



## 6 Ways to Make Virtual Work More Human

Despite the technology at our fingertips, many remote workers feel disconnected from the home office. How can we overcome this separateness?

BY LOU SOLOMON

The advantages of working virtually abound with benefits including flexibility and less time spent traveling on the road. However, engagement and separateness, the state of being kept apart from one's teammates, managers, leaders, and the culture at headquarters can take a toll. Employees who work virtually are often unhappy and on the outside of their companies in more ways than one, and that in turn can hamper productivity.

According to a recent Interact Harris Survey, more than two-thirds of American employees who ever work virtually agree that management needs to communicate better in order to keep them engaged. And 53% of U.S. virtual workers indicate they have to work twice as hard as those in the office to make connections within their organization.

Perhaps most alarmingly, 55% of virtual workers say their boss communicates with them almost exclusively by email. Email ups the probability that people will miscommunicate inadvertently, and people who depend too heavily on email can feel more isolated.

In order to keep team members engaged and ensure productivity and growth, leaders who aim to have a personal, authentic voice that initiates change and inspiration must find ways to stay close to employees, no matter how spread out or what size the organization is that they lead. Here are six ways to do that:

### **1. BE INTENTIONAL**

Blur the lines between technology and personal communication. Create a strategy for a conversational, relationship-based approach to culture that builds a sense of connectedness. Increase the value you put on human-to-human communication.

### **2. HUMANIZE CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS**

Avoid sending out over-vetted, impersonal documents that feel more institutional than human. Speak with simplicity and clarity. Tell personal stories. Invite feedback, listen, and respond.

### **3. BUILD GENUINE, PERSONAL CONNECTIONS**

Wells Fargo Capital Finance CEO Henry Jordan has for decades sent his Daily Thought to employees. You could do something similar, or even post regular video messages to employees on the intranet. Managers should call virtual employees on a regular basis and see if they have what they need to be their best.

“Today our personal communications are crowded by the 24/7 news cycle, status updates, tweets, texts, and phone calls coming at us from all directions—trying to get anyone’s attention is next to impossible,” says Erin Freeman, chief communications officer at Farmers Insurance. “The key to breaking through is the power of our on-on-one interactions and relationships—how we make someone feel in each interaction is the currency by which we gain someone’s attention and engagement.”

#### **4. THINK SMALL**

Pare down the number of people on project teams to allow for intimacy and trust. What virtual workers often lack is the satisfaction of what it means to be a part of a trusting team of people connected by purpose. Bring a virtual team together twice a year to reconnect face-to-face. Use this time to decide how the team wants to work and communicate with one another.

#### **5. DISCOURAGE AN EMAIL-ONLY CULTURE**

Employees are wasting hours managing email that does nothing to build connections much less trust. Consider “No Email Fridays” and “No Email Weekends” for virtual teams. Use Skype and encourage members to pick up the phone for real conversations. It’s important for teams to see each other on videoconference regularly. The standard-issue, audio-only conference call is unsatisfying and draining. We are not influenced and don’t feel engaged by disembodied mediums that allow us to multitask.

#### **6. BE INCLUSIVE AND LESS HEADQUARTER-CENTRIC**

In general, the farther employees are from the home office, the less prioritized they feel. Take this into consideration. For example, pay attention to different time zones and vary meeting times. Recognize the great work being done by virtual employees to the entire organization.

It’s time to take thoughtful inventory of virtual workforces to avoid paying the human and financial cost of separateness.

We cannot forget our most basic, core goal in business: To create connections and relationships. Today’s frontier is not the technology required to run a global company—it is applying technology while bringing along the nurturing, engaging aspect of human communication.

*—Lou Solomon is an author, TEDx speaker and founder of Interact Studio, a communications company that helps business leaders and their teams to make connections, earn trust and build influence.*