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# Working Virtually in Response to COVID-19? Lessons From our Four-Year Journey to Build a Virtual Organization

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*The charitable sector is responding rapidly to the expanding impact of the pandemic, in terms of outreach, operations, and advocacy. In the coming weeks, The Philanthropist will provide up-to-date coverage, as well as our usual reporting and commentary on other news of relevance to foundations, charities, and non-profits. [Read more of our COVID-19 coverage.](#)*

As Canadians pull together to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, many organizations are making the shift to having all their employees working online from home. While it can be a daunting prospect to reorient to a “virtual office,” and perhaps not feasible for all types of organizations and roles, there are many benefits to a well-run virtual workplace. So many, in fact, you may never want to go back.

The [Canadian Partnership for Women and Children’s Health \(CanWaCH\)](#) is a completely virtual workplace with 23 employees working from home offices across Canada. We’ve experienced the benefits and the challenges of virtual work and have spent nearly four years refining our operation model to ensure we are set up to succeed.

It’s important to begin with the logistics and technology required for virtual work. But you must also put your people-centred culture first, especially at a time when employee anxieties are heightened over the public health risks associated with COVID-19.

## Technology

A desktop or computer with an updated operating system, loaded with software essential to

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your organization's operations is a must. So is high speed internet access. Project and team management tools like Glip by RingCentral (the platform that CanWaCH uses), Basecamp, Asana, and others will amplify performance and communication for your team. With Glip, we group conversations by team, project, or event to enable seamless, ongoing messaging, file sharing, assigning, and task tracking.

Our Glip package is further enhanced by one-click video conference integration. We strongly recommend that you consider videoconferencing to effectively communicate with your employees and support their success. It's the next best thing to in-person interaction. Videoconferencing tools such as Zoom, Skype, Google Chats, and BlueJeans are easy for employees to set up and have minimal technology requirements.

At CanWaCH, we do not use phones for internal communication. Unless we are in a meeting, we make sure to always be available by video. We also try to connect with our members and stakeholders this way. During video meetings, our camera is always on to maximize human-connection and focus.

It is important to invest the time to research and set up a platform like Glip and video communication tools. Choose one set of technologies, learn them, refine them, and stick with it.

### **Myths about productivity**

Managers must let go of their need to "see" exactly where staff are and what they're doing to measure productivity and output. At CanWaCH, like any workplace, setting clear tasks and goals, coupled with strong manager-employee communication, ensures we continue to deliver. At a very basic level, it is important to have a conversation with employees that begins with "What are we going to accomplish today?"

### **Putting your people and workplace culture first**

Not all employees adjust easily to working from home for a variety of reasons. Loneliness and isolation for even the most adept virtual worker is possible. The key is intentional social connections. Start every meeting, regardless of the number of team members online, with a simple personal check-in – and be prepared to hear about everything from crazy cat stories to big life announcements. Create space and social license for video conference "water-cooler" chats (yes, we even call them this!). Don't rush to launch into the business of the meeting. If people are connecting, let it roll for a few minutes. It's a wise investment of time in your people.

### **Collaboration requires structure**

In any successful workplace, all managers and staff need to have confidence that they can reach out and access their colleagues for key information and for professional and personal support. Virtual work does not necessarily mean flexible hours. CanWaCH is a highly collaborative workplace and we spend a significant portion of our days on video conference calls. You can't be collaborative and succeed as a team if your employees work random, misaligned hours. Core business hours and up-to-date calendars ensure sufficient opportunities for the team to collaborate, connect, and get the job done.

### **Setting work-life expectations**

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Virtual work has its advantages for most people. This includes avoiding exhausting, time-consuming commutes and the flexibility to use your lunch break to run quick household errands or pop in a load of laundry. However, it's important to set expectations around domestic labour or family pressures. Half the battle of staying professional in a home office is creating professional boundaries for yourself and the people who walk through your door.

From the employer side, set expectations around child and elder care. If a child is sick, or if schools are closed for weeks, what are the expectations? Childcare, along with all forms of domestic labour, is a tough job (possibly one of the hardest). Expecting employees to take on two demanding roles at once is not realistic.

It's important to have the conversation, seek solutions, and approach it from a place of trust in your employees, allowing for enough flexibility to acknowledge the daily pressures people face.

CanWaCH hires and screens for candidates' aptitude for working very independently and for previous experience with virtual work arrangements. Organizations transitioning to work-at-home arrangements as part of the COVID-19 response will undoubtedly find that not everyone adjusts well to virtual work. The best you can do is set them up for success as much as possible, be understanding of their challenges, and communicate openly and frequently.

We have learned at CanWaCH that a well-run virtual workplace is like no other work experience. From productivity to work life balance, we believe the virtual workplace is the best way to work.