

How to ensure successful collaboration in a remote-working environment

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Ways to ensure remote collaboration

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How to ensure successful collaboration in the remote-working environment

Some manufacturers have temporarily closed their factory doors and are now working remotely. If you're one of them, you may currently be juggling a variety of challenges – from keeping employees safe and well to maintaining motivation whilst continuing operations.

However, virtual collaboration doesn't have to cause a headache. By being proactive, you can support your workforce effectively and accelerate your growth.

How? It's all about the technology. Here, we explore how you can use digital tools to work together successfully.



Tools for transformation



Choose the right tools

First, carefully consider the technology you want to use – don't jump in feet first. This will require you to think about a number of different aspects:

Pick a solution, not a product

Ensure your tools are solutions, rather than a solitary product. In this way, systems, applications and devices will all be connected, making collaboration and sharing content much easier. Plus, you'll avoid any conflicts, or duplication and compatibility issues. That means the usability and the quality of related business reports aren't restricted – and you can save money too.

If you're already using Microsoft products, for example, you may also have access to their cloud database ([Microsoft Azure SQL](#)) and video-conferencing application ([Microsoft Teams](#)). Alternatively, you could explore modular software that can integrate with your existing systems.

Pay attention to the details

It's important to review your solution after you've made your decision. From the different licensing models on offer to how viable the tool will actually be in your business, you don't want to sign up for something that's impractical later down the line.

Due diligence is essential. Look at the technology's functions, along with its life cycle. We suggest selecting a trustworthy technology partner who will be there to support you now and throughout your relationship with them. They'll help you minimise risks



and upscale or downscale your systems as required.

Put the right infrastructure in place

To collaborate effectively, you'll need to have the right technology infrastructure. A key aspect is, of course, internet connection. Not all connections are made equal, so make sure your remote team has enough bandwidth to manage the amount of data they'll be using.

Consider the devices your staff have too. If their personal laptop may result in reduced productivity, you might need to purchase a reasonably priced one on their behalf. For capturing data on the go, mobiles can be used. And if anyone requires a bigger screen but also wants to use a device like a notebook, then a tablet may be more suitable.

For team members that need to access your office desktop remotely, [set up a remote desktop connection](#). It's quick, easy, and often doesn't require you to buy any additional products.



Enhance your business resilience

FASTER

Turn to the cloud

If you've not already considered the cloud, then it's time to do so. It's key to ensuring business continuity:

Switch now

The main benefit of moving to the cloud is that it adds resilience to your SME's critical data systems. This reduces business downtime should anything unexpected occur.

Employees can connect to systems and share documents in real time. Large files can be accessed swiftly, and multiple users can review content simultaneously. What's more, all data is backed up. Therefore, if a server or PC fails, it's not an issue – simply use an alternative device. The cloud will prove especially beneficial if your business is using legacy systems, as these have a higher chance of hardware failure.

On top of all these benefits, the cloud is cost-effective, easy to integrate with other systems, and is straightforward to deploy and manage.

Adapt to online demand

Cloud-based systems can also be particularly helpful if you need to integrate an online shop, sales app or stock management system.

In this difficult time, many have had to switch from the conventional retail trading system to taking a high level of online orders. This has proved quite challenging – not only is there the switch to the cloud to consider, but they also have to process orders quickly and accurately.

Thankfully, cloud-based systems have a higher availability ratio than traditional platforms and are easily scalable depending on your SME's needs. And upscaling production quickly is nothing new to industrial technologies like the cloud. It can help with increasing volumes as well as ensuring business systems can process a higher amount of data.

The key to success is the correct system design and a thorough feasibility study. If this is something you currently require, it's a great idea to speak to a trusted technology adviser for guidance. If any of your peers from similar industries have recently made the switch, they'll be able to offer some advice too.

Select suitable software

There are so many fantastic tools available for cloud-based storage, including [Dropbox](#), [Google Drive](#) and [Amazon Web Services](#).

Collaboration can also be achieved through video-conferencing tools like [Slack](#), [Microsoft Teams](#), and [Webex](#). These can offer extra features that can help engage your team too – such as virtual lists and whiteboards, polls and breakout rooms.

Even engineering can be done at a distance. There are multiple options that enable engineers to use cloud-based storage for CAD files ([Kenesto](#) and [AutoCAD](#), for instance) and collaborate on design.



Building your security shield

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Prioritise cybersecurity

The safety and security of your business data should always be high on your priority list – even more so at the moment.

Unfortunately, cyberattacks don't suddenly stop because of a global pandemic. In fact, the opposite has happened – there has been an increase in attempts to access business data and finances, and cause disruption through electronic viruses. Here are some steps you can take:

Mitigate the risk

A home network or public WiFi connection won't be as secure as your managed office network. However, you can reduce the chance of a cyberattack by introducing either a two-factor sign-in platform or a secured gateway (for example [Okta](#), [OneLogin](#), [JumpCloud](#) or [1Password](#)).

You should also guarantee that your company's network administrators can manage all company equipment remotely, including laptops and mobile devices. They should be able to implement a regular password-changing policy, as well as monitor network traffic for any malicious activity.

If your business doesn't have an IT policy yet, then now is the time to get one in place. You can work on it with a trusted technology partner or technical consultant. They'll help preserve business-critical data whilst ensuring easy access for your team. Ideally, they'll offer ongoing employee training on how to respond to suspicious activity as well.

Introduce education

On a similar note, it pays to look into what you yourself can teach your team on common cyberattacks. Currently, these include:

- An email from someone portraying themselves as a superior and requesting the individual to set up a money transfer
- Phishing scams where an email is sent from your company's domain and prompts you to click on a link or download a file, resulting in your business' system getting infected with a virus

A recent [survey by Make UK and The Manufacturer](#) revealed that over 80% of large companies and 60% of SMEs have experienced a data breach in the last year alone.

Take action now

You don't have to wait to speak to an IT partner to protect your business – there are some easy steps you can take today. For example:

- Ensure you've installed the latest versions of your software/hardware & activate firewalls
- Allow only authorised & secure access to systems
- Protect and manage mobile devices
- Implement a password-change regime
- Introduce business resilience methods
- Regularly backup and test systems

There are also a number of government-funded organisations that can provide you with free and impartial advice, including us here at Made Smarter.



Creating a robust workforce

Maintain team continuity and culture

Ensuring a positive company culture remotely won't be so easy. However, whilst a virtual office lacks the shared experiences of a physical environment, culture can still be built organically – it simply takes more deliberation and proactivity.

Get the most from collaborative tools

There are a variety of tools available that can help with both collaboration and team management. [Trello](#) and [Asana](#) are just two popular choices.

Through these, you can define a task's requirements, duration and completion time. You'll also be able to track and analyse your team's progress and KPIs. Ultimately, you'll have the power to boost productivity.

On top of this, you can use AI-enabled transcription software alongside video-conferencing software to record events and actions – allowing you to increase productivity even further.

Be explicit about your work policy

Not everyone defines 'flexible' or 'remote' work in the same way. For instance, do you expect your staff to be online a certain number of hours each day?

As they're not there for you to physically oversee in person, some remote employees may feel like they need to respond to requests immediately to show that they're staying actively engaged (even if these requests are for non-priority work).

So, ensure that there are boundaries. Agree that everyone can carve out time for meaningful work without interruption.

Ensure positive engagement

Similarly, people may feel like they should always be working. However, in a normal office environment there will have always been conversation at desks or at the water cooler, and this is part of what makes for a positive culture.

Keeping your employees engaged without this may require you to get a bit creative. You could host a virtual happy hour or a breakfast session where people from the same department can discuss their challenges.

Another idea is to introduce 'working hours'. This is where an employee has specific times available for audio and video calls. It allows them to make room for those conversations and devote their full attention to the matter at hand. Plus, it can also help them organise their work better.



Creating a robust workforce

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Maintain team continuity and culture (cont.)

Rethink all of your processes

You'll need to take a broad approach in order to collaborate effectively. This isn't just considering project management and remote-working tools, but can be related to other aspects of business like performance reviews and recruitment.

Additionally, it may be that not all of your team have to work remotely. For some, their work may be vital, requiring them to still go out to the production line. As a result, different team members may notice a different impact. You should make sure that the whole organisation still feels like one team.

It's a good idea to have champions of this new virtual culture – individuals who are receptive to it and can motivate others to join in.

Prevent communication issues

Anticipate communication confusion. Ensure everyone knows their role, responsibilities and objectives, and that all contact details are available. In this way, they'll be able to easily get a hold of the relevant person when needed.

Guarantee a good feedback loop too. You want productivity to continue and quality work to be maintained, so it's a great idea to set up meetings designed to give constructive feedback.

Avoid technical downtime

You should have a plan in place for preventing any technical problems too – for example, if either email or WiFi goes down. Bear in mind that some employees won't benefit from high-speed broadband at home, and so you may need to look into purchasing a fibre network upgrade for them.

Overcrowded conference calls can pose a challenge as well. Chaotic audio will cause most to be discouraged from contributing, potentially bringing about latency issues. But this also extends to sharing large files and avoiding video delays and interruptions. Keep calls to a minimum audience size where you can.

And just as you should implement a feedback loop on employee work, it's important to ask for continuous feedback on your processes too. If you're completely new to running a remote team, then the chances are you won't get everything right the first time. Be receptive to what worked and what didn't, and ensure you make adaptations where necessary.



Supporting your digital journey

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Support from Made Smarter

Using technologies to collaborate effectively is going to come with its obstacles. Thankfully, Made Smarter is on hand to support you as you start your digital journey. We work with small and medium-sized manufacturers across the North West, providing specialist and personalised technology advice. We'll help you identify the right digital tools and, as a result, make everyday improvements to your business.

We also offer up to 50% match-funding for technology implementation, and can pair you with a [fully-funded digital native](#) to develop your digital strategy. On top of this, our [roadmapping workshops](#) will allow you to pave the way for digitalisation, and our [subsidised leadership programme](#) will ensure you have the skills to lead your SME to a stronger, smarter future.

Speak to a Made Smarter adviser about using digital technologies today. The sooner you talk to us, the sooner you can begin to benefit and start driving your growth. Simply register at [madesmarter.uk](https://www.madesmarter.uk). By collaborating with us and empowering collaboration amongst your team, we're #SmarterTogether.



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