



Working From Home: Lessons From The Real World

26 March 2020

Working from home has now become a forced reality for many South Africans, as well as global citizens, for the time being.

At Bateleur, we have been working from home since 2012. We made the move to embrace the economic, technological and social needs of the times. The past 8 years has proven to us the tremendous benefits of working from home, as well as taught us many simple and practical lessons in how to do this effectively.

The purpose of this open letter is to share our hands-on experience and tips with South African business leaders, owners, managers and employees alike. I hope that, and indeed feel confident that you will find these insights useful. They are derived entirely from personal and practical experience rather than derived from any textbook or Google search.

Synopsis

The article begins with a short introduction describing the **context of working from home**, or working remotely as it is commonly referred to. It goes on to describe the **circumstances leading to favourable conditions** for Bateleur to take the decision to abandon the concept of communal offices and go “into the cloud”.

The article then goes on to detail the **benefits of working remotely**, especially the unexpected rewards. These include paybacks to the company, benefits to employees and advantages for customers.

Yes, there are **problems associated with working remotely**, and the article goes on to describe these in some detail with advice on remedies.

Following on, the article goes on to detail the **ideal characteristics for remote workers**. Getting the best out of a remote working situation implies best management practices for this scenario. The article then goes on to share **4 key tips for management practice** in order to get the best out of a remote working environment.

Also included is a detailed section on **principles, guidelines and tips** to everybody who is working remotely. This very important advice comes from a brainstorm of our own members at Bateleur who have been working remotely for 8 years now.

The article concludes with a **list of invaluable tools**, mostly technology, that we have found essential to improving communication, productivity and camaraderie in the remote workplace.

I hope that you enjoy this article, as well as find it useful. I welcome comments and feedback. In particular, I would value to hear about your own experiences of creating and operating remote workspaces. Enjoy!

Introduction

Working from home is as old as the proverbial hills, and was more than likely the prevailing place of work for most prior to the Industrial Revolution.

Mass production, and mass retailing was the driving force that caused the global change to the practice whereby the bulk of humanity moves between their homes and places of work on a daily basis. One only needs to pause for a short moment to reflect on the enormous extra burden in respect of infrastructure, energy and time required to support this human habit.

In essence, any business that does not physically produce a product, or stock a multitude of products for retailing, is not bound by any specific location of enterprise in this day and age. What has made this possible is, of course, the Internet.

Until very recently, even businesses that did not physically produce or stock products, needed to get together in a common place of work for communication purposes. That need is now history.

Taking the thinking one step further, even in companies that do physically produce a product, or stock products for retailing, there are many departments which are exempt from the need to be present at the location of manufacture or retail. Examples are, finance, administration, marketing, training, IT, procurement, HR, legal, and the list goes on.

This means that in today's day and age, it is quite possible for even companies who depend on central manufacturing or retailing can decentralise many of their business functions to a work from home environment.

Although retailing typically falls within the same constraints as manufacture in respect of needing a central location of operation, the past few decades have seen a tremendous migration towards online purchasing and fulfilment via delivery or consumer collection. The net effect is to consolidate retail places of work to warehousing and distribution operations, with commensurate decrease in the need for employees in a common workplace. In other words, retail consumption is moving into the home!

[The Bateleur Case](#)

In early 2012, with offices in Johannesburg North, and Cape Town, we reflected on a key set of environmental factors that were affecting our business negatively, and, another set of factors which provided us with opportunity to overcome these negatives. In summary:-

1. Most employees were spending between 2 ½ and 4 hours every day commuting to and from work. Some by car, and some by public transport with as many as 4 stops and changeovers involved. Our staff reported in some instances spending up to 25% of their monthly income after deductions on getting to work and back!

In addition, many of our employees were then, and still today are, mothers with young children. This meant saying goodbye to kids at 6 AM in the morning as loved ones were delivered to a local crèche, and collecting them again at 6 PM in the evening. Naturally, this added additional expense, as well as tremendous emotional stress.

2. South Africa, as well as the globe, was 3 years down the line into The Great Recession initiated by the subprime crisis which broke in 2008. Accordingly, turnover was hard-won and needed to be cherished rather than wasted on expensive office rentals and running costs.

Looking back on it now, it is extraordinary how much of our monthly sales was ploughed straight back into a landlord's pocket, along with the various other expenses associated with having an office. These expenses naturally include things like office maintenance, cleaning and general upkeep, IT infrastructure, security infrastructure and operations, office canteen, stationery and printer consumables, switchboard rentals and call costs, water and lights, and a host of other overheads that tend to attach themselves to an office environment.

3. If you recall, around about 2012 was a turning point in respect of Internet functionality. ADSL, fibre, broadband and Wi-Fi unleashed a host of very effective ways for humans to communicate and operate remotely. Cloud-based computing became a reality, cell phones truly became smart and the digital revolution ramped up in earnest.

This technological revolution afforded opportunity for any company who trades in data and information to once and for all abandon their city offices in favour of home offices.

And this is just what we did at Bateleur.

It began with a 3 month trial period, where we “operated in the cloud”, while still in our offices. It all appeared to work, and we took the plunge. Adjustment to the new working life was swift and with some interesting surprises...

There were naysayers yes, the most common criticism of our move was,

“How could you possibly trust your staff to work without supervision?”

The answer to this question was the single biggest revelation to me personally, and possibly one of the biggest lessons I have learnt in life. The answer is,

Give people your trust, and in return they will be trustworthy!

Benefits: Unexpected Rewards

By our rather extensive and long-term experience, the benefits of working remotely, in particular at home, are usually significant, and they far outweigh the negatives. Let's try to unpack some of these benefits.

Benefits to Company

We have found the benefits to Bateleur to be innumerable and strategically advantageous.

- **Massive cost reductions** in both overhead and operating costs. As mentioned above, the cost of running an office is huge, and this set of fixed overheads vaporised almost overnight.
- **Increased flexibility** in almost all areas of business operation. Meetings became quick, often impromptu, focused and flexible. No boardrooms needed to be booked! This dramatic reduction in workplace meetings increased productivity almost immediately. Staff could be hired from anywhere on planet Earth! Cross functionality

and the breaking down of compartmentalisation and “turf protection” quickly developed as a company culture.

- **Increased productivity** was naturally a follow-on benefit. The inordinate amount of time spent travelling, translated into more time both on family matters and more time on work matters. Without asking, automatically, staff tended to put more hours into work simply because they had more hours in hand to do so. I quickly noticed the development of a culture of task focus as opposed to clock watching. Teamwork improved dramatically. A spirit of “How can I help?” soon became evident and grew a life of its own.
- **Enhanced creativity** was a dramatic and unexpected benefit of abandoning the head office. Somehow, almost inexplicably, but not without reason, the organic and trust-based culture that has evolved with working remotely has had a strong spin-off in terms of innovation on a wide range of fronts within the company. This has had dramatic impact on how we work, our efficiencies and the products and services we deliver to our clients.
- **Improved health**, both emotionally and physically quickly became evident. Fewer sick days were reported not only because less flu was passed around amongst staff members, but because many simply elected to continue to be at their desks when they were feeling a little off. Staff morale improved, corporate politics declined, and members generally adopted a mantle of maturity and responsibility in respect of work matters.
- **Retained skills** was a clear and unexpected benefit. Bateleur had often suffered poaching of well-trained staff members by competitors. Since 2012 this has not occurred. Staff retention has been at an all-time high as a consequence of the trust, flexibility, improved morale and general sense of maturity that has formed the foundation of our culture since abandoning the proverbial head office.

It doesn't require too much mental juggling to conclude that these benefits to the company, ultimately translate into significantly improved business performance.

Benefits to Employees

Benefits to employees are without a doubt life changing. At face value, one may think that employees no longer have to go to work! Nothing could be further from the truth. Given the culture of maturity, cooperation and trust discussed in the previous section, staff members lives are improved on a multitude of fronts, including these:-

- **Personal and customised environments** are the order of the day. No open plan offices, glass cubicles, regulation furniture, corner office power-plays, or distracting office banter and gossip. This results in more privacy, less interruptions, more time to think, less mistakes, more creativity and overall an enhanced level of productivity.

In most corporate environments, due to open plan, it is impossible for employees to make use of the wonders of dictation software. The ability to use technology to dictate dramatically increases the speed of communication as well as the creativity in report writing and copywriting.

- **Skills development** grew exponentially at Bateleur due to 2 major influences. Firstly, the spirit of co-operation and helpfulness leading to multi-skilling became a natural culture. Secondly, members were encouraged to identify opportunity for skills improvement, seek out online courses, and complete these courses during the course of their working day. In a corporate environment, it may well raise eyebrows to have your co-worker doing an online course during working hours.

This reduction in formality in respect of training had the effect of improving both relevancy and quantity of skills development within the company.

- **More time** was on hand in general. Mainly due to not having to travel to an office and back again each day, but augmented by a myriad of other time-saving benefits, members have found more time to dedicate to work, their family and loved ones, their hobbies and interests as well to attend to as their general household needs.

I'm convinced that this is one of the single biggest reasons for the overall increase in morale, reduction in stress and improved well-being of staff members.

- **Saving money** has been a benefit enjoyed by all Bateleur staff members. Naturally, not having to spend money on public transport, petrol, wear-and-tear on one's vehicle is an obvious one. However, the savings go further than mere transport.

Less money spent on child support infrastructures and caregivers, work lunches, the list goes on and is different for each member. Tax benefits have also been enjoyed by most members.

- **A sense of dignity** was an unexpected benefit of making the move to abandon the head office. In truth, nobody likes to be micromanaged. The culture of trust that has grown through working remotely, has afforded members to work independently, at their own time and pace, with opportunity to exercise flexitime in totality without permission, rules or guilt.

In other words, members are treated like adults, and behave like adults as a consequence of the culture of trust that comes automatically with working remotely. I have yet to receive a complaint, or feel a misgiving, about any of Bateleur staff member's sense of balance and responsibility in respect of work needs versus personal needs.

In a nutshell, members at Bateleur feel that they have achieved a fine work-life balance. This is especially true of the working moms who talk openly about no longer feeling compromised between the needs of their children and the needs of their company.

Benefits to customers

Benefits to our customers are real and somewhat surprising. Those of you who have dealings with Bateleur will know these to be true:-

- **Responsiveness and quick turnaround** times often with immediate executive availability is a key benefit. Working remotely means one does not wind up in endless

meetings, meaning a high degree of availability. The improved culture of teamwork and commitment to the task means that client requests are dealt with quickly and without undue red tape and process.

- **Enhanced quality** was an unexpected benefit and one that I am extremely grateful for. Once again, the sense of commitment to task, multi-skilling and mature work ethic coupled with low staff turnover and therefore high skills retention has resulted in a strong improvement in the quality of our products and service delivery.
- **Enhanced creativity** is definitely a client benefit derived from the death of red tape and process that comes with an organisation that works organically, and with maturity. The self-same spirit of innovation that has benefited Bateleur itself, flows on to our clients.
- **More competitive prices** is of course a natural spin-off of lower overheads, improved productivity and efficiency. It goes without saying that heavily hierarchical corporate structures and fancy head offices ultimately find their way into the pricing model.

All in all, working remotely has meant that Bateleur has been able to improve quality, service, creativity and, at the same time, keep prices keen.

Problems: It's Not A Perfect World

It goes without saying that working remotely is not a perfect world. Nor is working in an office, warehouse, store or factory environment!

Here are some of the problems associated with working from home:-

- **Credibility perceived by some** oddly enough. I imagine that some people have a perception that the trappings of a head office are a sign of solidity and success. That may well be so. Nonetheless, my experience has been that most people perceive working remotely as being modern and quite hip. Definitely, the way of the future.

- **Conveniences** associated with formal workplace environments are of course absent when one works remotely. There are no company gyms, canteens, photocopy rooms, crèches, stationary departments and so on and so forth. When one works remotely, these types of conveniences have to be found individually.

- **Cabin fever** can be a problem. Most members do not live in palaces, and need to make do with a fairly small place of focus for work activities in their home. It is important to recognise this limitation, and to facilitate freedom of movement to stretch legs and minds alike. We have found that meetings at clients' offices as well as both informal and formal staff get-togethers help alleviate this feeling.

- **Working too hard** is a problem reported by some members. Given the importance of trust, task orientation and the absence of micromanagement means that when the chips are down, it is very easy to work deep into the night to get the job done. And this does happen! More often than one would think. Recognition, reward and proper project management with fair resource allocation are important management focuses in this respect.

- **Distractions** are not the domain of the formal office environment only. Any mother with small kids will know that they know no boundaries, and rightly so. It is a key skill of members who work remotely to be able to have the discipline to manage these family and home based needs aptly.

- **Communication breakdowns** are a risk both equally in the formal office place as well as when one works remotely. Arguably, working remotely accentuates this problem. We have found that short daily project status meetings, together with weekly sales, marketing and financial meetings keep the ball rolling smoothly, especially with a culture of openness, transparency and "open door" policy.

- **Technology troubles** can be accentuated when one works remotely. In a formal corporate environment, the IT department usually has one standard for all. Working remotely results in a myriad of different Internet and IT solutions, resulting in a lack of uniformity with occasional operational challenges.

- **Lack of visibility** of staff members can potentially present a problem to some. At Bateleur, we have grown a culture whereby members habitually let everybody know where they are, when they are going out, when they will be back and so on and so forth. Added to this culture is the use of technology to create seamless communication across PC, laptops and cell phones. Done properly, we are all visible and able to communicate all the time, anywhere.
- **Potential misfits** may well not succeed in a remote working environment. Whilst we have not had this experience at Bateleur, it is not inconceivable that some individuals may take advantage of the lack of visibility, and bluff their activities accordingly. By my experience, these misfits manage to bluff just as easily in an office environment!

Ideal Characteristics for Remote Workers

It is useful to consider the characteristics required for successful remote working. Individuals who are naturally endowed with these characteristics will perform better than those who don't when working remotely.

In addition to recruiting for these characteristics, management would do well to nurture such characteristics in their existing workforce in order to successfully work remotely.

- **Self-motivated, independent and confident** individuals are excellent candidates for remote office environments. Individuals who are prone to procrastination, needy for face-to-face interaction and infirm of purpose may well flounder in such environments. Working from a remote environment requires resolve. It means replacing one's wishbone with one's backbone!
- **Focused, engaged, energised** employees thrive in remote working situations. More than that, they pass on this sense of engagement to their co-workers as well. There is no room for vacillation and relaxation in the workplace, whether communal or remote!

- **Communication skills** are implicit. That goes without saying. Poor communicators in general create confusion and breakdown team cohesion. This effect is only accentuated in a remote workplace environment. It is good to remember that communication comprises of both receiving and sending messages. Listen well to your co-workers, express yourself in a focused, clear and unambiguous manner, and you will enjoy the success of working remotely.

- **Disciplined, structured and well organised** people, who have a keen sense of **timeline management**, do well in home office environments. It is much easier to “march in time” when on the communal parade ground at the behest of the drill sergeant. Discipline without orders is required in a remote working environment, and needs to be self-administered.

- **Critical thinking and problem-solving** inevitably benefit remote working environments. Applying one's mind to best adapting solutions to problems as they emerge is more important when working alone and bereft of the opportunity to “leave it to somebody else”. In communal corporate environments, it is very easy to pass the buck ... one merely has to recall how many hours are spent, by so many people, in so many meetings, who contribute absolutely nothing at all. Far less so in a remote workplace, it is often up to the individual to find the solution.

- **Availability and affability** are crucial to remote workplaces. People who are inclined to absence or to hide behind curtness very quickly become left behind and isolated in remote workplace environments. Availability and affability live at the heart of the culture of “How can I help?” discussed in Part 1 of this article.

- Being **tech savvy** definitely helps one succeed in a home office. Whilst IT are able to assist remotely with ease these days, employees who yearn after the DOS days, or who claim to be technology challenged, often find themselves floundering without foundation in the remote working environment. Being tech savvy these days is fundamental.

- **Open-minded** individuals are a boon to business at the best of times, but especially in a remote working environment. Members who are **passionate, willing to learn and innovative** we find to be far more successful at working remotely than those who are lacklustre, complacent or stuck in routine.

Whilst these characteristics are extremely important in any work environment, they become critical in a remote working environment. As one can see, people who have these characteristics do not need to be clock watched or micromanaged!

Talking of management, now is the time to go on and deal with management style required for effective remote workplace operations.

[Ideal Management Characteristics for Remote Workers](#)

Having staff members with the right characteristics for working from home is only half of the story. Management styles that are conducive to remote working operations are essential.

Managers who are **control orientated typically have trouble** with the remote working concept.

Managers who are able to **garner followers through their leadership skills** typically do well with the remote working environment.

Here are 4 key tips for managing in a remote working scenario:-

- **Give clear direction and expected outcomes** and manage employees by these objectives. This requires excellent communication skills, flexibility, support and regular engagement to assist employees in arriving at the end goal. Be sure to not set unrealistic goals and deadlines. Set clear, definite and fair boundaries and make sure that these are well communicated, understood and agreed upon. Make no exceptions, and show no favour, in respect of these protocols.

- **Don't micromanage** employees, but rather learn to trust their integrity, motivation, skills and abilities. It is not necessary or desirable to require employees to constantly "check in" to prove that they are working. Treat your employees like the adults that they are.
- **Give recognition and show appreciation** for goals achieved, work well done and innovative contributions. Remember that production and turnover is actually generated by employees. Managers merely manage the process. We need to show immense gratitude for this production process.
- **Lead by example** and motivate employees by being approachable, encouraging helpful, sympathetic and constructive in helping to achieve objectives. Be organised, respectful and give regular feedback to members. When working remotely, it is especially important for managers to adopt a leadership role and host regular online meetings and discussions for the purposes of imparting direction and motivation.
- **Open door policy** is crucial in a remote working environment. Having no corner office, or door to close, makes it easy to forget about the importance of being available to employees. Especially in a remote working scenario, managers need to be available, to everybody, all the time!

[Principles, Guidelines and Tips For Working Remotely](#)

Here is an interesting collection of pieces of advice that we at Bateleur feel are worth sharing with anybody who is considering working from home. These tips have been generated from first-hand experience.

- **Dress for work** just as if you are going to the office. This is a formality that is essential in preparing your mind for the work day and the psychological boundary required to separate work from play from home activities. Dress for success!
- **Create a bright, airy workspace** that is clearly demarcated as a work area. Choose a place that is quiet. Keep your workspace neat and tidy. Definitely resist the temptation

to work anywhere that pleases you on any whim. It might be at home, but it is definitely a “Home Office”.

- **Manage your time properly** just as you would in an office environment. Take regular breaks, do not eat lunch at your desk, and finish your day at an appropriate time as far as is possible.
- **Communication is key** to successful remote working! Formal status meetings on a daily basis, interspersed with regular informal communications with team colleagues are essential. Technology enables remote workers to be in touch with each other and communicate more so than many employees do in a formal office workplace.
- **Create simple and effective systems** to assist members to keep abreast of work activities, project milestones, key tasks and progress reports. Preferably these systems need to be collective as opposed to directive. In other words, they need to be owned and operated by all rather than imposed by one.

Tools of the Trade

Working from home, or other remote places definitely requires the skilful use of a wide variety of technology-related tools. Here is a list of the ones that we use at Bateleur, and find invaluable to our work processes and teamwork:-

- **Email** (obviously).
- **Word processing, graphics and spreadsheet packages** are also obvious, and of course are used in a communal office environment as well. However, working remotely reveals the need to explore these packages in more depth, especially in respect of their deeper features designed for collaboration. Remote workers need to be power users of such packages.
- **Communication tools, especially Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Office Teams, WhatsApp (especially the desktop version)** need to be available across all platforms from PC to cell phone.

By our experience, it is not necessary to use video features much. It tends to consume an inordinate amount of data, produce turgid response times and consequently create frustration. Convening meetings on Skype, for example, and sticking to audio only is the way we do it. It's just like talking on the telephone, except it's a group conversation. Works like a charm!

In addition, we often make use of the recording features, especially when conducting technical briefings or training sessions.

Of course, all these platforms are excellent ways to share documents, share screens, and generally speaking create a virtual boardroom / discussion room. With a little practice, it's amazing what one can do with these wonderful tools.

- **Project planning, coordination and milestone management programs** are important in the ordinary course of business, but really come into their own when working remotely.

Construction companies know this all too well. By definition, the construction industry works remotely. Every single construction site is remote from head office, and from time to time relocated to a new site! The construction industry possibly is the most skilled in the use of production planning coordination and milestone management techniques. Let's learn from them!

- **Cloud backup systems** have revolutionised opportunities for remote workplaces. In a formal communal work environment, protection of information and data is normally left up to IT, and becomes automated as part of the corporate systems network. When one works remotely, there is more responsibility placed on each individual, along with discipline and protocols required to effectively uphold information integrity and safety.

In this respect, we found that the most important ingredient is in fact the human factor. It becomes very difficult to systematise data integrity in a remote working environment. The systems don't work well unless individual member discipline supports them properly.

Further to the need for data integrity is to remember that when multiple members are working on a project, it is very easy to wind up with multiple versions of the same document. Facilities like Microsoft Teams allow many users to work in the same document at the same time, addressing this problem quite neatly.

- **Facilities for large file transfers such as Dropbox / WeTransfer** are familiar to most, but really come into their own when working remotely. We find that documents of more than 10 MB are often problematic to email. WeTransfer is free, and has become a staple tool at Bateleur.
- **Video camera, speakers, microphone for virtual communication** are obvious and essential. What is not obvious, is to invest in reasonably good quality hardware in this respect to ensure good quality audio and, where applicable, video.

Further, user training is often advisable, especially on how to speak into a microphone, believe it or not. Many people talk directly into a microphone resulting in a disruptive, frustrating and irritating staccato of “popping” interspersing each word.

Rather than talking directly into the microphone, place the microphone to the left or right of one’s mouth, imagining that your voice is coming from your cheek. That way produces really clear audio, with no popping.

Further on the topic of clarity, it has proved useful for members to develop the habit of attending to the “mute mike” button on communication software when their dogs bark, the vacuum cleaner is put on, and aeroplane goes overhead, and so on and so forth. Being attentive to disturbing environmental noises transmitted to others in the group call is good etiquette in remote workplaces.

- **2 screens per PC** dramatically helps productivity in all work environments, and especially in remote work environments. Invariably, one ends up with a communication program open on one screen during an online meeting, and referring to an Excel spreadsheet or PowerPoint presentation open on the other screen.

I personally use 3 screens. My 3rd screen is dedicated to emails alone, meaning that I can communicate, calculate and keep emails all at the same time. I often feel the need for a 4th screen!

- **Team Viewer on each PC** is essential for remote IT support. Our IT specialist makes heavy use of Team Viewer to tinker with our PCs. It seems that 95% of IT issues can be solved remotely using this tool.
- **Dictation software such as Dragon Naturally Speaking** is made possible by remote working environments as one does not have the problem of disturbing one's co-worker a desk away.

I personally use Dragon all the time, for all my writing, including this article. I have found that dictating rather than typing reduces my time spent writing by a factor of about 4. But, more importantly, my writing style has become more colloquial and hopefully more readable as a consequence. It's definitely more fun than typing!

- **Recording and transcribing software** to record and share important meeting notes can be very helpful in a remote working environment. Recording software is as old as the hills, and transcribing software is becoming reliable and useful.
- **A printer** can be useful, but we have found these to be less than essential in a remote working environment. In fact, one of the operating cost saving benefits of moving to home offices has been to dramatically reduce our company printer ink bill! It's also good for the environment.
- **Relaxing music** has been reported by Bateleur staff members to be an important background companion in a Home Office environment. I don't for a moment advocate hectic house or growling metal as a work aid, but having a playlist of one's friendly favourites definitely helps time fly by and assists in productivity.

In Conclusion

Being forced to transition from a communal work environment to one that is remote need not be feared, and, done properly, may well in fact yield benefits that outweigh its problems.

We learnt the hard way, by bitter experience, how to do it properly. I am quite sure that every organisation will find its own nuances both in terms of opportunities and problems in respect of working remotely. However, hopefully the core of these opportunities and problems have been adequately described in this article.

I thank you for reading this far, and trust that you will find value in the learnings shared here. I would be most grateful for any comments, especially in respect of your own experience of working remotely.



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