# Structure and flexibility: two key elements of a successful virtual workplace

*Structure and flexibility together might seem like an oxymoron. But they are not. **Alana Baker** and **Stephanie Chan-Ahuja** write that as organisations around the world continue to manage virtual or hybrid teams, leaders can provide structured flexibility to help employees stay both engaged and productive.*

In early 2020, organisations around the world faced a sudden and dramatic shift to the way they worked. Unless they were deemed essential and could keep operating in-person despite health restrictions, telework became necessary for companies to maintain productivity and keep business going. Almost overnight, many organisations had to operate in a virtual setting.

This posed challenges to be met; not just for getting work done, but for staying connected and engaged. The usual ways that colleagues used to interact with each other socially– the water cooler chats and weekly happy hours – vanished. So, too, went the in-person collaborative structures for getting work done; the weekly meetings around the same table, the ability to pop into someone's office for a quick chat, even simply seeing someone at their desk – all suddenly a thing of the past. In this "new normal" of remote working, how could organisations keep their workers engaged in a fully remote team? How do we function in this new way of working? One of the best ways to answer this question is by looking at successful companies who work virtually by design.

So, we went into a remote organisation, Quinncia, to research how they have managed to keep their workers engaged, and business booming. Unlike many companies, Quinncia has been a fully remote organisation since its inception, in 2016. That is, all their employees work virtually (from all over the world), and they have never had an office space. This also means that they were working remotely even before the pandemic hit.

Quinncia is a successful technology company that designs and runs a system that helps students navigate finding jobs out of university. It works with 100+ universities and has a dozen employees located all over the world (from London to Nigeria and beyond, plus a digital nomad who has lived in over 40 countries while working with Quinncia). We interviewed all of their employees, including the CEO, head of engineering, and head of sales. We asked them about their intentions and experiences working at a fully remote organisation as well as the positives and negatives of managing a remote team.

We found three main factors that are important for success in a fully remote team:

## 1. Individual motivation and fit

People who want to work at Quinncia saw remote working as a benefit. During the job search process, not everyone was looking for a remote job necessarily, but they all saw remote working as a positive. It was a set-up that allowed them to schedule their work time and their nonwork time flexibly. For example, if they had to book a dentist appointment or take their pet to the vet, they were able to do that easily without facing scheduling issues that often arise because workers are at the office for the same period of time that dentists and vets are open for business. Of course, people who worked in an office setting would also be able to schedule a dentist appointment or go for a vet visit, but it would require more scheduling hassle, taking personal time off, etc.

However, simply perceiving the remote nature of their work as a positive is not enough to thrive in this setting. It is also coupled with high self-motivation. Quinncia employees say that being able to motivate yourself to work, even when there is no direct supervision or anyone checking over your shoulder, is important. One employee we interviewed said, "A big portion of working from home is being able to motivate yourself to get the work done. So, if someone isn't doing that and they're just taking it as an opportunity to be home all day and just do whatever they want, that is not going to work. You have to find it within yourself to get the work done."

Therefore, the alignment between the organisation's and the employee's way of working is particularly important. Because the motivation often comes from the employee rather than from management or direct supervision, finding a good fit is crucial. Despite the importance of job applicants seeing remote working as a positive, current employees still find that skills match and cultural fit to be more indicative of success in the job, and hiring managers keep this in mind when bringing on new employees. Even though they are remote, employees still communicate and work together closely. As a result, a fit into the company culture – in addition to having the right skills for the job – matters immensely.

## 2. Group communication

The second factor we found was that constant communication enabled Quinncia workers to stay organised and productive. This is especially important in Quinncia's case because their staff spans across 7 different time zones. Those logging on from the Pacific US will see messages from those in India from the day before.

They have two forms of communication: regular weekly meetings and ad hoc messaging. First, there are the weekly meetings where the whole team meet on Zoom and discuss general business and the plan for the week. Then, the business team and the engineering team will meet separately to discuss more specific topics. However, outside of these weekly meetings, employees rely heavily on ad hoc messaging and meetings on their communication tool, Slack, to ping quick questions they have for their colleagues. The quick chats are particularly effective for people who are more introverted and less likely to speak up in bigger meetings, one employee said, "you can just exchange a couple of messages in the Slack chat. It's a lot easier than gathering [in a bigger group] and having an hour meeting, then keeping quiet for most of the time when it's not your turn."

Another method of using Slack is to replicate some of the in-office habits that facilitate conversation. Take the water cooler conversations, one of the most important social interactions that many forced to work from home during the pandemic miss. Quinncia employees created a chat group called "#water-kooler" to replicate the random run-ins during the day and have informal chats with their colleagues. On #water-kooler, employees post pictures with their friends and family or share a funny gif they came across. It isn't about work topics, but rather sharing other aspects of their lives and forming more personal bonds. Many employees told us they consider their co-workers who they have never met in person to be close friends.

Importantly, teamwork and a sense of communality matter more than ever. Regardless of the format of communication, there is a general willingness to step forward and help their colleagues. They perceive others on the same team to be friendly and helpful. "We have this openness, like we're very available and ready to assist, which is something that I think it has been important" says one staff. Being a small team also helps in communicating a unifying mission: "Everyone's just trying to work on the same goal but also personally caring for each other, which is a great thing".

## 3. Company connection

Finally, we find that the organisational structure that is in place helps to create a place for conversation and trust to incubate. In addition to the weekly meetings, Quinncia has one dedicated hour for social activities where the CEO explicitly says, "you can talk about anything but work". Called a "lunch meeting", it is neither during lunchtime for those in the east nor those in the west, but a label to signal that it's time away from work. The group usually plays a virtual game together, catch up on weekend plans (mostly pre-COVID), and have a good laugh. Last year, a staff member volunteered to create the role of "Chief Morale Officer", taking charge to plan things such as virtual yoga sessions and talent shows.

The leaders play an important role in facilitating online conversations. It might be tempting for workers to just enter into an online meeting and want to discuss the topic and leave. However, the leaders make sure during weekly meetings that some time is spent discussing non-work topics. As someone told us, "they really won't get started on work, if someone like try to bring [work] up, they're like, "Hey, so, you know, how was your weekend over here" and so it's just taking that first 20 minutes and just bringing up a funny topic talking about our weekend." Furthermore, leaders are responsible for making different people feel inclusive. Those who are usually more reserved might find it slightly awkward to be called upon but nonetheless say they appreciate the time spent sitting and listening to their colleagues. "It's okay to like go off topic for maybe 30 minutes of an hour-long meeting and it really is important, so I honestly like it. And even if I don't say much or other people don't say much, it's still just nice to have that interaction with people and learn a little bit more like what are they doing in their lives, what did they do this weekend, [if] anything sad happened, [if] anything fun happened, or something like that, just to build those connections."

**Conclusion: have structure and flexibility**

Two years into the COVID-19 crisis, with new variants always around the bend, companies that went virtual are still largely that way. More than that, a permanent shift toward increased telework is becoming a global trend. As remote ways of working become the new normal, questions remain about how to do it best, especially when it comes to keeping workers productive and engaged.

In one organisation, Quinncia, we find that the combination of structure and flexibility is key. Structure is provided top-down in the form of weekly meetings and communication norms, but the flexibility given to employees allows for their own expression of work styles and personalities. As an example of how structure can be combined with flexibility is how the Quinncia team is required to attend the weekly team meeting, but employees are not restricted on the hours they work or where they work. This "structured flexibility" allows employees to bring their best and unique selves to work, improving their well-being and their work performance. They feel motivated to work and contribute positively to the team and can do that in their own way.

While structure and flexibility might seem like an oxymoron, they can be practiced in tandem. In the case of Quinncia, it has yielded positive outcomes. As organisations around the world continue to manage virtual or hybrid teams, leaders can provide structured flexibility to maximise employee engagement and performance.

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*Notes:*

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