

Be Careful, Working Remotely Carries Risks. Know How to Avoid Them.

By [LawVision](#) on April 15, 2020

By now, most of us are beginning to get proficient, if not still a tad frustrated, at working remotely. To add a little science and data behind best practices I thought it made sense to reference some [excellent advice coming out of MIT](#) on managing the hidden risks of working remotely.

Alex Pentland, Director of MIT Connection Science, held a webinar recently reported by Dylan Walsh of MIT's Sloan school. Pentland points out that although the obvious answer to a pandemic like COVID-19 is to have employees work from home, there are serious inherent risks. The biggest threat is losing the subtle but profound, and often underestimated value that comes from social interaction at work.

He points to several areas that provide strength to any enterprise:

1. Productivity and sound decision-making are strengthened by simple informal communication like:
 - a. hallway run-ins
 - b. coffee breaks
 - c. spontaneous discussions in the parking lot or at the water cooler
2. Employee trust, solidarity and mental health rely on simple actions found naturally in in-person interactivity.
 - a. small affirmations
 - b. gestures of support
 - c. expressions of understanding
 - d. nods of empathy or courtesy
 - e. morning greetings

The report suggests strategies to offset the deficit caused by the lack of in-person interactivity in technologically enabled remote conversations.

1. Monitor communication by asking yourself:
 - a. Is anyone dominating conversations?
 - b. Is the discussion inclusive?
 - c. How is the tone of each participant's contributions and the conversation generally?
 - d. Is someone interrupting?
2. Maintain Inclusivity to decrease psychological distance
 - a. involve people in decision-making
 - b. consider secret voting on new ideas and initiatives
 - c. Don't allow group conclusions by relying only on input from the loud talker
 - d. Create "Idea Markets" in which colleagues can vote on new ideas
3. Reward Cohesion
 - a. Allow groups to vote for colleagues who have been helpful or have contributes in some way
 - b. reinforce social ties lost from working remotely. Creative suggestions include:

- i. watching a movie together with a chat screen open so the group can make snarky comments to each other while watching
- ii. schedule a tea or coffee break together over Zoom
- iii. schedule weekly discussions for people to discuss challenges outside of work

Pentland concludes by explaining that these strategies are not merely about coping and emergency preparedness, they are central to any competitive strategy and long term-success. As you plan for a post pandemic future, working models will be different than pre-COVID norms. Ensure that your workplace has structures that are resilient to economic and political shock that is sure to cause disruption even after the current crisis subsides.