

‘This isn’t remote working, this is crisis management’

Tracy Keogh, one of the founders of the GrowRemote movement in Ireland, shares her thoughts on the new working reality for many businesses and their employees amidst the Covid-19 outbreak.

[GrowRemote](#) began as a WhatsApp group among like-minded proponents of remote working serving as an economic supercharge for the Irish economy, enabling workers to remain in their community and boost the local economy. Today Grow Remote has 60 local chapters and more than 10,000 members across Ireland. In recent months the not-for-profit group [secured €500,000](#) from the Regional Enterprise Development Fund (REDF)

One of the founders of the movement is Bank of Ireland Community Enterprise manager for Connaught and Ulster, Tracy Keogh.

Rather than feeling vindicated, Keogh points out that what is happening as thousands of workers suddenly find themselves working at home amidst family and crisis isn’t truly what remote working is about. It is crisis management, she says, as parents try to work and at the same time manage bored kids and worry about ageing parents.

Rather, real remote working is well-thought-out and considered a viable extension of the workplace, whether it is from a home office or a co-working space. People who had already been working at home or remotely, perhaps a few days a week, should easily adjust to the present situation. Those who haven’t are juggling domestic chaos and ensuring things like broadband, laptops and software actually cooperate. For businesses, all of this is impacting productivity at a time when many face a very real existential threat.

Do you believe remote working will help maintain productivity and keep the economy on track?

Remote working can transform the economy of our local communities if companies properly commit to it which means adopting their culture, tech and policy to work for remote working. It’s lower cost for the employer, makes sense for the environment, the wellbeing of our colleagues, and lets income come into, and stay within our local communities. If we get to a point where jobs are advertised without a location, people will be able to live where they chose, and that will go a long way to re-balancing the Irish economy.

What advice do you have for firms that are embracing remote working out of necessity and for the first time?

This isn't remote work as the remote working community would know it. This is crisis management. Companies have been doing remote long before the technology properly enabled it, so the first thing we'd say is let your people go home. Talk through communication channels and goals, and then make adjustments for the fact that they probably don't have a home office set up, and they're all of a sudden home with all the family!

After that, think of it like re-creating the office building, meeting rooms, and common areas.

The Building: [Microsoft Teams](#) and [Slack](#) are two communications tools you can use to set up your remote environment which is kind of like the physical building. Within that, you can create digital homes for each team/department through what those software applications call 'Channels'.

The meeting rooms: Video conferencing is needed to help people meet. With Teams, Microsoft has everything in one place, but with Slack you'll need [Zoom](#). There are other applications like [CrowdCast](#) or [Remo](#) which facilitate webinars or coworking.

The common areas: people, especially when remote, need things to congregate around to facilitate social interactions. One of the reasons remote companies rate so high on rating sites like Glassdoor is that all of these interactions are thought through and deliberate. This can be as simple as a Talking Point Thursday thread in Microsoft/Slack, or a 2pm Zoom that is not work related.

When you've got that set up, you'll need to watch as your teams adjust and iterate. It is at this point that the challenges get more nuanced and specific. I'd recommend reaching out to the likes of John Riordan or Renate Kolhmann and various others who have been managing remote teams for years and are more than willing to lend their experience.

Grow Remote has a dedicated resource for companies making the transition:
<https://growremote.ie/get-started-companies/>

What tools/technologies do you recommend they deploy for workers to stay on the same page and maintain productivity?

Email, Slack and Microsoft teams are the primary tools. Within that, you can use the likes of [Trello](#), [Teamwork](#) or [Basecamp](#) as a project management tool so that you know where everyone is on which goal.

I would say that from what we've learnt, tools aren't the real enabler. Remote as a way of working can accentuate any problems that already exist within a team. If your team hasn't set goals and a way to measure progress beyond turning up in the office, that will get worse when you're remote.

Set goals, agree on a communication structure, reinforce trust, and iterate as you get feedback.

What advice to you have for employees and what tips do you have for those working at home for possibly the first time?

Get involved with the remote working community and people from eBay, Shopify, Amazon and Apple who have been doing it for years. There, you'll see that the remote working experts aren't quick to give tips here, the likes of Buffer which has been remote-first for 10 years this week spoke about how they're having a hard time adjusting.

Getting support from others who are on the same journey and regularly communicating with your employer are the only two tips I would have.

Is the current crisis likely to make remote working a more accepted way to work for firms going forward?

We need to be ambitious about where remote work needs to get to. When companies are hiring, we need to get to a point where the position is advertised without a location. It is archaic that jobs are ring-fenced to a geographical area, and we need to understand that there is a barrier to entry to cities, so we're excluding a huge portion of the workforce.

This is putting ways of working on the desk of executives and making it a priority, it's pushing everyone past tech barriers. I think the driver of whether it makes change is whether or not companies start to look at the cultural part and I'll think we'll only see whether that is happening in a week or two.

Pictured at top: Grow Remote co-founder and community enterprise manager with Bank of Ireland Tracy Keogh

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