NEELA BETTRIDGE

REMOTE WORKING, STEM & AI

A publication by Neela Bettridge Ltd

How to make sure that working remotely doesn't leave your team feeling remote

The trend towards remote working is inevitable. But are you comfortable with it? I think some leaders, considering the prospect of a remote-working team, have a vision of themselves taking a lovely fleet of origami boats down to a lake, nervously releasing them – and then watching them drift apart, unfurl and finally sink. Remote working = AWOL team. Here are a few ways to keep your fleet afloat.

Share!

Collaborative working technology is getting every more user friendly. So use it. From Google Docs to Templafy, there's no need for remote working to mean isolation.

Communicate!

Keep the lines of communication open and ensure that they are clean, crisp and gleaming lines. Don't even entertain the idea that remote working might mean a reduction in communication. If anything, it should mean more. Voice calls, instant messaging, video conferences: set them all to work.

Recruit wisely

Ensure at the recruitment stage that you and the candidate know exactly why they're applying to work remotely. Is it for the right reasons? Do they know how to make it succeed? Ask specific questions to find out.

Stay familiar

In the office, we have a sense of each other in space. Even if you're not in easy eye contact with your team members, nor they with each other, you can still make sure everyone knows – more or less – where everyone else is, so that sense of a physical team endures. Make remote familiar.

Human connection in a virtual world

A couple of articles caught my eye recently, one on employees' preference for video calls over voice calls and another on the importance of strong friendships at work.

Did you notice how I started this blog? With "caught my eye". Because there's the thing – the eyes have it. We place implicit trust in the evidence of our own eyes. And, moreover, we crave connection with the eyes of others. I'm pretty sure that's never going to change. Yet remote working is gaining ever-greater traction, and virtual teams are an inevitability. As business leaders, we must ensure our workplaces – physical and virtual – are fertile spaces for human connection.

But how? Well, normalising video calls is one way. They're not just good for forging human connection – in today's increasingly visual world, they're also a potent method of communicating information.

Even when eye contact is not an option, though, it's in our power to foster human connection within our teams – think virtual breakout areas and water coolers in the form of internal social networks. Connection with our colleagues is absolutely crucial, whether they're across the corridor or across the Atlantic.

How to make working from home work for your business

“Working from home”. I think for many people that phrase is weighted rather more heavily to the right than to the left: what they hear is “home”, and it sounds pretty blissful. But the reality can often mean a world-record-beating number of pushes on the snooze button, a leisurely breakfast (or multiple breakfasts, and another breakfast in the afternoon), a dishevelled appearance and swiftly diminishing productivity.

Here are some tips to keep your remote teams firing on all cylinders:

1. Get a room

Encourage your virtual teams to set up their space at home so that they effectively have a miniature version of the office. This is, of course, more of a psychological step than anything else. Setting an area or a room aside for work is a mental exercise in itself, the equivalent of warming up before launching into a proper workout.

2. Don’t stop talking

Ask your remote teams to be as contactable and present as possible, even if they’re on the other side of the globe. Arrange a morning telephone catch-up (and an evening one too, if you can) and ensure they have access to some

form of instant messaging. As a leader, you're going to need to push for more phone contact than you might feel naturally inclined towards – maintaining that human contact is crucial.

3. Dress to impress

Or at least just dress. It's amazing what wearing shoes does for your focus. Planting your soles firmly on the floor rather than cosily curling your toes into slippers makes you far more inclined to work. Arranging video calls via Hangouts, FaceTime and Skype is one sure way to ensure global teams actually get dressed – which is as much a positive mental exercise as properly preparing your workspace.

Team building in the age of remote working

“So if everybody can just say a little bit about themselves as we go round the table. Who wants to start?” I think we’ve all been in this scenario, be it in a meeting or at the start of a team-building exercise.

Team building is tricky and I’m conscious that many people would rather avoid it (or limit it to after-work drinks) but as this fascinating article explains, team building is actually a pretty potent force for improving team performance – so long as you use it right.

Behavioural science tells us that ritual (which is essentially what team building is) can be powerfully exclusive as well as inclusive and binding. So if you already have cliques – or even just certain groups with stronger bonds – within the team, then so-called “team-building” can be destructive to team performance, unless you take great care to make it inclusive.

But what the article really got me pondering was the place of team building rituals in remote working. It’s pretty tricky to catch someone falling backwards when they’re in a different country! Which just goes to shore up my conviction that leaders in the fourth industrial revolution – this new world of technology and virtual teams – need to have richer human qualities than ever before.

The humanities in the fourth industrial revolution

Is there more to life than STEM – science, technology, engineering and mathematics – in today's hyper-technological world? Students could be forgiven for thinking the liberal arts and humanities are defunct, that there's no place in the skills pipeline for such impractical fields.

But I'm fully behind the thrust of this article, which cites a new book by George Anders that is all about the importance of the human factor as the world gets ever more technological and digital.

For the thing is, technology and big data are essentially cold and inhuman. Those nightmarish sci-fi visions in film and literature where "the machines" take over are, I think, expressions of discomfort about this coldness. For the world to keep on ticking along, all this technology and data needs human filters and human glue. We need people with those "liberal art" qualities – empathy, insight, creativity, leaps of the imagination – to take what's happening and make it work at a human level. People who are great thinkers, but whose thinking has not been herded down one path from the age of 18 – as the world changes, industry needs thinkers who can flex and bend with it.

And remember – at one time, there wasn't such a clear distinction between 'sciency' STEM subjects and the more reflective, creative ones – the kind

that people might say you’re mad for pursuing a degree in these days. That binary distinction has developed over time. There’s still room for the humanities in the skills development of our future talent.

The problem with STEM

As this TARGETjobs article describes, there's an increasingly worrying disconnect between the job market and STEM graduates.

Recruiters and employers are underselling technical roles, undervaluing them both in terms of the presentation of such roles' status and in terms of remuneration – even as STEM skills become more and more integral to the world we live in.

The way I see it, there are three major issues at play here.

STEM and pay

This recent BBC article describes the shortage of STEM teachers in Scotland. With STEM skills highly prized and often quite niche, salaries tend to be on the higher side – except, of course, in the teaching profession. How can this be combatted? We cannot, of course, raise salaries for STEM teachers and not for teachers of other subjects. The teaching profession has its work cut out to become an attractive proposition to STEM-qualified individuals.

STEM and status

Then there's the question of how STEM-relevant jobs are marketed and packaged. We need to tap into the enthusiasm that we know people feel for these subjects, and express how these roles let that enthusiasm blossom. We

need to make STEM-related roles look vocational, aspirational and desirable. STEM makes the world go round!

STEM and academia

The TARGETjobs article makes another observation that I think might be pertinent, noting that recruiters will often filter out candidates with a 2:2 degree. To me, this shows a lack of imagination on the part of the recruiter. The world is changing so quickly that relative ‘failure’ in examinations – systems that have been rigged up in what amounts to practically a different technological age – does not mean the candidate is unfit for roles in the modern STEM workplace. Of course, recruiters and HR teams need some way of narrowing things down, but it should really be by tests of their own design, rather than relying exclusively on formal academic results.

As a leader, are you encountering any issues around STEM? I’d love to hear how you’re getting on with it – do drop me an email.

Why it’s alright for STEM graduates to enter non-STEM industries

When it comes to STEM, everyone seems to agree that we have lots of challenges to overcome. Some say there’s a shortage of teachers, a shortage of graduates and a shortage of candidates. Others suggest that there are plenty of teachers, graduates and candidates – but not of STEM-related jobs. Others again seem to think the only shortage in STEM is of women.

What can we conclude from this mixed analysis? That STEM is increasingly on our minds would be my take. With the fourth industrial revolution underway, anything pertaining to technology is under ever greater scrutiny. The anxiety around STEM speaks to an anxiety about the hi-tech times we live in: are we ready? Can we cope? Even – are humans still relevant?

As to the first of those questions, well, we do need to move quickly. Businesses are both serving and shaping a swiftly changing world. The calls for solutions to new problems are coming thick and fast. Right now, the academic system is probably not well attuned to what’s going on in the wider world. Subject distinctions in STEM make less and less sense: academia has to catch up; companies must talk to universities. The government needs to enter the conversation. In fact, as I’ve said so often, it’s another example of just how crucial the human glue is as technology skyrockets.

Moreover, something that’s often brought up when writers lament the STEM situation is that STEM-trained students are being ‘lost’ to other sectors. I really don’t think that’s such a bad thing at all, actually! As the fourth industrial revolution takes hold, it’s going to seep into every aspect of society. We need lawyers and politicians and journalists and even medical staff who have an understanding of these topics, who are not intimidated by the jargon, who can oil the cogs of the fourth industrial revolution.

Are you up to speed with the STEM conversation? As leaders, we really must make sure we don’t get left behind!

STEM: why we have to talk as well as tech

With STEM becoming increasingly important, there's a whole lot of talk of tech these days. And there's also plenty of talk about how we all need to be able to talk tech! I for one agree with that sentiment: as I've said before, while many see the so-called drain of STEM graduates into non-STEM sectors as a problem, I actually think the opposite – STEM familiarity in every corner of society and industry is only going to benefit us as the fourth industrial revolution starts to accelerate. For it will accelerate at a pace we cannot imagine. Having STEM-literate people in sectors where STEM has traditionally been viewed as irrelevant is going to be a huge blessing.

But enough of talking about tech. What I want to write about today is the importance – in the context of the fourth industrial revolution – of talk itself. We need to be able to tech, yes, but we also really, really need to be able to talk, too. Casting aside the apocalyptic visions about where tech is leading us, a vision where the machines have taken over, we need to bear this in mind: tech is supposed to help us, to help society function better – I mean, there are even articles being written about an artificial intelligence-led future where none of us need to work at all.

But that's a long way in the future – however quickly the fourth industrial

revolution is progressing. As tech gets ever more sophisticated, it might start looking as if it is self-propelling, as if we can take a back seat; as tech begins to pre-empt what we want it to do, we might be tempted to let it. This would be a big, big mistake. Tech's appearance of intelligence is – for now – just that. It still needs us to steer it. And to flirt for a moment with those apocalyptic visions, we do have to keep talking as a way to keep tabs on where it's going.

If we all start sitting back and letting tech do its thing, talk only in tech's language, we'll lose each other – and we might start losing control of tech. Losing control of tech is not – I honestly believe – going to lead to the rise of the machines, but it might mean two lesser evils: we don't use it to the maximum and we lose a little bit of our humanity.

What about you? As a leader, do you feel it's increasingly difficult to make face-to-face human connections as the workplace gets more and more hi-tech?

AI: keeping ahead of the machines

Dan Schawbel produces an interesting annual workplace trends forecast for the coming year, and 2018's is as good as ever.

I'm particularly interested to talk about number 4 – "Artificial intelligence becomes embedded in the workplace" – as to read his description of what's coming, you might think he's talking about 2058 not 2018.

There is a touch of hype around AI – as this article explains – but, all the same, there's no denying that it's going to have an immense impact on our workplaces.

It appears that jobs traditionally regarded as low-skilled are most at risk – manual delivery roles and manufacturing, for instance. But some predictions put the figure at almost half of all jobs being made redundant by AI within the next twenty years. That's some prospect, and while it is unclear how it will play out, what's for certain is that workers and young job seekers need to take note: to keep one step ahead of the machines, we need to raise our skill levels as high as possible. Anyone coaching young professionals or interested in attracting talent needs to be on board with this.

P: +44 (0)7771 726 971
E: neela@neelabettridge.com
W: www.neelabettridge.com