

2020 Trends in Global Virtual Work

METAMORPHOSIS OF THE GLOBAL WORKPLACE



A Metamorphosis of Work

During the first months of 2020, dramatic changes occurred as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic that had a transformational impact on the way we work. Suddenly, virtual and remote work became the only way for many organizations to continue to operate, and for vast numbers of employees, it meant abrupt and mandatory changes in the very definition of work. Not surprisingly, this year's survey reflects many of those stunning changes.

In May 2020, RW3 CultureWizard invited members of major organizations around the world to participate in the fifth biennial global virtual survey. The survey attracted nearly 2,700 respondents from 106 countries, which indicates the continuing high level of interest in the subject and is particularly relevant in light of the COVID-19 virus and its impact on work.

Over the past 10 years, we have seen virtual teams grow in consequence and relevance in keeping with the greater global integration of the workforce, coupled with the growing importance of workplace/work life flexibility. The 2020 survey points out that this trend has been catapulted, and based on our findings, remote work will continue to grow. Despite that, while improving, many of the key challenges remain the same as in previous years (2010, 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2018). However, as a result of the metamorphosis taking place in the way we work—with greater dependence on virtual work—it becomes ever more critical to become aware of these needs and institute programs to remedy these shortcomings.

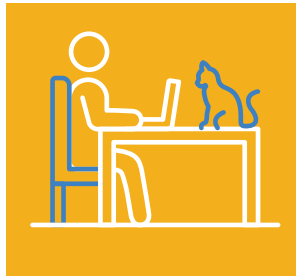
“ With greater dependence on virtual work, cultures around the world are affected differently by the need to work virtually. Appreciating these differences is a business necessity to maintain an inclusive, productive workplace. ”

— MICHAEL SCHELL
CEO, RW3
CULTUREWIZARD



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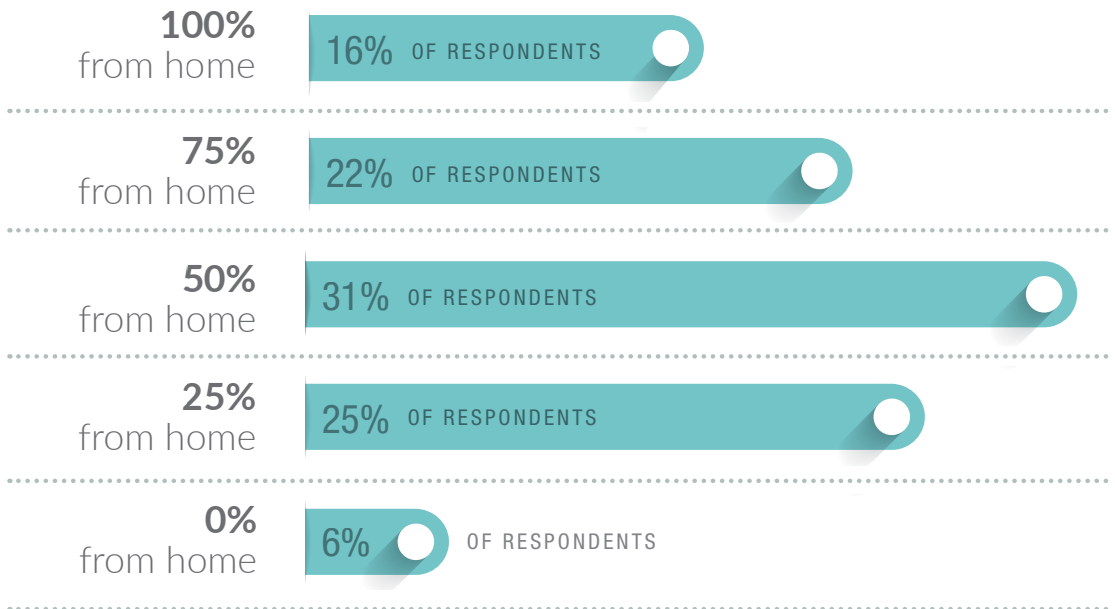
Adjusting to a Redefined Workplace

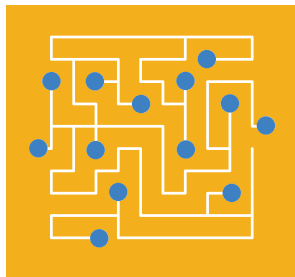
As we return to a “new normal” work routine, survey data and anecdotal information reveal that more of us will be working virtually. Nearly 70% of respondents want to continue working from home at least half of the time! And, when you include those respondents who want to work from home at least 25%

of the time, the number jumps to 94%—underscoring the pressing need to develop virtual leadership and collaboration skills.

Verbatim comments provide deeper insight into the desire to work from home. On the plus-side, people point to greater productivity, a better work-life balance, and a reduction in commute times. The comments also point out the challenges of working at home—including the lack of camaraderie and opportunities to collaborate easily, inability to separate work from personal lives, lack of space for a home office, and lack of bandwidth.

HOW OFTEN WOULD YOU LIKE TO WORK FROM HOME IN THE FUTURE?





The Collaborative Challenge

Technology makes collaboration possible, but personal skills make it successful. Even though collaboration technologies have been available for a long time, the survey demonstrates that people still face challenges using those tools effectively. The highest barrier involves creating collaborative, inclusive

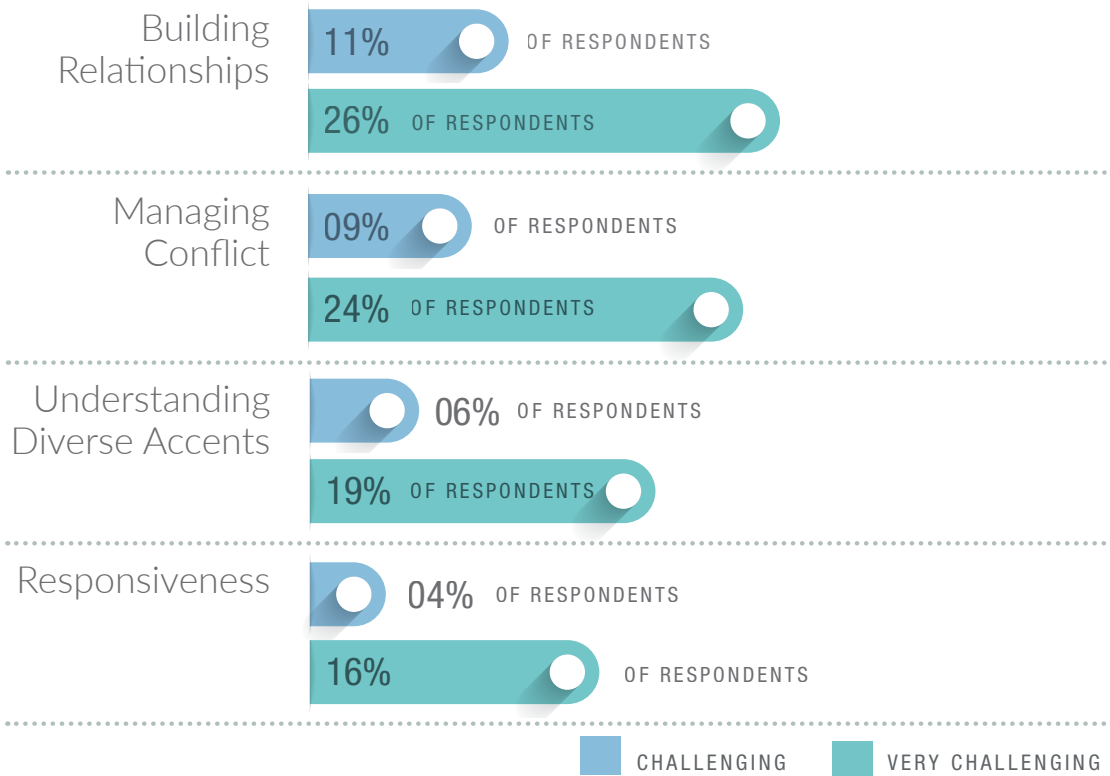
virtual environments. For example, 54% of respondents said they need to alter their communication style to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction. Webcams are used at least part of the time by about three-quarters of the respondents to remedy the lack of face-to-face contact, but a significant percentage of respondents cited complications such as ambient noise and interruptions by family members, feeling pressure to look attentive, having to dress up for webcam sessions, having insufficient bandwidth for good-quality video and audio, and having difficulty operating the software.

Adding to the difficulty of building collaborative relationships are a number of other challenges. For example, over one-third of respondents indicated that building relationships (37%) and managing conflict (33%) were challenging in virtual environments. Understanding diverse accents (25%) and lack of responsiveness (20%) posed additional challenges when face-to-face communication was lacking.

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HOW LACK OF FACE-TO-FACE CONTACT AFFECTS GLOBAL VIRTUAL TEAMS



Finally, differences based on culture and standards of living in different parts of the world, receptivity to diversity, and the divergent perspectives of younger and older workers add layers of complexity to remote-work collaboration. Younger workers, for example, were more comfortable with flexible schedules.

Older workers, however, interpreted schedule flexibility as a lack of commitment to the job. They expressed concerns about the priorities of these young workers, assuming that younger workers were more interested in trying to fit work into their personal schedules rather than the reverse. Both older and younger workers sometimes had difficulty understanding the colloquial phrases used by people outside of their own age groups. Moreover, younger workers noted that older workers adopted and achieved proficiency with new technologies much more slowly. On the other hand, older workers claimed that younger workers sometimes had an unjustified know-it-all attitude and were unwilling to accept and benefit from criticism.

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The Leadership Challenge

The role and expectations of leadership seem to be changing. Team leaders still must accomplish their business mission and goals, but in the new work environment they need to develop additional skills to maintain high levels of engagement and full collaboration. The almost complete elimination of face-to-face contact may impair inclusion, intercultural cooperation, and good teamwork. These new challenges cannot be overstated—both for team leaders and colleagues.



It is clear that leaders will face new challenges based on hundreds of survey respondents who expressed the heightened risk of cultural misunderstandings. For example, they cited concerns about micro-management, embarrassment about asking co-workers to repeat statements, reluctance to express themselves directly, and confusion about the multiple meanings of the word “yes” as acknowledgement that something will be accomplished.

In addition, leaders had to become technology troubleshooters. Other comments made it clear that good leadership now included encouraging the use of webcams, providing on-the-spot guidance in the use of virtual-meeting platforms, and creating and sharing meeting agendas and summaries in a timely manner.



39%

Only 39% of respondents rate their virtual team leaders as very effective

23%

Only 23% of respondents rate themselves very effective as global leaders

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The Challenge of Trust

But what about trust? As we've learned from previous surveys and decades of work on diverse intercultural teams, gaining trust is critical for teamwork and collaboration. But establishing trust across cultures that have different expectations about workplace behaviors, responsiveness, and respect

is extremely challenging. And it is made all-the-more difficult when trust must be established virtually.

Establishing trust requires team members to be responsive, reliable, open to sharing information, and willing to give recognition to others. It's easy to see how diverse teams, working remotely and meeting virtually, can easily encounter difficulty building the trust necessary for effective collaboration. It takes enlightened leadership to appreciate these unique challenges and a readiness to learn what leadership means in this "new normal" work environment.

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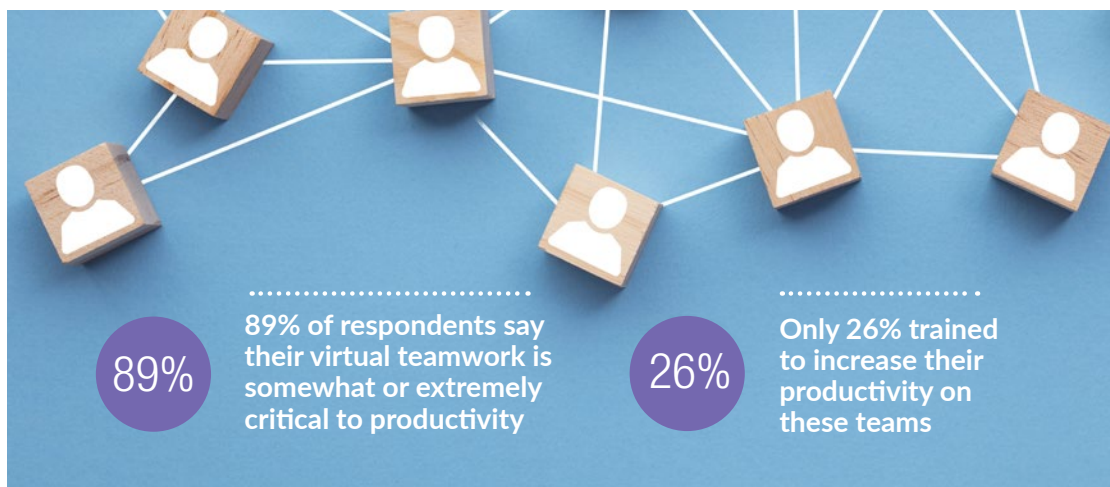
Virtual Teamwork Remains Critical

An overwhelming majority of respondents (89%) reported that virtual teamwork is extremely or somewhat critical to their productivity. With virtual teams incorporating larger numbers of cultures, the potential impact of cultural barriers rises correspondingly. And the technologies used to keep team members in touch simply cannot alleviate the consequences of misunderstandings and other culture-based obstacles—frequently over simple matters such as agreement on schedules and task assignments.



Being engaged and collaborative is part of being a good virtual teammate to 92% of respondents, but different cultures interpret the term collaborative differently. So, it's not surprising that people can misunderstand behaviors as not being collaborative when, in fact, their colleagues are working hard to support the team. Good communication skills are at the heart of this issue and are cited by 89% of respondents—as is providing useful feedback (62%).

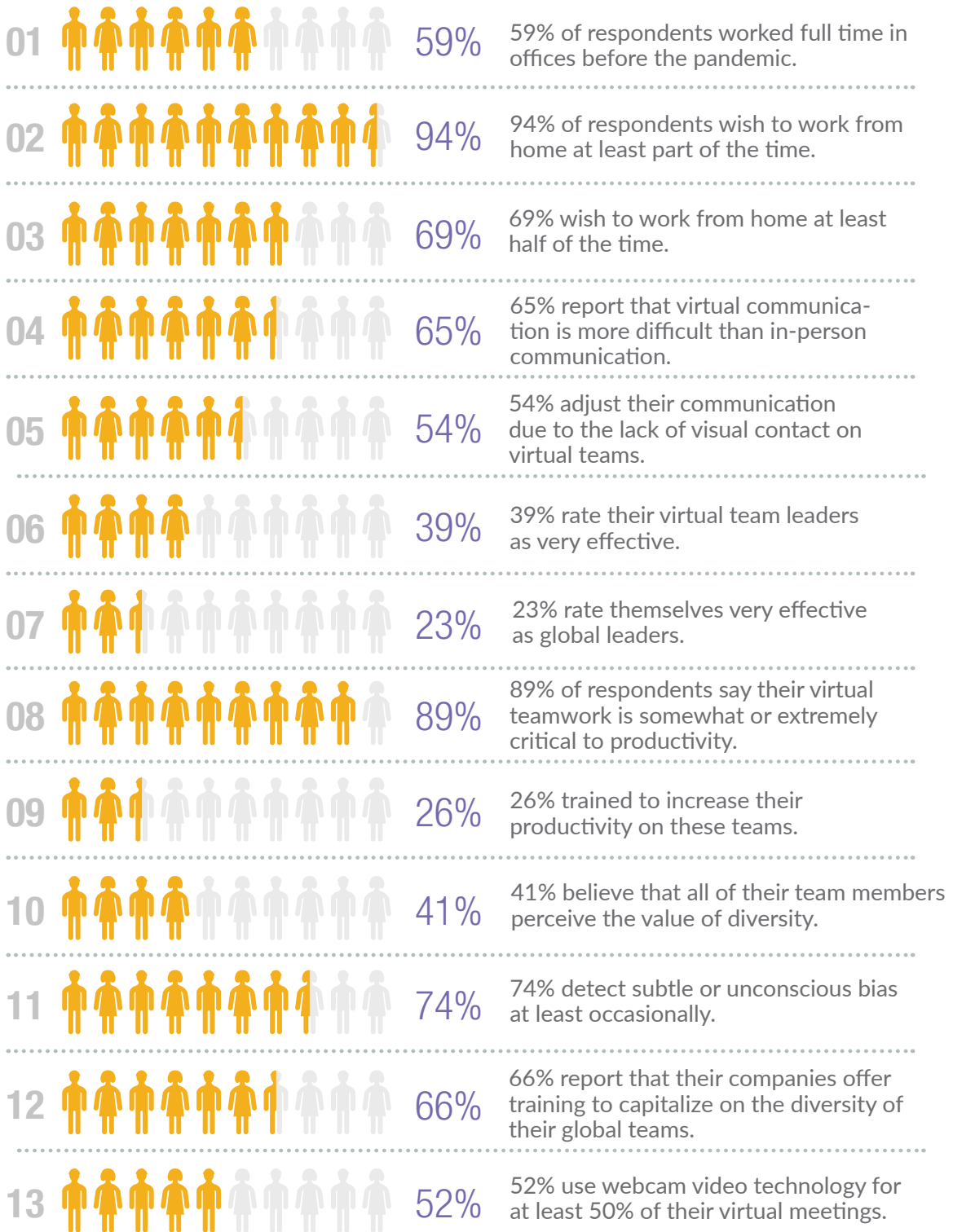
Years ago, we observed that the inability to see each other and to create a personal connection takes a disproportionate toll on team members, crippling those that come from high-relationship cultures. As we move into a new era of virtual work, it behooves us to remember that what worked in a traditional workplace will need to be modified in order to maintain a similar level of productivity. The findings in this survey give all of us some insight into the new skills we'll need and the learning challenges ahead. This means that every one of us will need to: (1) identify the new skills we need; (2) assess our own current skills against the new skills, and (3) build competencies that enable excellence in the new environment.



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PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS IN AGREEMENT WITH STATEMENT



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THE FOLLOWING ISSUES WERE RAISED IN THE OPEN-ENDED REMARKS:

01 ✓ *Personal* concerns about working from home include technical problems, stress, the responsibility of having children present, and non-private workspaces.

02 ✓ Respondents cited the following challenging aspects of the transition to virtual teams: lack of casual interaction, slow access to data, inferior office equipment, distracting surroundings, lack of motivation.

03 ✓ Some respondents believe they are more efficient working at home; others claim they work too many hours and not as efficiently; some claim to work fewer hours.

04 ✓ Respondents cited less-acknowledged kinds of diversity such as parenthood status, thought and work orientation, legacy organization identity, being a contractors, health, power, and hierarchy.

05 ✓ Generational differences included such things as terminology, inability to adopt new technologies, lack of experience, lack of flexibility, and impatience for quick promotions.

06 ✓ Respondents not only cited cultural differences, but the impact of notably different physical conditions and living circumstances around the world.

07 ✓ Respondents varied in their appreciation of diversity as a goal—some willingly accepting its value, but others pointing out the need for merit-based standards of performance.

08 ✓ When using webcams, respondents are concerned about pressure to look attentive, being unable to multitask on other things during meetings, and ambient sounds from nearby family life.



About the Study Sponsor



Today's workforce faces a complex world where people work—often remotely—across distances with people who have different cultural values, styles, and behaviors. RW3 CultureWizard is a global training organization that provides digital and instructor-led training that prepares people to work effectively anywhere in the world. Since 2001, we have helped our clients to create inclusive work environments and to prepare their people to be productive, effective, and engaged no matter where they are.

Drawing upon real-world scenarios, we customize immediately actionable tactical business applications. At the same time, we provide the most comprehensive digital library of global skill-building tools, integrated on-demand courses, assessments, and learning games guided by instructors both virtually and in-person.

Survey Purpose

In 2010, we pioneered a 17-question survey to gauge the importance of global virtual teams and identify the challenge faced by team members. We enriched our exploration—expanding our survey to 41 questions this year to incorporate the following additional concerns:

- Changes in virtual work situations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic
- Challenges and opportunities perceived by workers who never worked remotely before
- More detailed treatment of definitions and challenges related to diversity, cultural values, and biases
- Communication challenges related to work in virtual settings versus face-to-face settings
- Detailed questions about leadership, training, and best practices related to virtual teams and technologies

For full report, including verbatim comments, please send request to Liliana at liliana@rw-3.com.

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