

## Harvard Business Review

### Managing People

# WFH Is Corroding Our Trust in Each Other

by Mark Mortensen and Heidi K. Gardner

February 10, 2021



sturti/Getty Images

**Summary.** In early 2020, the switch to remote or hybrid work was abrupt for many companies. While employees were willing to give one another some latitude earlier in the pandemic, now, almost a year in, their trust is wearing thin, and some find themselves wondering... [more](#)

About a third of the employees of a regional bank have returned to working onsite, and the president holds a weekly all-staff town hall meeting by videoconference. Employees are encouraged to submit anonymous questions for him or other senior leaders to answer. For the past six weeks, an increasing number of people have asked, “How do we know if the people who are still working from home are actually working?” Some employees have even suggested specific technology-based monitoring approaches to track remote workers’ onscreen time and activities.

Each week, the president assures his employees that the business is on track and that measures of productivity (like the number of loans taken out) are above expectations. “But it’s exasperating,” he said. “No matter how much I try to convince them or even use numbers and other kinds of evidence, it’s not sinking in. You’d think that if I can trust people, surely they can trust each other, right? But no.”

The crisis of trust this bank is facing is increasingly common as the strains of remote working wear down company culture and people’s goodwill. Early in the pandemic, stories of organizational heroics — like companies repurposing laptops en masse overnight to equip employees’ homes — abounded. And for a while, people gave each other the benefit of the doubt and didn’t mind making compromises like allowing the occasional deadline to slip so that people could take care of homeschooling or other new demands.

Over the past eight months, we've worked with and researched dozens of companies that are wrestling with this challenge in settings as varied as professional services, oil and gas, finance and insurance, healthcare, telecommunications, automotive, and tech. In each of them, we've seen a shift from the positive, "We've figured out this virtual work thing!" sentiments to the recognition that trust in their organizations — in individuals, relationships, and the organization — is fundamentally at risk. Increased reports of electronic monitoring also suggest that executives' confidence in having figured it out is starting to ebb. For example, Hubstaff, a provider of time-tracking tools for remote work, reported a four-fold increase in its UK customers since February of 2020, and Sneek, whose technology takes webcam pictures of employees on a regular interval and shares them with colleagues, reported a five-fold increase.

It's critical that company leaders work to rebuild and maintain trusting relationships — with and among their employees. Those that don't risk far more than lower morale. The chances of increased attrition, lower productivity, and stalled innovation also loom large when trust plummets.

### **Why the Crisis of Trust Now?**

Companies have experimented with work-from-home policies for years, so what's new now? First, remote work is now widespread. Companies previously allowed select employees to work from home, either because those specific employees were highly trusted or because their work allowed managers to measure their output and hold them accountable. Now everyone is at home, regardless of past performance level or job.

Second, when stay-at-home mandates hit around the globe, people were involuntarily thrust into remote work — often without the equipment, training, or desire to do it. Whereas before, employees may have opted to work remotely, many are now struggling to focus at home thanks to increased familial responsibilities or because other members of their household are also working from home.

Third, uncertainty about the economy and job stability breeds anxiety, which tends to prompt a go-it-alone mode of working among employees and a general wariness of others.

Finally, employees' WFH challenges (including technology failures, shifting work norms, and conflicts between work and home responsibilities) make it more likely that they'll fail to deliver on perceived obligations, leading to a further erosion of trust. Critically, though, the factors reducing this ability to trust are not limited only to the effects of Covid-19, but are tied to ongoing trends in the way we design our work and organizations. Leaders need to address the underlying issues in order to build a sustainable model of trust.

## **A Loss of Information Undermines Trust**

Predictability is the foundation of trust. We're willing to be vulnerable — to expose ourselves to potential risk — when we have reason to believe that someone will not take advantage of us or disappoint us. This comes only when we think we can anticipate how others will behave. One of us, Heidi K. Gardner, researched more than 3,000 senior knowledge workers and identified two distinct kinds of trust that are essential for people to work together effectively. First, they need to believe that others will deliver and that the work will be high quality (competence trust). Second, they need to believe that others have good intentions and high integrity

(interpersonal trust). To trust colleagues in both of these ways, people need clear and easily discernible signals about them — what they're doing (actions), why they're doing it (motivations), and whether they'll continue to do it (reliability).

Over the past two decades, the moves toward remote working and dynamically shifting teams has made this information harder to come by. Less face-to-face time means that we have less opportunity to observe, for example, that a teammate consistently brings along prepared notes and diagrams to enhance the conversation. We also have fewer shared sidebar conversations that build rapport and interpersonal trust, and we lack situational cues — like the leftover pizza boxes as evidence colleagues pulled an all-nighter — to understand others' efforts and outputs. This makes it difficult to establish trust in others because we don't have the data we need to know what they'll do. It also eliminates the steady stream of reinforcing information that helps us maintain existing trust. The isolation of remote working may be tied to lower trust for another reason: we unconsciously interpret a lack of physical contact as a signal of untrustworthiness.

In virtual work misunderstandings and miscommunications abound. We therefore face a perfect storm of less information on which to establish trust, less reinforcing information to maintain it, and more “trust infractions” to break it. Once trust is lost, it's very hard to regain. There are a few steps leaders should take — and one they shouldn't — to bring trust back to theirs and their employees' relationships.

## **Monitoring Is Not the Answer**

An increasingly common approach to dealing with decreased trust is to counter it with increased monitoring. Whether done through technology (for example, keystroke capture) or process (for example, daily check-ins), monitoring is usually counterproductive.

First, it never works. Any manager who thinks they can know everything their remote employees are doing is fooling themselves; there will always be gaps in any monitoring process. Second, people perform to the measure, not to the objective. It doesn't take much to figure out how to get around the measures themselves, and employees often put more effort into working around them than into just doing the work. Third, monitoring isn't just ineffective — it actually makes the problem worse. One survey found that 49% of employees subject to stringent monitoring reported severe anxiety, compared to only 7% of those subject to low levels of monitoring. Monitoring can also increase burnout and employee dissatisfaction and undermine firm morale.

There are few stronger signals that you don't trust someone than putting them under surveillance.

## **Understanding the Science of Trust**

Monitoring fails because it tries to solve the wrong part of the trust equation — it's about managers trying to eliminate the space for vulnerability. The better approach is to leave the space alone, but reduce the likelihood that someone will take advantage of it (and you). This doesn't mean trusting blindly, but rather relying on the science of trust to build it in the least risky way possible.

**Recognize and leverage reciprocal trust.** So often, when we talk about trust, we focus on how we develop it in other people. This misses the fact that trust is bi-directional and reciprocal — research shows that the more you trust someone and act accordingly, the more likely they are to trust you in return. Importantly, these do not operate independently. This means that in order to increase trust within your network, you need to shift your focus to signaling your own trustworthiness. Increasing others' trust in you reduces uncertainty by creating a more stable and certain environment. Thinking in more Machiavellian terms, it also provides reciprocal leverage — the more trust they place in you, the less likely they will be to betray your trust (think mutually assured destruction as the underpinning of the entire Cold War). This is not setting yourself up to be taken advantage of; this is a strategic move that de-risks trust-building. And remember that which signals you send is one of the few things you do have control over.

**Build a trust staircase.** Across substantial research on change (behavior change, culture change, you name it), one message comes through clearly: The best way to create lasting change is through repeated, small, reinforcing steps. Building trust is no exception — it requires evidence and reinforcement. Another way to increase the trust others place in you is to audition for it by finding opportunities to work together on a low-risk task, which gives you a chance to demonstrate your competence and integrity. For example, offer to jointly organize a lunch-and-learn series, where people (not just you!) can showcase their abilities. Look for situations that require minimal investments and for which the opportunity and failure costs are low.

Demonstrate your own trustworthiness within that context and then, over time, build up to larger and more significant demonstrations to reinforce the trust you're establishing.

**Engage in status-quo communication.** Leaders know how important it is to communicate when things change. However, now, as things are in a constant state of flux, leaders also need to communicate about things that aren't changing. Given that trust depends so heavily on predictability, leaders must recognize the critical importance of helping employees understand what they can count on. Doing so reduces uncertainty and creates a needed sense of stability.

**Assume one-size-fits-none trusting.** Trust building, maintenance, and recovery work differently for different types of people, who fall into two broad categories: automatic trusters and evidence-based trusters.

- Automatic trusters approach a new relationship with at least some level of trust as the default, initially trusting the other party unless something happens to break that trust. This isn't blind trust, but rather an inclination to give the benefit of the doubt. They're minimally affected by fewer trust-building cues, and trust infractions trigger a challenge to their self-image, provoking a more severe and long-lasting backlash.
- Evidence-based trusters approach a new relationship with distrust as the default, not exposing themselves to risk until the other party has proven their trustworthiness. The lack of evidence characteristic of remote work makes it significantly more difficult to establish trust in virtual environments. Once trust is established (based on accumulated evidence), only major infractions are likely



to significantly counter or undo that evidence.

A critical first step is to not assume that others build trust as you do. With that in mind, you must do the homework required to know both your own and your counterpart's approaches to trusting and put in the effort to adapt accordingly. If you're an automatic truster and your counterpart is more evidence-based, you need to slow down your expectations and focus on providing that person with ongoing, repeated evidence of your predictability and trustworthiness. If you're building the evidence for your trust case and your counterpart is trusting you on arrival, it's critical that you keep an eye out for your own behaviors that may signal an infraction for them.

Widespread remote work is likely to stick around for a while yet. Company leaders who want to maintain morale and avoid negative outcomes like increased attrition must take steps to establish (or reestablish) trust among their employees.

**Mark Mortensen** is an associate professor of Organizational Behaviour at INSEAD. He researches, teaches, and consults on issues of collaboration, organizational design and new ways of working, and leadership.

**Heidi K. Gardner** is a distinguished fellow at Harvard Law School and a faculty chair in the school's executive education programs. She is also a cofounder of Gardner & Co.