

Unlocking the true creative potential of remote working – through lockdown and beyond

Depending on your perspective, 2020 has either been a year to forget or a year that will never be forgotten. Few aspects of our lives have remained untouched by the COVID-19 pandemic. And whether we like it or not, the ramifications are going to be felt for a long time to come.

But as we approach the end of the year and take stock of everything that has happened, we can also begin to appreciate some of the unexpected silver-linings that COVID-19 has brought. For me, one of the biggest changes provoked by Covid is our approach to work. Research suggests that nearly two thirds (60%) of the UK adult population are currently working from home, with a quarter (26%) planning to continue this permanently or occasionally post-pandemic. Two-thirds of employers have reported increased productivity for remote workers compared to in-office workers.

While remote working is by no means a new concept, this is the first time we have seen such a seismic shift led by businesses themselves. Granted, for many firms this started out as a necessity rather than a choice, but it has since turned into a real lightbulb moment: you don't have to be in an office to get the job done.

However, while the daily commute, awkward chats by the water cooler and the need to wear proper trousers instead of pyjama bottoms is certainly not missed, remote working is not without its challenges. Many people have replaced one set of distractions with another set. Others struggle to find the perfect remote-working environment in which to think creatively or to deep-dive into complex subjects and arrive at new ways of thinking about them.

I discovered this myself when I stepped down as CEO of my previous company Skimlinks. I wanted to try something new and, after stepping away from such a busy and demanding role, I expected to have boundless free time and headspace from which the ideas for my next venture might flow.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

Despite being out of the office, I was still surrounded by distractions – from busy and noisy co-working spaces, uncomfortable cafes that lacked ergonomic workstations to the repetitive and uninspiring four walls of my flat.

I decided that a change of scenery would help so I embarked on a trip around France and Spain. Life as a digital nomad was certainly more exciting, but it didn't solve the fact that I couldn't find places that were both inspiring and conducive to productive and ergonomic work.

Thankfully, I came across a book that would change everything for me: Cal Newport's *Deep Work*. In his book, Newport talks extensively about finding and creating working environments that facilitate uninterrupted, distraction-free, creative thinking. He explains how work that is performed in a state of focused concentration is not only the source of significant human innovation and creativity, but it is also the source of fulfilment and joy.

What's more, he touches on the fact that so many of us are now constantly facing a huge array of online and offline distractions, hindering our ability to truly focus. In order to get into this 'deep work' state, we need to retreat from our normal environment, perhaps somewhere closer to nature, and intersperse our periods of focused concentration with exploration, play and learning.

It was a concept that resonated with me so clearly, and Newport points out that this idea of retreating in order to ideate is something that many of our greatest authors, thinkers, inventors and leaders have been doing for years, including the likes of Bill Gates with his quarterly "Think Weeks" and J. K. Rowling

booking herself into a suite in the Four Seasons to finish writing her book.

I was inspired by the mission of making access to this type of thinking not something reserved just for the billionaires in our society. I wanted to create 'deep work' as a service, so that this type of workspace optimisation became a normal part of the way we worked – and thus the idea for Flown was born.

Aimed at knowledge workers (essentially anyone who thinks for a living), Flown is a platform that provides mental and physical spaces for people to get away from their day-to-day environments and focus on producing their most creative work.

Flown is split into two key offerings. Flown Away is a highly curated list of homes, hotels and retreat spaces that are fully equipped for distraction-free, ergonomic and productive remote working. And Flown Here is a treasure trove of resources and interactive tools to help workers establish more effective 'deep work' rituals – from virtual accountability groups to perception-shifting creative challenges.

Since announcing the start of Flown last month, I have already spoken to so many people who have expressed how, despite the new found freedom that comes from life outside the office, they too have found it tough to concentrate and focus. And of course, even the people who have been working remotely for many years now – freelancers, creatives, entrepreneurs – know how hard it can be to find the right spaces for distraction-free creative working.

What we all agreed on was that, when we get opportunities to do 'deep work', it really is magic – and the very best ideas flourish when you allow yourself to enter that state of flow.

So while I am sure there will always be a place for traditional offices, I believe companies will recognise their employees need a diversity of environments to work from, depending on the type of work they need to accomplish. Day-to-day "shallow" work is great for offices; but "deep" work – creative, valuable work – requires distraction-free space and focus. It won't just be digital nomads who do remote work, but all knowledge workers will benefit from it.

Read also

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