

# Distributed Work as Part of the Evolving Workspace



Remote working, or working from home, has — by necessity — grown phenomenally in the past months. But it's part of a bigger strategy and can be far more involved than setting up an employee's home workstation. "Distributed work" — getting substantive, critical work done away from the main physical space organizations think of as a traditional office — is now an undeniable part of working for millions of employees.

Distributed work gives employees more choices and options to get their assignments done in a way that makes sense for both them and the organization. It can give workers greater autonomy and boost productivity; and can give organizations the opportunity to expand their talent pool and and, in some cases, reduce their real estate footprint. But it can also challenge legacy beliefs and behaviors for both employers and employees.

Many organizations who have had no formal program to support WfH discovered — during this giant experiment — that productivity did not drop, and their employees are interested in the option to work remotely at least part of the time.

Allsteel is ready to be a collaborative partner to help organizations understand the role distributed work can play in supporting work processes and employee success, and achieving organizational goals.

Building a program for distributed work follows the same four phases we've introduced throughout this document. Think hard about the critical questions here, as they may not be ones an organization has truly asked themselves before. Stand on the shoulders of those organizations who have deep experience and offer best practices for working effectively from alternative locations and successfully working on or managing distributed teams — addressing work-life balance,

meeting and communication skills and tools, and the like — as well as employee home office setups.

Allsteel offers helpful resources for organizations looking to build or expand their distributed work practices, including our Ready to Ship program to get work-appropriate furniture to employees' homes.

[Working from Home →](#)

“With an underlying concern about our health, office workers moved, literally overnight, into a place where working from home is the ‘new norm.’”

Eric Johnson  
Senior Workplace Advisor

# Assess & Prioritize



For those organizations broadly implementing distributed work for the first time, it's very reasonable to step back and take the time to identify what 'good' came from this forced experiment. Approach distributed work with the goals of making sure it supports organizational objectives, enables worker effectiveness, and improves resilience to other unexpected external forces, rather than it just being a cost-savings measure.

Distributed work will very likely be a more significant component of every organization's workplace strategy. We need to assess what features/components have worked well during this challenging time and translate them into a program that sustains current successes, addresses current problems, and will be effective longer term.

## Critical Questions

During COVID, what's been working, and what hasn't—and has it clarified what the purpose of our office is?

How can workers balance autonomy and responsibilities?

How can our Distributed Work program align with the needs and objectives of our business, including culture, worker effectiveness, and asset efficiency and resilience over time?

What new technologies, and/or changes to the office will be needed?

How do we address employee concerns about this new way of working?

What shifts in management styles or culture will be needed?

## Key Action Items

Coach employees—and their managers—to consider their responsibilities to their colleagues to share information, meet deadlines, and participate fully in discussions so that work processes are not adversely affected by their choice of work locations or work hours.

Plan to support and coach managers and employees during a period of defining and assessing best practices for working effectively, sharing information, collaborating, and managing time.

Open a two-way dialogue with employees about their current experiences with WfH—positive and negative—to identify factors that can impact their effectiveness

Assess the range and frequency of activities the office needs to accommodate as distributed work patterns may change overall office utilization patterns.

Coach employees to consider the nature of key work processes and activities to identify the optimal spaces or places to support them.

# Defining “Distributed Work”

Distributed work involves more than just ‘work from home’ — think of it as an integral element of an organization’s workplace strategy designed to support the organization’s goals, work processes, activities and culture.

Whereas work once centered exclusively on the office for many organizations, Distributed Work gives workers more autonomy and more options for places and settings that are most conducive to the specific work activities users are responsible for. This requires that managers trust that their employees will ‘go where they can do their best work’ as Frank Duffy, an early proponent of distributed work, said.



Distributed Work is not “one-size-fits-all” — that workers are either in-office or work from home—but rather a range of options for working in different locations, and may include:

- Defined full- or part-time remote work
- Flexible part-time remote work schedules
- Flexible workday start and end times
- Working at remote locations that are not “home” (i.e., public spaces, coffee shops, coworking) at any time
- Any combination of the above

While embracing Distributed Work doesn’t have to change office design, monitoring office utilization/occupancy patterns can inform strategies for making better use of in-office spaces, as well as to address both COVID and post-COVID health and safety requirements.

# Consider & Solve



Working from home is only part of a long-term distributed work strategy. How individuals and teams work within the office is also pivotal to designing a positive remote experience. An organization can start the process by exploring how work is happening with departmental representatives and facilitating a discussion among functional stakeholders—Facilities, HR, IT—about who is responsible for what.

Distributed work is standard practice for some, and a brand-new concept for others; and will very likely be a more significant part of most organizations' workplace strategy. Assess what's worked well during COVID and translate successes into programs that can evolve. Consider that what we're really advocating is agency and resilience—the ability to exercise choice and adapt to situations and circumstances as they come.

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## Critical Questions

How do we get key stakeholders to embrace distributed work?

How do we support home office ergonomics and set-up?

What can we learn and adopt from others' best practices?

How do we adopt distributed work best practices?

Who will distributed work involve and why?

What support or training will be needed?

What will it entail: remote work, flexible schedules, unassigned seating, alternative workplaces?

Which technologies, like video conference platforms or shared file platforms, will be needed?

What communication, knowledge sharing and collaboration technologies will be needed to support work processes?

## Key Action Items

Set explicit expectations and accountability for projects so team members are clear on goals, timing, and interdependencies.

Model virtual meeting etiquette—like video is generally “on”, but colleagues will understand when it's not—and general best practices, like remembering to take breaks.

Follow—and in doing so, model—communication norms, such as regular availability updates, or demonstrating the unwritten rules for encouraging and resolving debates in virtual communications.



## Setting Expectations

Team processes and activities, and individual needs and preferences for where, when and how they work should inform what range of options for working in different places a distributed work program enables.



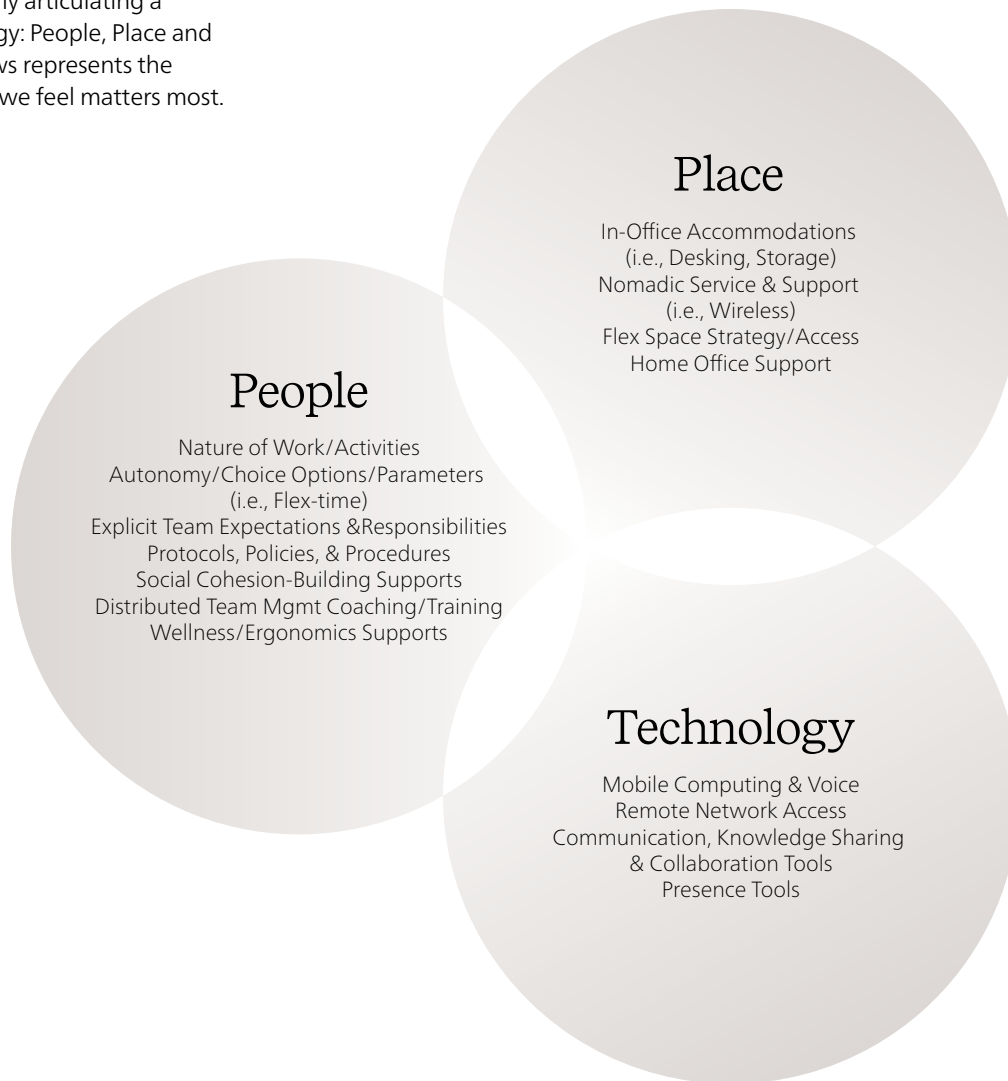
Distributed Work requires setting more explicit expectations and accountability between teammates or co-workers. It's helpful, for example, to develop and communicate protocols for distributed work (in all its forms) including:

- Preferred communication, knowledge sharing and collaboration tools and processes
- Availability when working remotely, i.e., using text/IM to determine/ verify when a team member is available
- Guidelines for timely responses to emails, voice mails, texts

Remember—if you are working in the office, you are 'remote' from those working elsewhere. Consider, too, the anxieties distributed workers may have—like “out of sight, out of mind” or “they don't think I'm working” and work to build/maintain psychological safety and social cohesion.

# Key Elements of a Distributed Work Strategy

Three categories of key elements can act as a checklist when clearly articulating a Distributed Work Strategy: People, Place and Technology. What follows represents the range of considerations we feel matters most.



The topics covered by these three categories each play a role in the employee’s feeling of psychological safety and their confidence in their effectiveness, as what is now work-from-home evolves into a broader strategy with more work “places” to choose from:

## **People**

Organizations must help employees work effectively outside the office by keeping that critical sense of connection and belonging. As well, they must help build invaluable social cohesion with their teams and interdependent colleagues.

## **Place**

Employees can now match their work to the locale where it makes the most sense: office, home, client office, flex space. Organizations should consider what provisions and policies are made for employees, both in remote spaces and when they’re in the office.

## **Technology**

Organizations must identify and provide employees with the tools and platforms they need to successfully do their work remotely—including collaborating with their teams—and make sure workers understand how to use them effectively and securely.



# Implement & Feedback



Gather feedback on how distributed work impacts user experience/effectiveness, workplace efficiency and adaptability and fine-tune your approach as needed. Allsteel will continue to collect and share findings from our entire client base and the latest findings from outside practitioners, as well as researchers on the evolving learnings from those directly addressing the pandemic.

Because distributed work expands the ways workers can accommodate their circumstances and preferences, organizations have greater opportunities to support diversity and inclusion.

## Critical Questions

How should we assess the effectiveness of our distributed work program?

Do workers have any technology challenges that need addressing?

How can we identify management, social cohesion, and well-being challenges for distributed workers?

Are there crucial external factors that are changing that may impact our approach to supporting distributed work?

Are workers more productive? More satisfied? More engaged?

## Key Action Items

Build or enhance existing feedback systems (i.e., IT Help Desk, Program Manager-issued surveys) to capture and address positive and negative input, and to quickly address any immediate issues, like connectivity.

Check in with teams whose members work in distributed locations from time to time to assess team/worker effectiveness and identify opportunities to refine and improve.

Communicate what technologies are being added, and how home office furnishings will be addressed.

Communicate—and train workers in the case of new technologies or processes—any program expansion or changes, i.e., duration, new tools, memberships to coworking locations, etc.

# Adapt & Reconfigure



As distributed work evolves into both a workplace pillar and a decisive advantage for organizations, Allsteel's Workplace Advisory and Wellness teams are here to help as employers make that journey. We will continue to collect, confirm and share best practices from the most successful programs and thought leaders.

## Critical Questions

How do we make distributed work more successful and an option for more workers/ teams?

How do we track and integrate learnings and advancements from other organizations or technology providers?

How does distributed work become an advantage for an organization?

How can we improve our assessment/ measurement and feedback processes?

## Key Action Items

Consider repeating previous steps as health and policy standards evolve.

Create a system to trigger change as internal and external factors evolve and new opportunities emerge.

Check in periodically with distributed teams to discover and share new best practices or ideas for improving tech support.

Expand successful elements of distributed work in a meaningful way ( i.e., remote hotspots for face-to-face collaboration).

Keep feedback loops open.