

WORKING FROM HOME

A BUSINESS MODEL FOR TROUBLED TIMES

WORKING[®]
SOLUTIONS



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SECTION 1:

INTRO TO WORKING FROM HOME



As we enter the final months of 2020 and begin looking toward 2021, it's painfully clear that there's no immediate end to the COVID-19 pandemic. No matter what political outcomes the coming months bring, there's no escaping the fact that working from home (WFH) is the new normal.

For some, this is business as usual. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to upset the traditional apple cart of American commerce, some companies have simply stepped up the scale of their existing work-from-home model and are embracing the benefits of wide-scale implementation:



Less office space utilization means **less money spent on infrastructure**



The end of commuting and more flexible scheduling **drive employee satisfaction**



A more flexible, comfortable workspace means **improved productivity**



A virtual labor pool provides access to **better qualified candidates** (and many more of them)



In just a few months, the economy
has gone from

14 to 50%

of its entire workforce working from home.



Wait — working from home can actually help productivity?

Though employers have sometimes feared the “shirking-from-home” specter, the real numbers show otherwise.



“The one overriding piece of feedback is that working from home is far better than anyone expected. We’re hearing that firms get the perception people are working harder.”

Nicholas Bloom

Stanford economics professor ([via Vox](#))

That’s welcome news in an economy that’s gone from [about 14%](#) to [half of its entire workforce](#) working virtually in just a few months.

As lawmakers continue to debate how to incentivize re-opening traditional workplaces, some business leaders are well ahead of them. [Google has announced](#) that its approximately 200,000 employees and contractors will be staying at home through mid-2021. Slack is already operating with the idea that the at-home work [will be permanent](#), and many others are following suit.



But those are tech leaders, accustomed to leveraging technology to meet immediate needs. For other businesses, the path to a permanent and effective WFH model may not be quite so clear. And as the economy and the very culture of the country continues to shift to virtual, there may not be time to catch up later.

My team already has email, Skype, Zoom and Slack. Why do I need to invest more in WFH? If your business is fortunate (or far-thinking) enough to sustain and even grow revenue right now, shifting your WFH mindset from ad hoc to ironclad could make the difference in your market share in the years to come. It can also offer more immediate benefits, such as boosting morale and productivity and weeding out unnecessary expenses.

If you're on the fence, or struggling to stay on top of the new WFH status quo, it's time to stop hedging your bets and dive in. It's time to get to work.





SECTION 2:

WHAT WORKING FROM HOME CAN DO FOR YOU

When done right, the shift to a comprehensive WFH footprint offers a rich list of operational and strategic advantages, including improved productivity, lower overhead and a better pool of labor to draw from.

Happy employees, happy customers, healthy bottom line. No more commuting. No need to fit life into an outdated 9-to-5 boilerplate. These are just a few of the ways the WFH model can improve work-life balance among workers.

Happy employees are productive workers, and they tend to stick around longer, too. That lowers your turnover rate and helps save you the time and expense of continuous rehiring and retraining.

Happy workers are also brand advocates, helping recruit new team members and customers just by great word-of-mouth. And when they interact with clients, their sense of happiness with your company shines through and reflects directly on your brand.



Lowering overhead costs while expanding access. In addition to saving some valuable dollars on commercial real estate, reducing the amount of physical space you use also can mean having to employ fewer resources on office management.

And while you're reducing your physical footprint, you can expand your virtual availability. Thanks to the flexibility of the virtual model, you can easily and cost-effectively expand your hours of availability or customer care from the traditional 9 to 5 to include evenings, early mornings or whatever your customers would prefer, in whatever time zones they live.





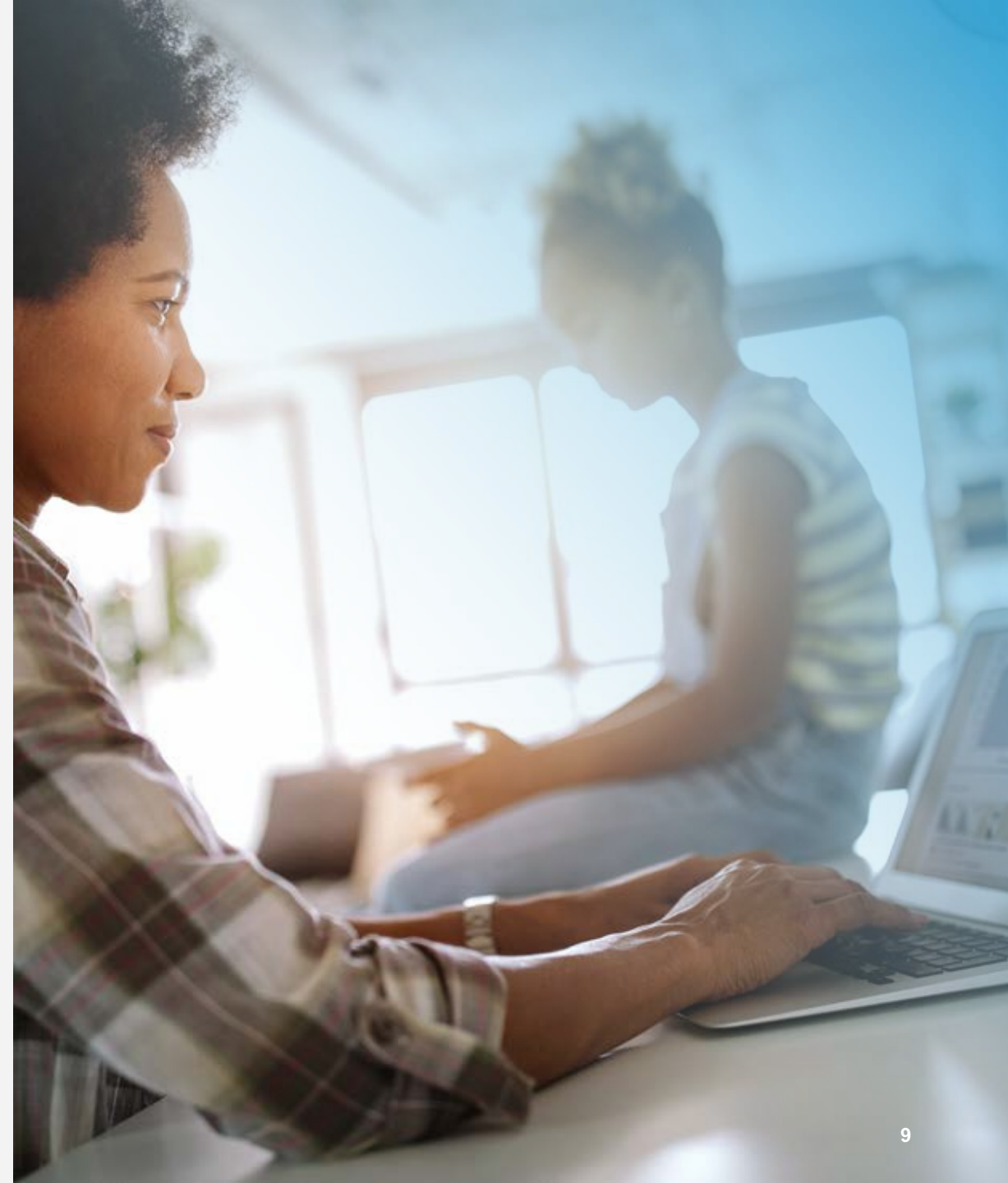
A wider selection of job candidates from a much larger and more diverse pool of job seekers. A virtual labor pool is a huge advantage, offering a means to:

- ▶ Expand the labor pool with access to more workers in more locations
- ▶ Improve quality of life for workers, who can operate from low-cost-of-living places and rural areas where jobs in their chosen field may have otherwise been scarce
- ▶ Lower your overhead by moving administrative tasks to the cloud
- ▶ Maintain business continuity services with remote resources when faced with crises or disasters, as Nationwide has demonstrated by applying crisis management methods to its Covid-19 response
- ▶ Ensure nonstop customer service at a time when most traditional call centers have shuttered





Access to greater diversity. The people engaging with you/buying from you want to see themselves reflected in you, so you will benefit by amplifying diverse voices. The virtual workforce gives you the chance to do this with access to workers in every corner of the United States.





Here are the companies leading the WFH revolution:

Some of the big-name companies that are succeeding right now chose to embrace the work-at-home model before they needed to. These companies didn't react — they led. And they're reaping the benefits of expanded coverage and engaged employees.



NATIONWIDE

Launching proactively in early March before widespread work-from-home mandates kicked into gear, Nationwide quickly shifted more than 98% of its 27,000 employees to a work-from-home model. In the process, the company leveraged the opportunity to shrink its physical office footprint from 20 to four locations.

The company's "pandemic experiment" has gone so well they've decided to make it permanent, where possible. Citing historical lessons from the Great Depression, two World Wars and other "key historical events that shaped society," [CEO Kirt Walker told Fortune](#) the expectation of "a permanent mindset shift," as well as decades of expertise in crisis management, spurred the company to quick action and prepared to make those changes permanent: "We think the world is changing."



insivia

Once reluctant to embrace WFH solutions, modest-sized web marketing and design firm Insivia went all-in during the quarantine's earliest stages by offering full remote work. That meant investing in the tech needed for daily video meetings and instant communications. It also meant the opportunity to terminate the lease on its 6,000 square-foot headquarters in favor of a much smaller space to be made available on an ad hoc basis.

It also enabled expanding the hiring pool for an important project manager position from about 50 local candidates in the Cleveland area to, per CEO Andy Halko's estimates, a pool of ~600 to 700: "We can find the very specific skill set we're looking for," [he told USA Today](#).

WORKING[®] SOLUTIONS

Working Solutions, a leader in customer-service outsourcing, has been virtual since the company launched in 1996. Pre-pandemic, more than 80% of its 150+ employees worked from home. When stay-at-home orders were imposed, the remaining employees shifted to fully remote, with 97% remaining at home today.

The company mission leverages the potential of the virtual workplace to give clients access to a network of more than 150,000 contractors across the United States and Canada. Because contractors work from home, Working Solutions provides the flexibility and round-the-clock services clients require, on a schedule agent contractors choose. That's tens of thousands of professionals spread out over thousands of miles. An in-place, WFH network decades in the making.



SECTION 3:

DEFINING YOUR GOALS AND PRIORITIES

What lessons can we learn from the success of these businesses?

With little to no time to prepare, many companies responded on the fly to the WFH order, scrambling to set up employees at home with little prep or guidance. Now that reality has set in, and the permanence of these changes has become clear, it's time to correct any initial oversights and make sure the job is done right.

It's time to presume that widespread work from home is permanent, and to embrace its opportunities rather than resist its challenges.

Given these new parameters, how do you make sure that work is getting done? How do you achieve and sustain productivity? Are you working under a model that's set up for success? If you're just guessing at answers, it's time to take decisive action.



First, here's what **not** to do. There's a science to success with work-from-home; simply trying to graft your existing rules isn't likely to cut it.

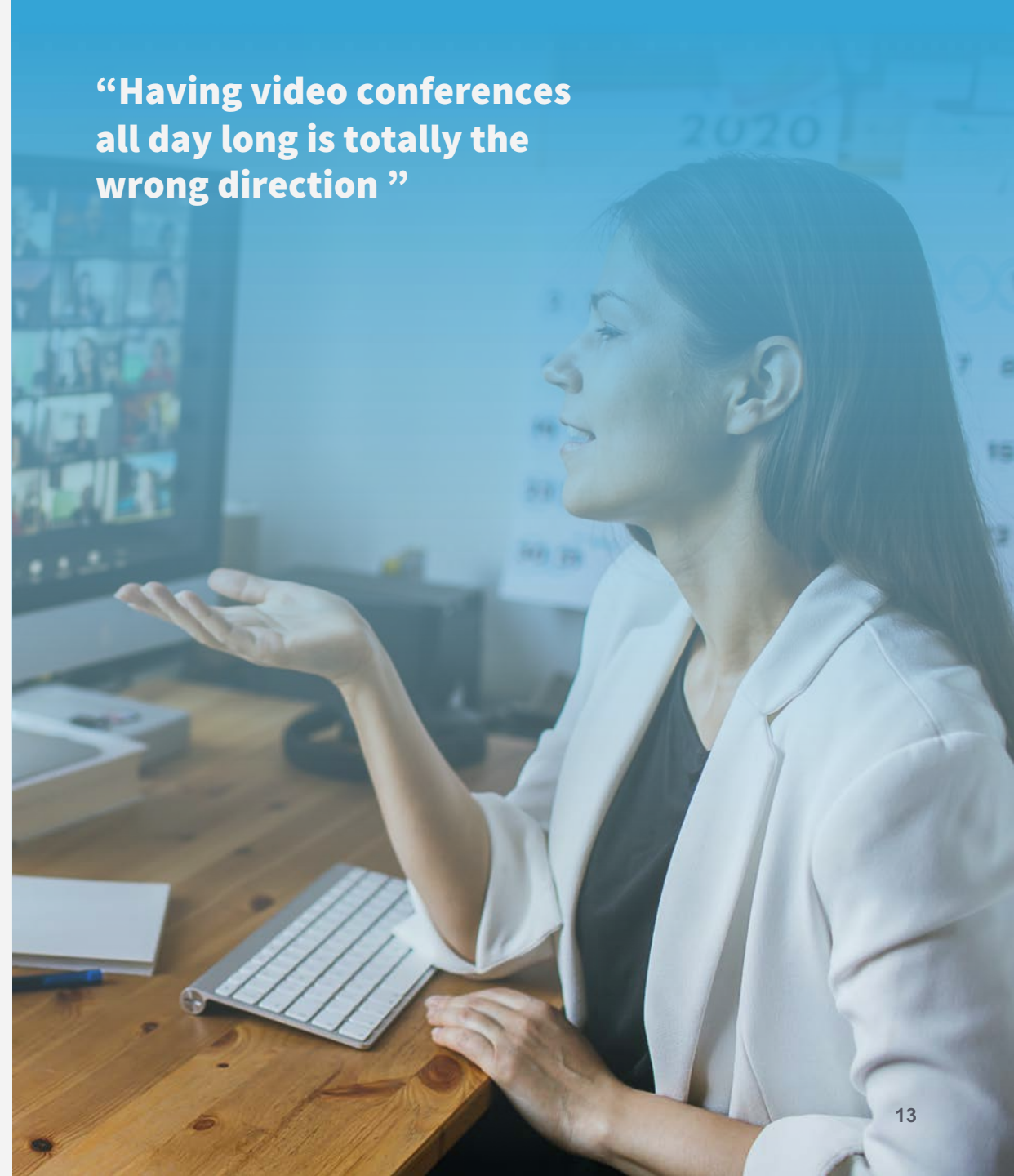


Having video conferences all day long is totally the wrong direction. The beauty of remote working is the opportunity to improve the way you work, to cut way back on meetings, to cut back on the number of people that need to be involved in any decision, to cut back on the need to FaceTime constantly.

[Jason Fried Nicholas Bloom](#)
[Basecamp co-founder](#)

In other words, WFH is a chance to rethink employee engagement, and to seize new tools to better achieve age-old goals like productivity and employee satisfaction. The tough part to accept may be that conventional “best practices” could have little to no bearing on this new strategy.

“Having video conferences all day long is totally the wrong direction ”





Processes, people, performance. As the leader of a successful, woman-led business, Working Solutions founder and chief executive Kim Houlne is frequently asked for her unique insight into successful work-from-home strategies. And she's quick to tell you that the principles that apply to running any business, virtual or otherwise, are **processes, people, performance**—in that order.

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PEOPLE

Put the right **people** in the right jobs. No matter what role they hold, each person should be held to a standard of reliability and responsiveness. Location has nothing to do with these qualities; the real way to nurture them is to hire more selectively — an option that's made more available by the vast virtual labor pool.

PROCESSES

No matter what type of task you're working on, it's essential to set up clear expectations and guidelines from the start. Rigorous **processes** to get this done help fight lack of clarity on basic rules and processes, which can be a major source of downtime. Clearly defined processes make full use of the possibilities of WFH by making instruction clearer and more readily available than in the traditional workplace.

PERFORMANCE

Well-aligned **performance** metrics are the key process indicators (KPIs) showing you the specific progress toward any given goal. The better these can be designed, and the more collaborative the process for setting them, the more likely you are to keep productivity churning.

With these three priorities in mind, let's look at the elements needed to create a successful, work-from-home plan.



SECTION 4:

A FORMULA FOR SUCCESS

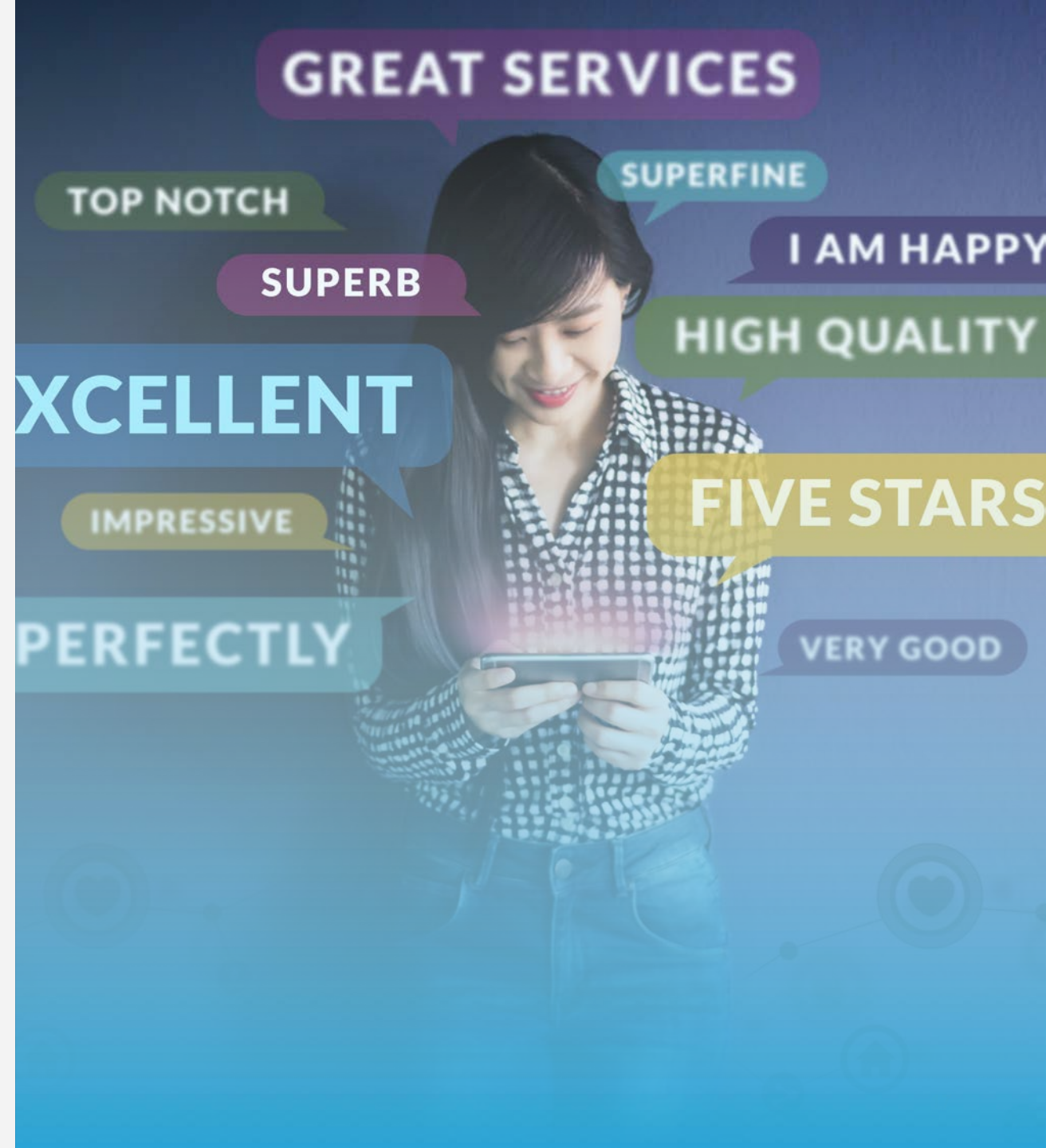


One of the most striking aspects of the COVID-19 crisis is that it happened at a time when virtual workplace best practices have become well established, and the technology to carry it out is widely available. So, while there's no substitute for expert guidance for companies that truly need assistance with WFH, there are some universal action items that you can work toward immediately.



Define goals and KPIs. Set up a system of goals and a process for regular check-ins. This shouldn't be about the number of hours worked, but about meeting specific KPIs. Tracking each goal and how well it's being met can not only help ensure that you maintain productivity but even give you insights into how to improve it by shifting tasks or re-allocating time.

Pro Tip: Distinguish goals by departments, then by individuals and you'll quickly know if you have enough workers for a job, or if you need to adjust how you're assigning projects.





Refine your system of goal-tracking. In his conversation with USA Today, Nationwide's CEO pointed to a strategy of self-tracking to help meet KPIs. "We rely on 10 key performance indicators, and employees can monitor their own workday today, and so can their supervisors," he said. "We don't try to hold people accountable with amount of time they're putting in, but rather how well they are doing on those indicators."

Pro Tip: Instead of annual reviews, consider a quarterly assessment, with more frequent check-ins. Provide incentives for meeting milestones for each assessment to further stimulate productivity.

Pro Tip: The check-ins can be a valuable chance to boost relationships between leaders and their teams, helping improve culture and promote teamwork and productivity.



Don't neglect customer service. For businesses still operating near the full capacity—or even beyond it—customer inquiries have likely increased. If you don't have the personnel or the operational strategy to handle a spike in call volumes, emails, social mentions, contact form inquiries or other interactions, it's time to adjust, or risk losing valuable customers.

Pro Tip: Seeing an uptick in customer service inquiries that you can't keep up with? Virtual customer service networks have been in use since the 1990s, offering instant scalability to meet the peaks and valleys of unpredictable customer activity.





Build a better culture. A chief advantage of operation-wide shift to the work-from-home model is that it gives you a chance to start fresh on your culture. And it's never been more important to offer a cohesive, structured and engaging culture at a time when so many newly WFH employees [say they're finding it tough](#) to stay focused and productive amid the many distractions they have at home.

Pro Tip: Build a culture “worth selling,” and remember that your employees, contractors and workforce culture are part of what you’re offering customers.

Pro Tip: Keep spirits (and productivity) high by offering the chance for more informal gatherings, whether it’s via intranet chats, a Facebook group or regular Zoom talks.



Offer flexibility to maintain productivity. Workers are under pressure on all sides, particularly if they're also parents or caretakers for elderly family members. "I feel like I have five jobs: mom, teacher, C.C.O., house cleaner, chef," as one parent [told *The New York Times*](#). This kind of pressure can be a huge disruption to productivity.

Pro Tip: Keep productivity up by letting workers tackle their duties during off hours or weekends, as needed, and building deadline flexibility into your project management models.





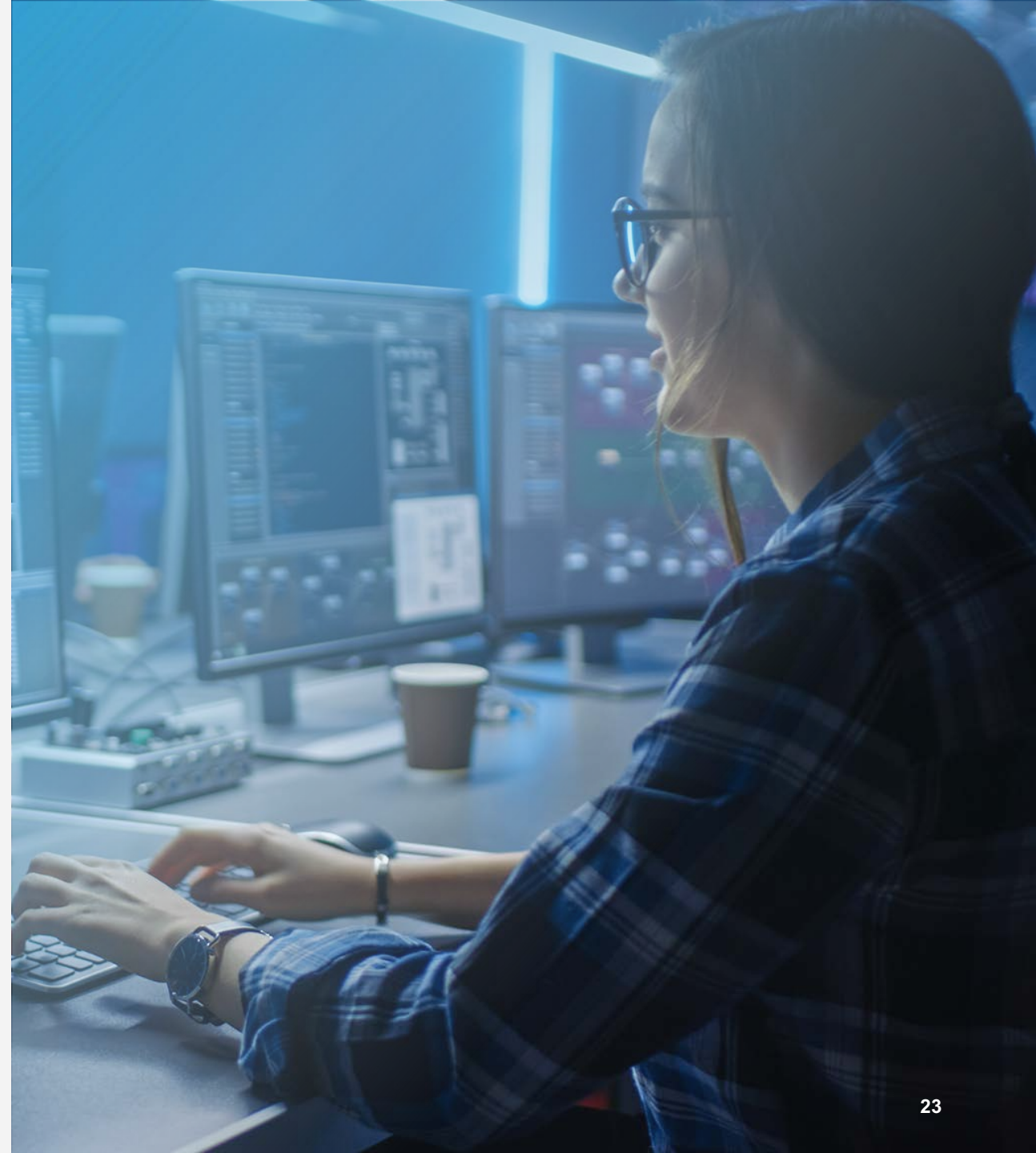
Offer trust and guidance. Some workers unfamiliar with working from home truly struggle with it. It's a good idea to offer actual guidance on how they can set up a dedicated space at home that can be organized like an office — a place that's quiet and with minimal distractions and has a feeling of permanence.

Pro Tip: Nurture trust by offering flexibility in scheduling and the option to engage via Zoom more or less, as their comfort level dictates.



Triple-check your cybersecurity. Every at-home workspace is a new source of potential attack from hackers. As some workers are choosing to work in alternate locations like hotel rooms out of desperation for a change of scenery (or to find a quiet workspace in a noisy house), those security risks are multiplied even further.

Pro Tip: A comprehensive, up-to-date security plan should be baked into your at-home work strategy from the very beginning. If you don't have the expertise, you shouldn't hesitate to consult someone who does.





MAKING WFH WORK



Promote technical literacy. On top of security, the speed of your network is also critical, even if your business isn't particularly tech-focused. Employees may not understand the technology they have to use now, much less how to set it up and maintain it. Promoting computer literacy helps eliminate potential tech-related roadblocks by making sure your workers are comfortable with the technology they'll be using.

Pro Tip: Software problems can be magnified at home. What may be an acceptable number of glitches in the office can disrupt an entire workday at home. Regular educational sessions can help offset this problem.



SECTION 5:

READY TO GET STARTED?



With proper planning and the right policies in place, WFH arrangements are proving to be more cost-efficient, effective and productive than employers could have hoped. Run in parallel with tight, in-office operations, the scope and scale of a virtual workforce can bolster everyday business and long-range projects while better protecting against unforeseen events.

As with so many other aspects of business, success is all about having the proper mindset—matched with the vision, skill and discipline to infuse it within your culture. It's about achieving alignment when operating from near and far.

And it doesn't happen by accident. COVID-19 may be forcing our hand, but either way, it's past time to take advantage of work-from-home innovations to better position your business for success in the years and decades to come.

Quick and agile, dedicated to quality, Working Solutions has offered virtual workforce solutions for decades. From virtual field trips to an emphasis on education from professional educators, we have true expertise in building and maintaining an on-demand, remote workforce that's effective, productive and happy.

We understand how to make sure the people we work with are set up for success in a virtual and/or work-from-home setting, and we're ready to put that expertise to work for your business. Contact us today to learn more.

About Working Solutions:

Based in Dallas, Texas, Working Solutions is a recognized leader in on-demand, onshore contact center outsourcing. Think virtual call centers, freed of bricks and mortar. Founded in 1996, the private, woman-owned company draws on a network of 150,000+ home-based contractors across the United States and Canada to provide best-in-class contact center services. Its remote workforce model enables businesses to deliver customer care in a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

