the playing field between those in the office and remote workers
4. The ability to work in a more agile fashion. We've been more focused, and decisions have been made faster.
5. Removing the office environment has helped to break down barriers and reduced office politics
6. The ability to get to know my colleagues better as people / to see another side of them has helped us to bond better
7. It has improved creativity / innovation
8. There seems to be less negative gossip and speculation
9. The increased ability to hire talent regardless of location

Q: Do you agree / disagree with the following statements that the following has improved with the increase in remote working?



Most people have experienced the challenges of group decision-making and collaborative activities when half the meeting is in the room and the other half is on video. To avoid the problems this imbalance creates, many teams with a number of remote workers have drawn on agile principles and use a level playing field approach (100 percent remote or 100 percent in office) for key collaborative activities such as Design sprints - or abbreviated Decision sprints.

Whilst we struggle with our own communication anxiety, the results show that overall, people feel company-wide communication has improved. The removal of the office environment has also helped to break down barriers, improving focus and collaboration. Meetings and collaboration were generally seen as either equally effective or more so.

Conclusion

Looking ahead

Whether looking at remote work from a peak of inflated expectations or the trough of disillusionment, for most organisations the 'new normal' is still far from certain. This research shows that remote work is a viable and desirable option for most knowledge businesses and individuals. Yet, it also uncovers some potential pitfalls as we look to the long-term when it comes to employee wellbeing and motivation and critically also innovation. In order to make this effective long-term, we need to address the threats to motivation and innovation caused by the absence of boundaries and the social interactions of the office.

Whilst respondents felt they could be equally if not more productive working from home, as organisations we need to consider carefully how we define productivity. True growth and competitive advantage comes from innovation and it is notable that respondents did not cite innovation amongst the top benefits from this transition.

As we have seen, social interactions are vital to an engaged and motivated workforce, but they are also critical to creating the informal networks which help to foster innovation. In a short-term transition we benefit from existing networks, but in the long-term we need to understand how we can build and maintain these networks, whether that's in a 100 percent virtual world or in a mixed office+remote work environment.

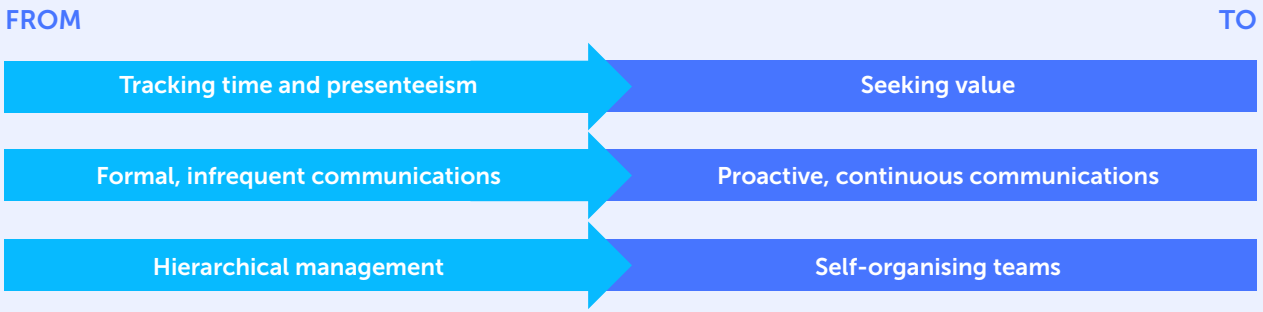
Making radical change business as usual

An overnight transition was forced upon the business world, compelling organisations to adapt by doing whatever seemed to work at the time. Now, it's time to reflect and analyse this, to see what positive patterns have arisen that we need to reinforce and what negative patterns we see that need to be changed.

Managing this transition successfully requires a new flexible way of working which facilitates response to change over strict adherence to plans, which may quickly become obsolete and irrelevant. For many organisations this demands a significant mental shift to a new style of management with new rules of engagement, new behaviours and a markedly improved digital etiquette. People, interactions and behaviours should be the starting point for this transition. As we have seen, lack of clarity around digital etiquette is a source of unnecessary anxiety and inefficiency. By bringing clarity to this murky world, we can alleviate the anxiety and stress, which can stifle innovation; reduce inefficiency; and empower workers to establish the invaluable social interactions which foster innovation.

In an increasingly competitive and challenging financial landscape, businesses that fail to get this right risk being left behind in a world where geographical boundaries are no longer a limitation to attracting talent. For those that invest in this analysis and make the mental shift, the future promises greater flexibility and freedom for our teams, and a wider talent pool to recruit from—bringing greater diversity and increased productivity across the organisation.

The mental shift required for success in the new normal



Methodology

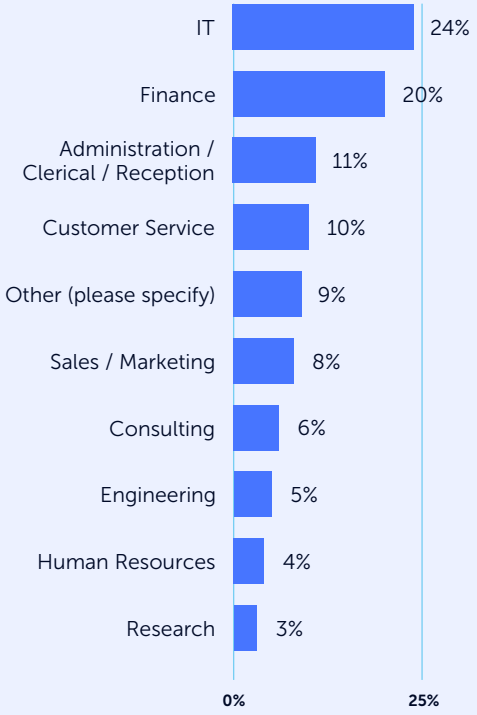
Over 2800 workers from a mix of office-based industry sectors and departments across the USA (c. 1000), UK (c. 1000), Canada (c. 400) and Australia (c. 400) were surveyed for Adaptavist's Digital Etiquette study. The research was conducted in May 2020 by Propeller Insights.

The age breakdown was: 18-24 years old (13%); 25-34 year olds (27%); 35-44 year olds (26%); 45-54 year olds (20%); 55-64 year olds (11%); over 65 years olds (3%).

Respondents by role

The main industry sectors represented in the study were: Accounting / Finance / Banking (33%); Science / Technology / Programming / Software (16%); Healthcare (15%)/ Telecommunications (4%); Retail / Ecommerce (3%); Advertising / PR / Media (3%); Operations / Logistics (3%).

Respondents by department



For further information please get in touch

About Adaptavist

Adaptavist is a global consulting and technology provider, enabling organisations to digitally transform how they collaborate, become more agile, and get work done. Founded in 2005, its 13,000+ customer base spans 60 countries and includes more than half the Fortune 500.

Adaptavist is a Platinum Atlassian Solutions Partner and Marketplace Partner, and one of the first trusted Slack partners. It offers expert consultancy, apps, training, managed services, and licensing solutions.

Adaptavist has received the Queen's Awards for Enterprise, The Sunday Times Tech Track Award 2019 and ranked in Deloitte's Technology Fast 50.

Want to drive digital transformation in your organisation?
Let's chat