

## Sustaining Productivity Virtually

It is clear that working virtually from home will be a part of our post-COVID economy, and some would now describe it as an economic essential. Many are eager to get a handle on how to remain productive while working virtually. This article will help to answer the question on the minds of many. How might we sustain and/or improve productivity levels virtually? The sooner we, whether policymakers, business leaders or employees, can answer and act on it, the better our firms and communities will be positioned when the pandemic subsides.

Firstly, let's consider productivity's definition, which is the efficient conversion of inputs into outputs, or simply put, doing the right things the right way. The outcome of it all being goods or services being delivered cheaper, faster, at a higher quality all, while increasing value to the customer.

During the period 2000 to 2019, Jamaica has seen a decline in productivity growth levels of -15%. The advent of the global pandemic paired with a fast-changing economic environment has led to an even greater need to improved productivity output.

The global pandemic has forced many to adopt flexible work arrangements, which means an entire or a few members of the team working virtually. A recent study conducted by the

Jamaica Productivity Centre (JPC), in June 2020 shows that 96% of firms surveyed are utilizing alternative work arrangements. Of the amount surveyed, 76% will be making this a permanent move.

One of the impediments faced by business owners and pondering the move to virtual operations, is how to maintain the productivity level of their organization. The fear held by many individuals is that working from home would distract employees from their duties with factors at play such as family responsibilities, friends, errands, extended leisure activities etc. Though these factors may be at play, research shows that persons generally tend to be more productive in their own space. By putting effective systems in place, organizations can be even more productive working from home virtually.

Here are five (5) key perspectives that if utilized will allow you to be well on your way to operating productively in a virtual office space.

1. **Rethink Strategies.** If you have not already done so, now is a good time to review, rethink and revise your strategic direction and initiatives after scanning the new environment in which we are now operating. Making as much use as possible of the opportunities and technological adoption, which can add efficiencies in the delivery of goods and

services. Doug McMillon (CEO, Walmart) sums it up well when he says, "There are so many new ways to serve customers. Technology, data, and information are opening new doors for us to lead through. Our purpose ... will always be relevant, but we'll do it in new ways."

2. **Measure, measure and measure...** The old adage of *you can't improve what you can't measure* holds true especially in a virtual space. If we are measuring what matters and can get the data associated in as real time as possible, it will help teams to be flexible and able to adjust to the ever-changing circumstances within the environment. Utilizing task or workflow tracking and measurement online tools where possible would be best. However, at minimum, creating results based work plans along with associated output and outcomes and tracking these can have a positive impact on your organizations productivity.
3. **Focus on the Customer.** Whether internal or external, customers are key to an organization's existence. We therefore have to ensure we are providing the goods and services that the customers need and value. Otherwise, we run the risk of losing touch of what's really important to those

who we serve which can have catastrophic implications. As Jeff Bezos (Founder and CEO, Amazon) said, "If you make customers unhappy in the physical world, they might each tell six friends. If you make customers unhappy on the internet, they can each tell 6,000." By keeping close contact with your customers through direct calls, surveys, emails etc. you will be able to continue to test and see if there are any gaps in expectations.

4. **Build a Community.** Whether we call it a community, network or an association, it is important to foster collaboration, while working virtually, internal and external to the organization. This will help to mitigate the psychosocial impact of working virtually, increase creativity and leverage the resources available to the organization. To do so, we have to think outside emails. Video conferencing tools (e.g. Skype, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet) and online collaboration platforms (e.g. Google, Microsoft 365), will help to decrease confusion and misread/misinterpreted information. By fully utilizing these tools, for example, enabling audio and video as much as possible when using video conferencing tools, will increase the reality factor and helps with connection in a virtual space.

Virtual “meetups” among groups will also help to build connection and allow for greater efficiency of flow.

5. **Incorporate Ergonomics.** Setting up an effective space that can be used for safe and productive work is equally important when working virtually. “Virtual Ergonomics” as some have phrased it, speaks to not only having the right tools, lighting, temperature but also includes practices such as, breaking every thirty minutes, allowing yourself to drop your hands from your work, stretch, and breathe, and switching up your tasks to create variation in your posture. Applying proper ergonomics has shown to improve both health and work efficiency, reducing musculoskeletal and other disorders. Some organizations have provided some basic tools to ensure worker productivity while working virtually to ensure productivity levels can be maintained. Including installing stable internet connectivity, as well as ensuring that proper equipment is ordered and set up for employees at home.

The cementing of these five suggestions will call for dynamic and transformational leadership among the teams. To enable, engage, energize and encourage the team, while learning and growing together in the virtual space thereby

realizing the productivity growth potential within the organization.