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Effective Leadership in Virtual Teams during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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during the COVID-19 Pandemic***

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about an unprecedented economic and social crisis that has affected many businesses. Due to health concerns, many organizations are being managed virtually. This can be challenging, especially for employees and employers that are used to face-to-face interaction and for those who are not tech-savvy. Organizational leaders need to develop strategies and methods to maintain business, as well as maintain the productivity levels of employees. This research paper investigates the most effective ways to lead virtual teams during a pandemic. This is a semi-empirical study based on a short literature review and the survey responses of a sample size of n=42 from working professionals across various job levels. The authors identified the key challenges of leading and working in virtual teams from the survey results, including communication hardships and the obstacles with onboarding new employees remotely. Drawing on the team's experiences and knowledge from the related literature review as well, this paper proposes a set of best practices based on the patterns observed in the survey. The paper also includes the scope of future work that can be done in this field.

Keywords: Virtual Teams, Leadership, Leadership in Virtual Teams, Virtual Team Challenges, COVID-19 pandemic, Remote work, Performance

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has plunged global economies and affected billions of people making it the worst global crisis since World War II [1]. To remain operative, essential services such as logistics, food, retail, and healthcare had to integrate health measures to protect customers and employees. In contrast, travel and non-essential service-based businesses such as airlines, hotels, and salons had to shut down due to lockdown measures. While others, such as media, education, and financial services had to alter existing ways and implement new ways of operations. This meant service providers, including those of essential service providers, had to adapt to a virtual work environment to keep their businesses running [2]. In addition to juggling workplace responsibilities in an unfamiliar virtual environment, employees also had to deal with other duties like providing child care and educational services to children at home, which was previously taken care of by institutions such as daycares and schools.

Virtual teams are characterized by dimensional dispersions from traditional teams and are dependent on technology for communicating within and outside the company. These dimensional aspects can be based on geography, organization, culture, etc., where one aspect does not necessarily take precedence over the other [3]. In this paper, the virtual teams described have mostly met and worked in person in the same geographical area and time zone as their team members before the start of the pandemic. However, during the pandemic, these teams conduct work almost exclusively virtually via phone, e-mail, text messages, instant messaging, collaborative workspaces, and video-conferencing. The pandemic has accelerated a digital transformation that adds to the challenges faced by leaders to manage a business and its workforce. Remote work environment has brought its own challenges into the teams and leadership. The current situation motivated us to pursue our research in this area. We aim to alleviate some of these challenges through our findings.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many organizations to make their staff work from home due to government restrictions and health concerns. As a result, teams within the same department or organization and also those within the same location have become virtual teams. While the concept of virtual teams is not new, the idea of virtual teams from within the same location is novel. A myriad of studies and researches are conducted on leadership in virtual teams. Ilze Zigurs posed the question whether “leadership in virtual teams” is an oxymoron or an opportunity [3]. Her research concluded that “*it is an opportunity, on several levels, and particularly with respect to the development of team member capabilities*” [3]. With the advancement of information technology, organizations already integrated virtual teams [9, 10] in the pre-pandemic era. The use of virtual teams had grown as organizations widely adopted virtual team structures [4]. Before the pandemic, virtual teams often comprised of members from different cultural and national backgrounds [4]. Controlling all employees across distinct times and locations can be difficult, especially with resource constraints in ensuring everyone has an excellent remote working environment [7]. This statement can also apply to employees within the same region and time zone.

Fast forward nearly a decade from Ilze Zigurs’ research, “leadership in virtual teams” as an opportunity has now become a necessity. Zafer B. and Roselind T. stated in their research that effective virtual leadership can be seen as a lifebuoy for struggling businesses [7]. There is a paucity in the literature on the effect of the pandemic on virtual team leadership, given that this is a new and an unprecedented situation. There are key challenges in virtual teams formed both before and during the pandemic. Communication, trust and role clarity among others head the list of challenges faced by virtual teams and their leaders [5]. Moreover, virtual interaction affects interpersonal dynamics and people can be distracted during meetings [7]. Overcoming these challenges is the key to effective leadership in virtual teams.

To make up for the absence of face-to-face nonverbal feedback, virtual leaders need to increase engagement time [7]. This can be achieved through “*regular communication and established channels to support team communication*” [6]. Spending time developing relationships within teams is essential to build trust [3]. Teams operate most efficiently when they tap everyone’s talents and when all members understand their duties [8]. To build a virtual team, it is important for the leader to provide role and expectation clarity for the team members [6]. In a virtual environment, it is imperative that employees are technically savvy, since most forms of communication and work are done on technical platforms. The leader needs to be cognizant of employee technology challenges and identify those who may need training or help to work efficiently [7].

The literature reviewed here provides a good foundation for our research. Works in the field have expanded significantly to provide empirical studies on virtual teams and leadership [11]. Additionally, earlier studies also expanded on technological advancements, such as virtual reality simulations, that have enabled virtual teams to be equally effective as in-person teams [12]. However, the papers on empirical research listed that the sample sizes were relatively small and represented viewpoints of a limited number of virtual team leaders and members [5, 6]. Academic papers on pandemic’s impact on virtual leadership may not be prevalent, but

organizations are creating their own methods on effective leadership in virtual teams. Deloitte laid out eight principles for mastering virtual leadership of teams. A few notable ones are: reignite team purpose & clarify roles, establish a new rhythm: determining what should or should not become team traditions, track capacity and progress, leverage technology to collaborate and strategically over-communicate [14]. We can see the emphasis on communication and role clarity in both academic and business literature. In virtual teams, it is important to focus more attention on the details of task design and the process that will be used to complete them [15]. In both categories of literature: academic and business, we noticed that behavior of ineffective leadership is not studied or researched. Studies in this area may help to understand what leadership traits, behavior or tradition to avoid to lead virtual teams effectively.

Research Design

As leadership and the degree of business digitalization are pivotal to determining business success, this study is designed to investigate the most effective ways to overcome challenges associated with leading virtual teams and maintaining employees' performance in a virtual environment that is intensified by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research is designed to address the question "What are the most effective ways to lead virtual teams during the COVID-19 pandemic?". The paper utilizes a literature review and semi-empirical method that follows an inductive approach in order to discover best practices.

Model/Framework Development

First, we considered the literature available on leadership and employees' work performance in a virtual work environment. Based on this review, we designed a survey to collect empirical evidence. The survey allowed us to better understand team demographics, team dynamics, stress levels, productivity factors, and issues being faced in virtual teams. Coupling the survey results with the authors' experiences working on remote teams during the pandemic, this semi-empirical paper provides insights and best practices for leading effectively in the pandemic-induced virtual environments as shown in figure 1.

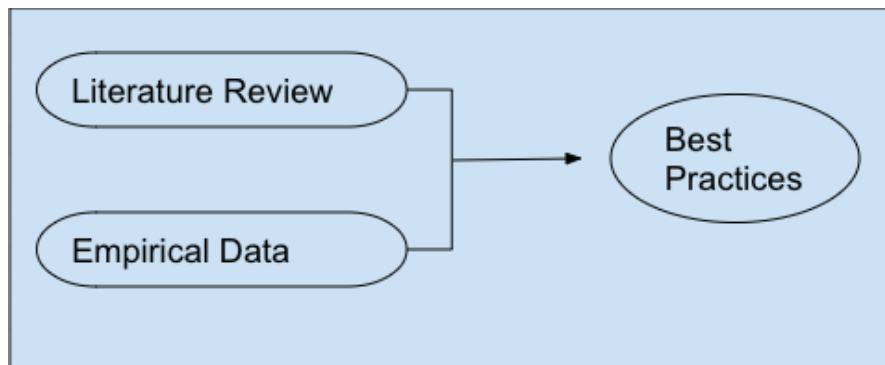


Figure 1: Research Framework

Survey Results & Analysis

In order to research the most effective leadership methods for virtual teams during the COVID-19 pandemic, we created a survey that was sent out to colleagues, classmates, friends, and family of the authors. In total, 42 individuals responded to the survey. As seen in exhibit 8, over 90% of the survey respondents answered that they are now working from home due to the pandemic, while 6% had always worked from home even before the pandemic, and only 3% still need to work in person at the office. The sizes of teams that the survey respondents are on varied widely from small two person teams to teams of over 400 [exhibit 9]. The large majority of respondents find they work the same or more hours remotely as compared to when working in the office [exhibit 10], while most found their own or team productivity stayed the same or increased [exhibit 11]. A narrow majority of 52.4% of the respondents said their stress level has increased compared to before the pandemic starting in March [exhibit 12] and a majority of those attributed the stress to the challenges of living with the COVID-19 pandemic [exhibit 13].

Demographics

Our 42 survey respondents represented a variety of ages, genders, education levels and job experience level. Most of the participants in our sample, including all the authors, belong to the 21-40 age group [exhibit 1]. As a result, survey results lean towards the perspectives of Millennials, who tend to be more comfortable with technology than older generations. Interestingly, we had nearly equal female and male respondents [exhibit 2] in our survey result, which provided us with a gender equitable perspective. We also found that most of the people surveyed have either Master's or Bachelor's degrees [exhibit 3]. This means that most of the respondents are well educated and therefore an appropriate group for sharing insights about their experiences during this pandemic. Additionally, the survey respondents represented a variety of work positions and levels from entry level to senior management [exhibit 4]. Based on the demographic results, the average survey participant is 21-40 years old, works remotely due to the pandemic, is a mid-level employee, and holds a masters degree.

Onboarding a new member during pandemic

During this pandemic, we expected the hiring process would have been impacted adversely in most companies. However, through the survey results in exhibit 5 we could infer that most hiring and onboarding of new employees remains healthy. This tells us the job market, especially for educated workers, was not as affected as expected and that companies are still actively looking for skilled workers. We also infer, based on the education level and familiarity of those surveyed that these workers are able to adapt to technology advancements in order to make remote work feasible. Additionally, the survey suggested that the onboarding process has been little affected by the remote work with the majority of respondents stating that the onboarding process has gone smoothly, which can be clearly seen in exhibit 6. Only a few respondents highlighted facing problems establishing a relationship with a new member in their team.

However, communication was emphasized as a major issue in the onboarding process. Explaining the onboarding process without knowing a person and without being able to interact in-person creates a complex challenge. According to the survey results seen in exhibit 7, about half of respondents found the onboarding process to be slower remotely during the pandemic

than compared to in person prior to the pandemic. This clearly displays that the pandemic has indeed affected the onboarding process. Survey respondents highlighted the challenges faced, such as task delegation, knowledge transfer, and process understanding. Assisting new employees remotely is a difficult process. New employees often assume that their first point of contact for assistance is the first person who was introduced to them during the onboarding process, rather than their own manager. Additional challenges to new employees onboarded remotely include being introduced to the team without an in-person orientation, gaining team trust, and interacting with the team both at work and outside of work. All these obstacles make it even harder for both new members and the team to form a bond.

These are all real pain points of working remotely that most of us have now experienced.. We were expecting an overwhelming majority would find the onboarding has become slow and complicated remotely. However, we were surprised that the onboarding process speed remained the same for about the other half of respondents as seen in exhibit 7.

Overall, during our analysis, common patterns have emerged about communication in remote environments. We see that while onboarding has been affected by the remote environment, employers can adapt to successful hiring and include new team members.

Additional Insights

Overall the survey provided a good representation of workers from different genders, job levels, education levels and team sizes; all who provided insights to the ways work life and effective leadership has changed over an 8 month time period. This study found that a majority of respondents had increased stress due to the pandemic and attributed that stress to living with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic [exhibit 12]. We were not surprised that stress levels had increased. Survey participants and the authors have found that the number of meetings have increased due to the inability to meet organically in the office and this has contributed to stress and longer hours. However, some respondents explained that the stressors are different now than pre-pandemic in March 2020 [exhibit 13]. For example, there is more concern over health, educating children at home, and longer work hours but the stress from commuting has been eliminated. We were surprised to find that respondents were split equally in stating if they had more or less direction in daily tasks working remotely compared to working in person [exhibit 14]. It was also surprising that workers stated they continue to be motivated to perform current responsibilities with over 90% of respondents stating to be a 5 or better on a 1-10 scale [exhibit 15]. Over 50% of respondents stated that management transparency stayed the same and 33.3% stated it had increased [exhibit 16]. This displays that management is doing a good job in being transparent and motivating workers despite the new work from home challenges.

Discussions

In this section we will discuss possible future work due to gaps in our survey, and the future of the pandemic. During this current environment, there are quite a few unknowns even though we are approaching a year in this work from home new norm. We do not know how long this will last, nor the impact that it has made from the general work from home revolution that was occurring before the pandemic. Due to this uncertainty, there are plenty of different avenues that could justify additional future work. The needed future work that will be discussed will focus on

building on the survey we conducted, making it more holistic and useful for companies and individuals interested in finding the most effective ways to lead during COVID-19.

To start out, our survey was targeted geographically to the Pacific Northwest region, due to the authors currently living there. It would be beneficial to receive more survey responses from individuals that live in all areas of the United States and even internationally. This would give us a broader perspective of what was happening across the world in order to understand all the advantages and disadvantages of working remotely during the pandemic.

To complement our geographical expansion of the survey we would also like to increase the amount of industries that are represented. Current work experiences differ vastly based on industry and the ability to adapt to remote work, so we would like to include healthcare workers, IT, manufacturing, education, finance, hospitality, and retail. By adding a distinguished question for industries and including a greater sampling of respondents, we could compile all the best practices and techniques by industry and profession in order to improve work effectiveness. For example, a lot of these groups mentioned above are working in very different settings. Healthcare workers are essential and are still going to work every day, but what has changed is being required to communicate with patients through Zoom or any other online meeting software. On the other hand there are manufacturing companies that have required most of their engineering and administrative teams to work from home while people in production are still required to be present in the plant to support the manufacturing processes. This creates a unique set of skills that are required as well because not only are you communicating with people that are also virtual, but with people that are not around their computers all that often during the day. We believe all this would further contribute to establishing best practices on how to lead effectively.

Another area of survey improvement is including questions regarding trust dynamics and the challenges and changes leaders are encountering with working in a virtual environment due to the pandemic. In the virtual work environment, communicating with employees has changed and management styles need to adapt. Managers need to trust their employees to be productive, effective, and reliable working remotely. We believe organizations that have high trust levels throughout are more efficient due to people being more committed to their work, having set transparent processes, and inclusive decision making.

Lastly, it would be interesting to take a deeper dive into how leaders are managing conflicts virtually. This is extra difficult due to the lack of physical cues and gestures that you normally receive from a crucial conversation. While the use of video conferencing in addition to just audio assists with seeing facial cues, hand signals and body language are not as easily communicated virtually.

In summary, expanding our survey geographically, across various industries, and increasing focus on trust and managing conflicts would give us a better chance on developing a good set of rules to help someone become more effective in a leadership role.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we have developed what we believe is an initial set of best practices for leading virtual teams effectively. Our teams' own experiences, results from the survey, and using existing work that has already been completed in this area are the main drivers in defining these rules.

1. Communicate regularly with team members in mutually agreed upon medium(s).
2. Clarify roles and processes to perform tasks.
3. Properly train employees on using the preferred communications platform (i.e. Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, WebEx, etc.).
4. Set speaking guidelines on the communications platform being used so people are not talking over one another and everybody gets to voice their opinions.
5. Create clear meeting agendas that are attainable by everyone prior to the meeting.
6. Schedule routine team and 1:1 meetings to stay in alignment with team members.
7. Foster collaboration and encourage everyone to participate in meetings.
8. Have frequent informal check-ins via chat or call to discuss project status and/or barriers.
9. Be creative when coming up with ways to continue team building and maintaining relationships i.e virtual happy hours, birthday celebrations, and online games.
10. Track employee capacity before assigning new work to reduce stress.

By following the above guidelines we hope to eliminate the communication hardships that come with working virtually such as the common questions, "Can you see my screen?" or "Can you hear me?". As people become trained and more comfortable with whatever communications platform that is used, the meetings will be able to start and launch into the content immediately and the tech problems at the beginning of meetings, that we have all become way too familiar with, will be eliminated. These established rules will also aid in driving team engagement and making sure everyone knows what the goals are and how. As a team, they will then accomplish those goals. If robust processes and training are put in place there will be a much greater chance for success. Working from home should not decrease productivity or make it harder to communicate with your team.

These times can be difficult and stressful for everyone, so it is important to keep in mind the benefits of effective leadership. A good leader will have open and honest two way communication with their employees and values input on decisions. As John Adams said, "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader" [13]. Successful leadership can result in high morale amongst your employees, higher retention, and overall sustainable long-term success for your organization. We truly believe that effective leadership in both a virtual and challenging environment is attainable by understanding and following the best practices provided.

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Appendix A: Participant Demographics

Exhibit 1: Survey Participant Demographics - Age

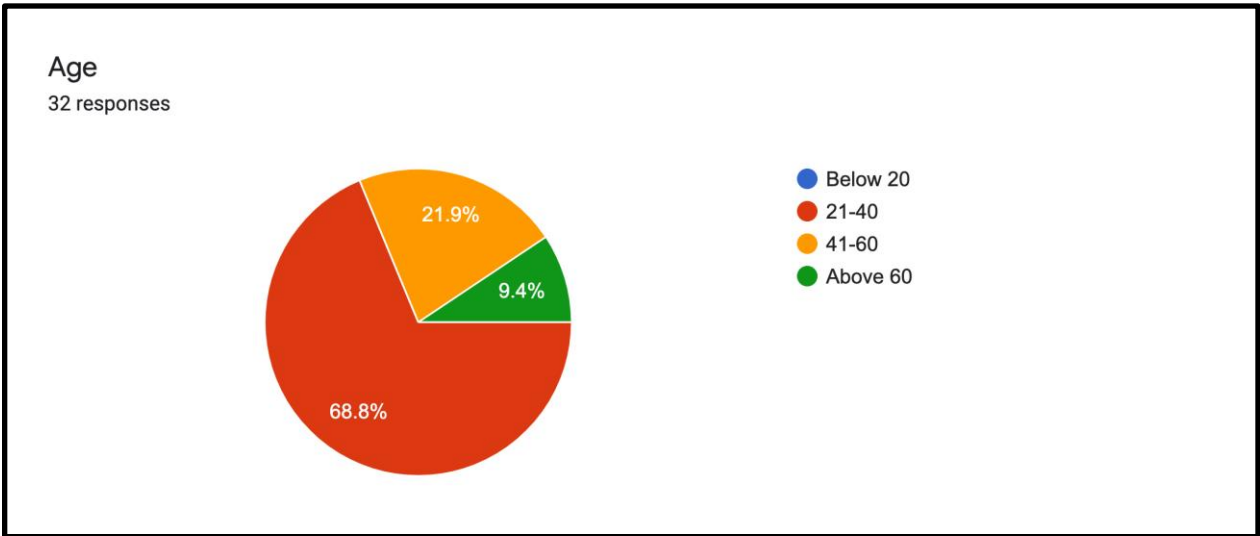


Exhibit 2: Survey Participant Demographics - Gender

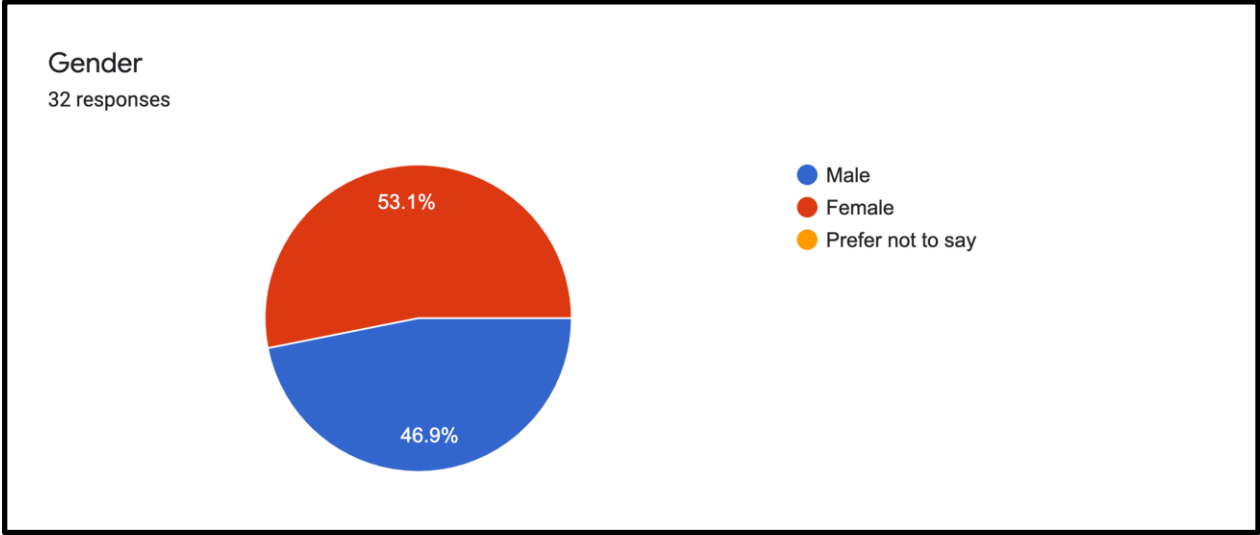


Exhibit 3: Survey Participant Demographics - Education

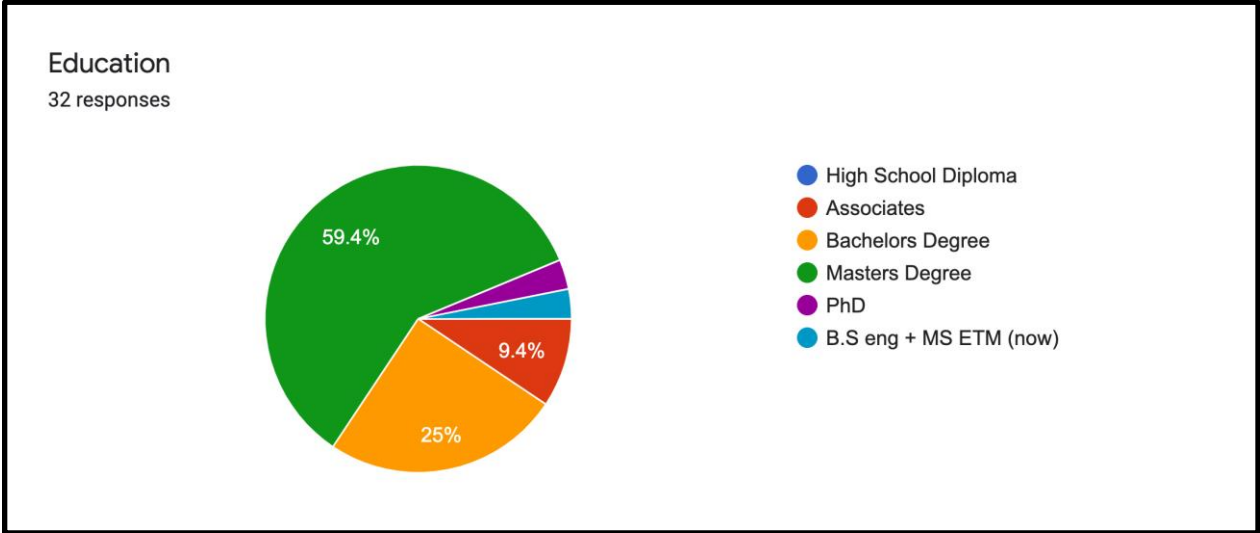
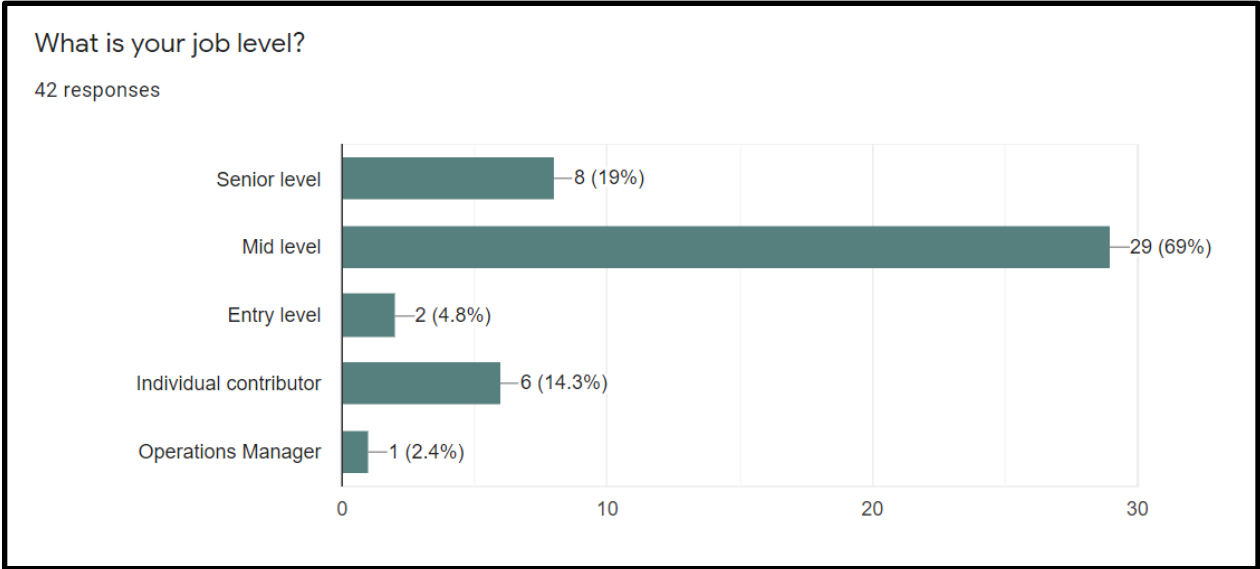


Exhibit 4: Job Level



Appendix B: Short Answer Questions

Exhibit 5: Onboarding New Staff Members

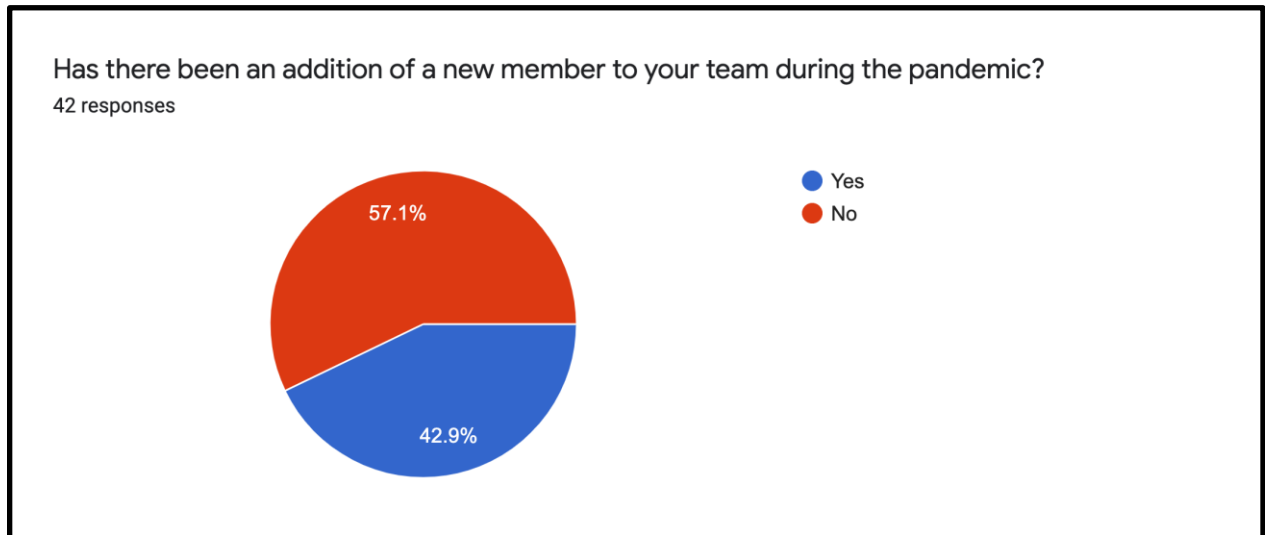


Exhibit 6: New Staff Transition

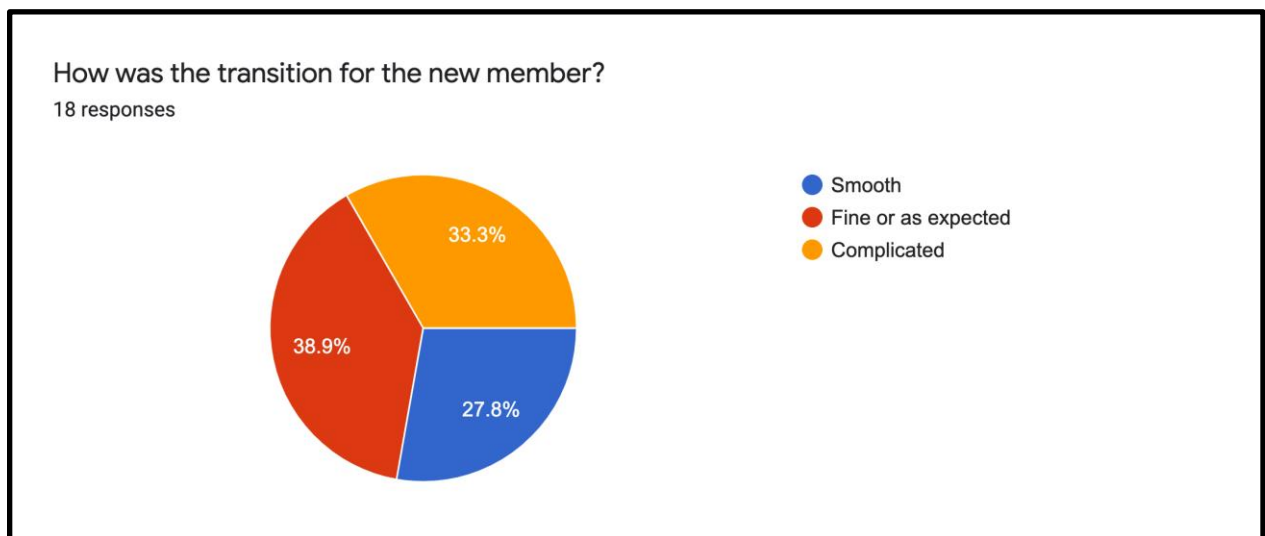


Exhibit 7: Onboarding Process

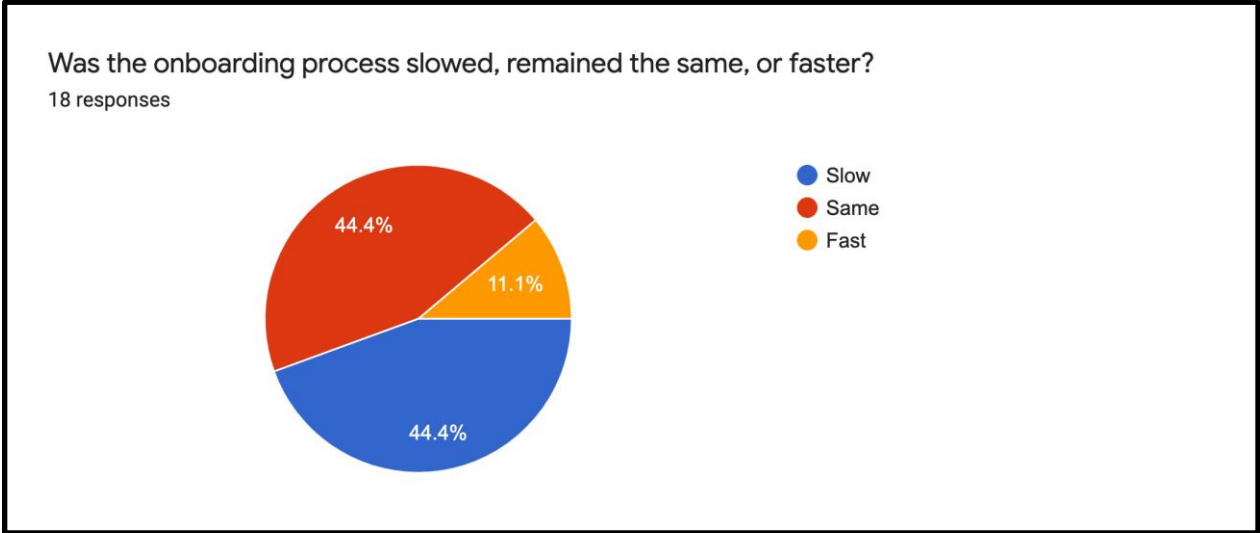


Exhibit 8: Current Work Environment

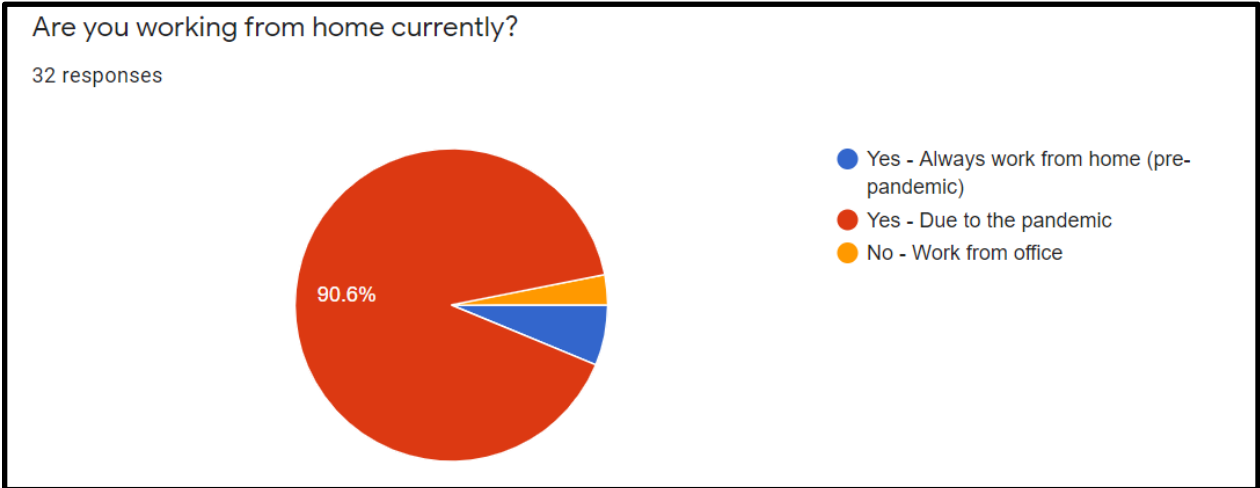


Exhibit 9: Team Size

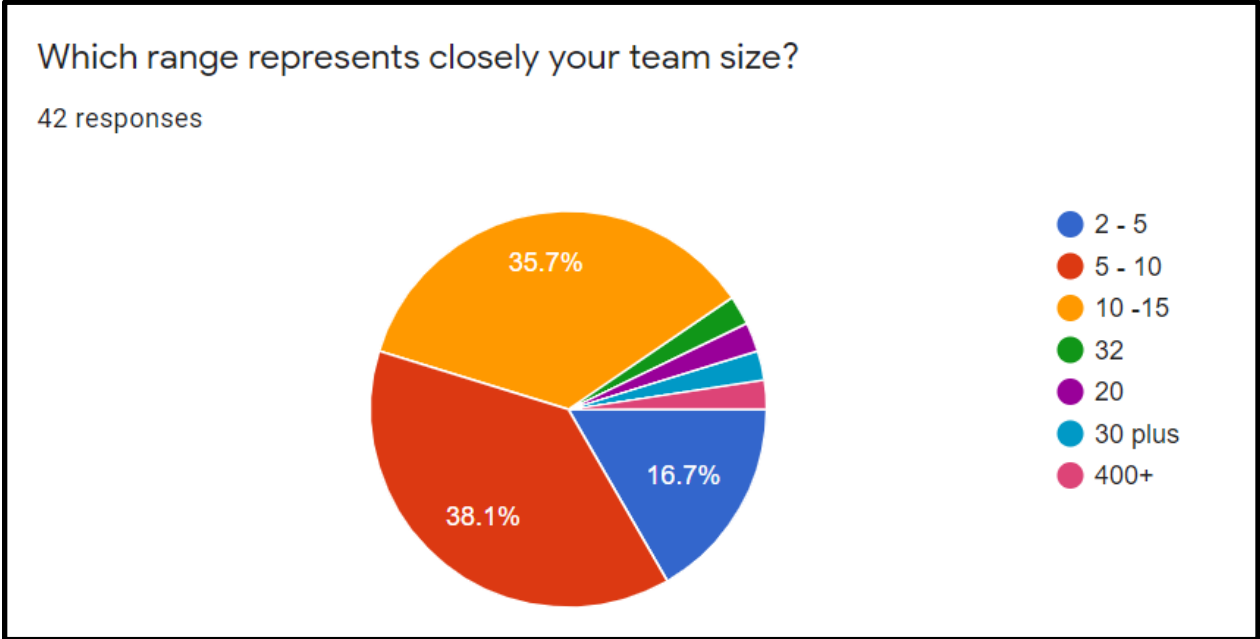


Exhibit 10: Hours Working Remotely During the Pandemic vs In-Office Pre-Pandemic

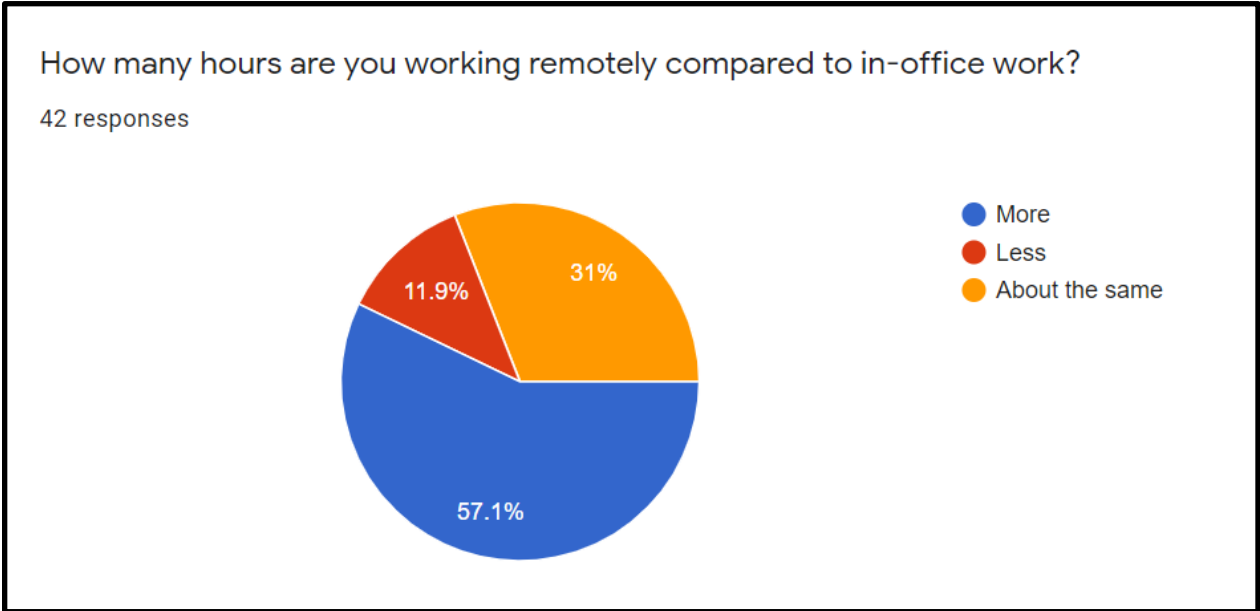


Exhibit 11: Team Productivity Level Comparison

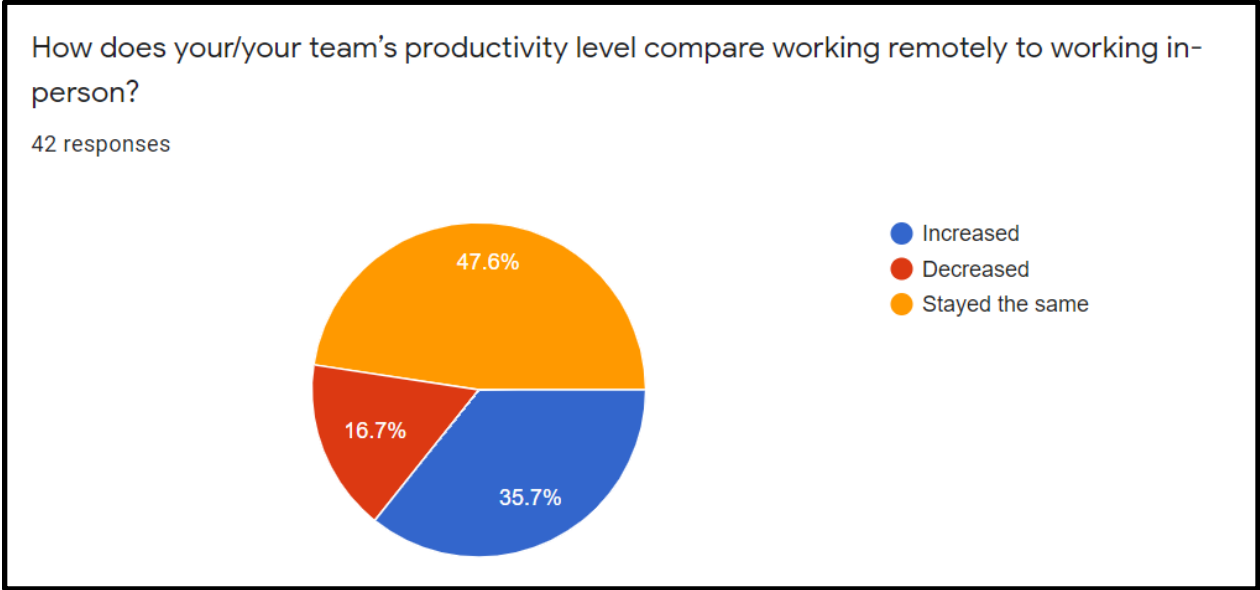


Exhibit 12: Stress Level Comparison

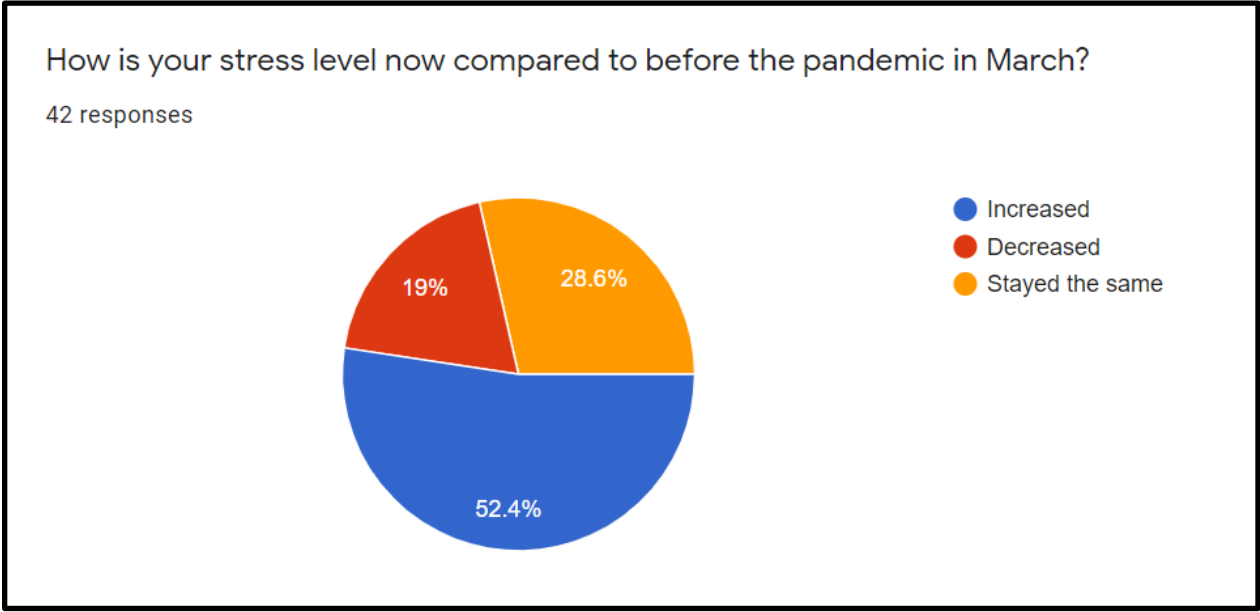


Exhibit 13: Stress Level Attributions

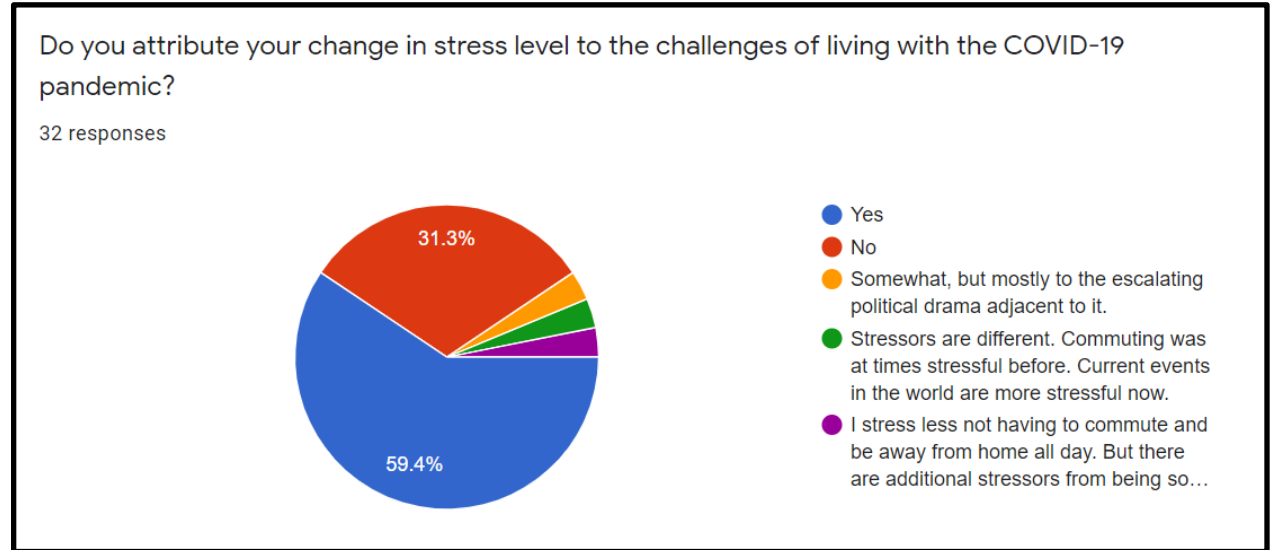


Exhibit 14: Daily Task Direction Compared to In-Person

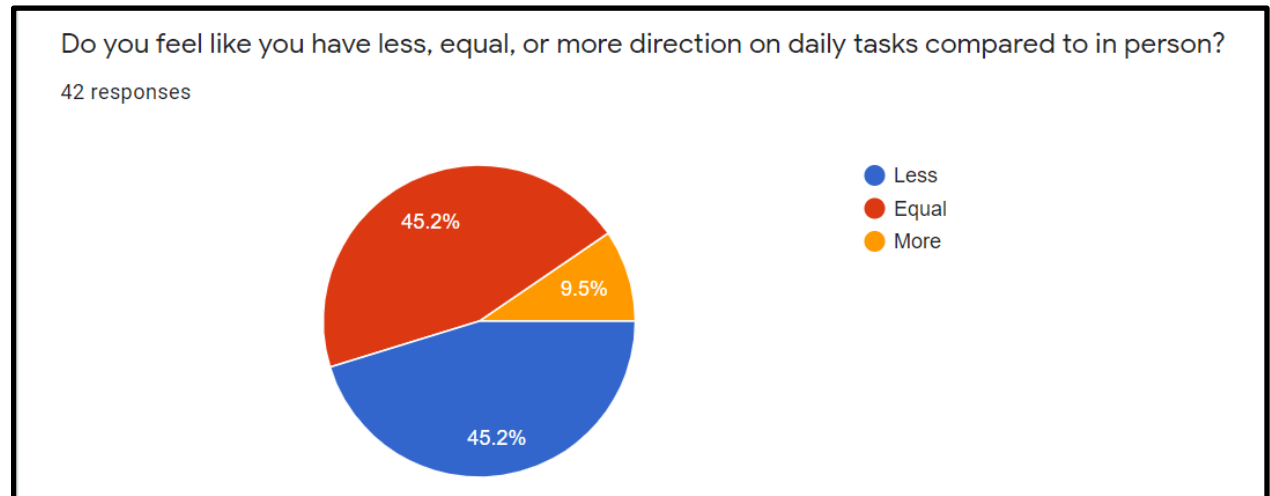


Exhibit 15: Motivation to Perform Responsibilities

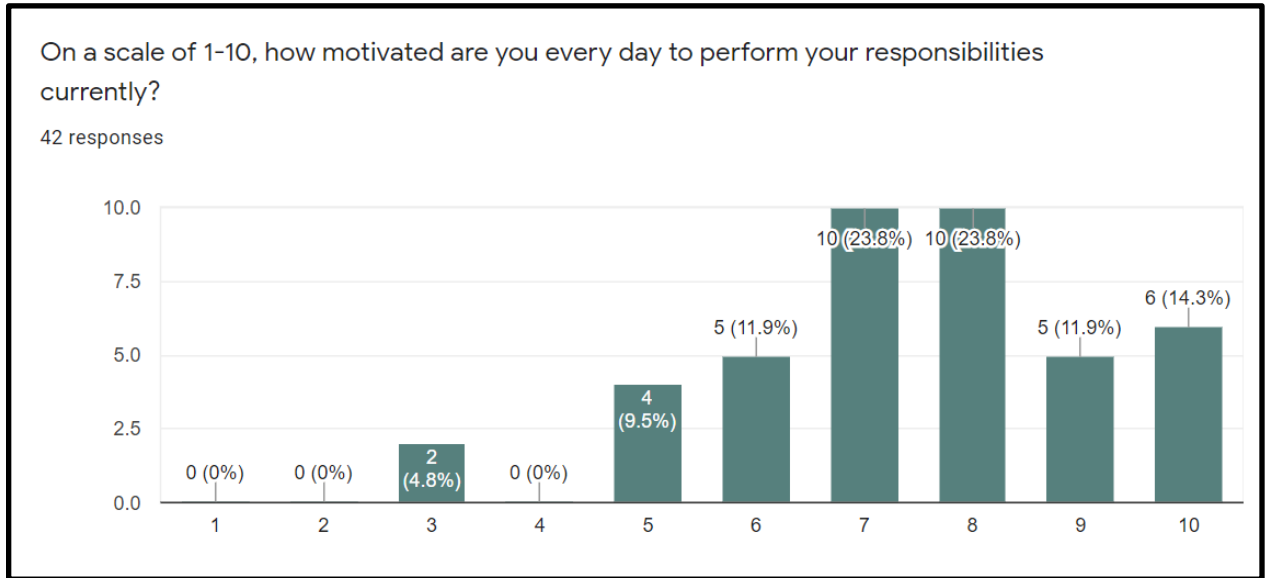
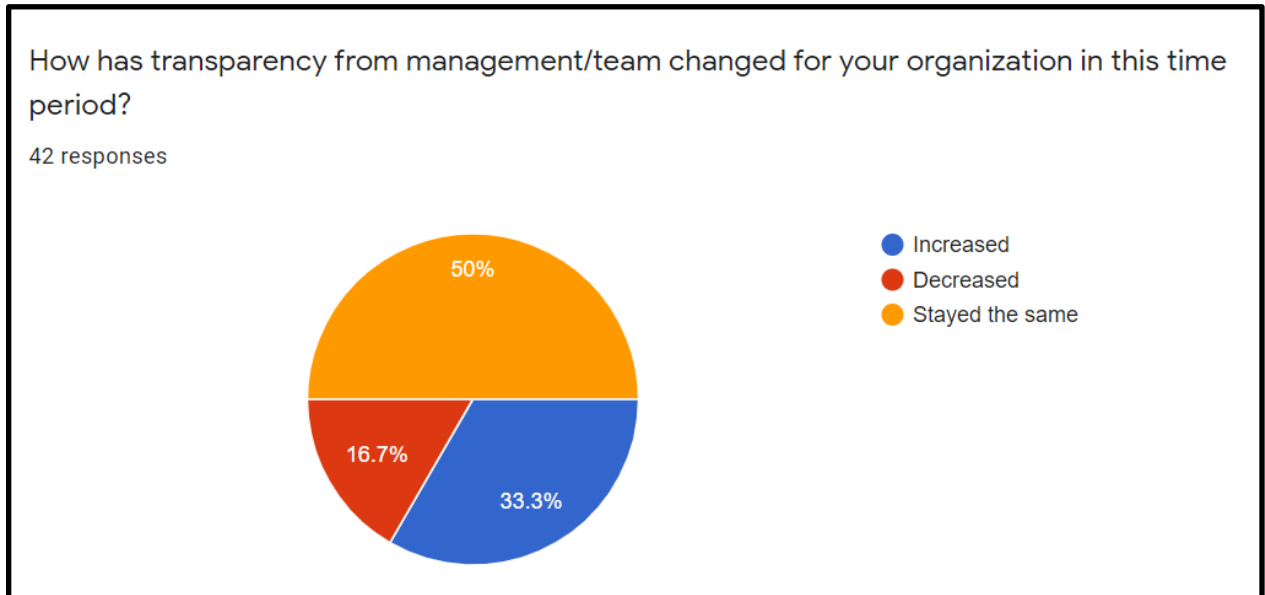


Exhibit 16: Transparency from Management/Team



Appendix C: Long Answers Question

Exhibit 17: Survey Responses on Team Engagement

What are you doing to drive team engagement?
No meetings during lunch to give everyone a break, creating a status tracker so everyone can track issues to reduce meetings, created a weekly meeting with my lead engineering team
Staying connected
Open to video calls and fun team videos.
Encourage vacation days
being supportive to coworkers and making a big effort to share work tasks so it is distributed equally
Making sure I am available for consultation 24/7
Help set up teams in advance.
Team meetings and detailed log of do/done list helps our team to be engaged.
using slack more
We introduced guiding principles award. This is awarded when a team member adheres to these principles.
Sadly, putting members on the spot (in a diplomatic way) is the only way to engagement in my team
Connect regularly
Calls everyday...
Play team game outdoor
Virtual team lunch, Happy hours, weekly theme for meeting backgrounds, encouraging to turn on videos
More connect with team, one on one's for their issues, off work fun games for less stress
Regular check-ins
Extra communication! Having 1 to 1 coffee breaks, Participating in group activities. Using internal message system Slack to check in with others not in direct work team.
1:1 check-ins, team meetings, virtual happy hours
We are trying to keep our pre pandemic rituals alive
Maintain weekly collaborative events/meetings, celebrate accomplishments.
Increased communications, including email, more stand-up meetings, 1:1s
More daily standups, checking in emotionally during 1-1s.
Communicate with team members on Chat. Have more meetings. Send follow-up emails and messages to get status updates. Remind people that I am available for work.
Clear expectations, goals & deliveries schedule. Frequent updates and touch bases.
DMS Meetings, and lots of phone calls

frequent team meetings; one on one meetings; Big 10 goals
By being candid, open, and honest and not micromanaging
Team happy hour
Online team games
Have a weekly informal check in session with my team
too busy
Staying in constant contact with as many as possible.
Emails/TEAM Meetings
direct calling
Weekly team meetings
Conducting social times, trying to engage team members in fun activities

Exhibit 18: Survey Results about the Decision Making Process in a Virtual Environment

Has your decision making process stayed the same or been modified to better suit the virtual environment? If so, please explain.
It's been modified slightly. My employees still work in person and do not have computers or phones with cameras. But I work remotely. I feel disconnected and I am trying to stay engaged by being onsite at least once a week and being available anytime. I have found that showing extra empathy is important during this time.
Stayed the same
Same
We had to adapt to a virtual workplace
We are having a lot more zoom meetings to discuss planning. Since everyone is working from home, it's easier to schedule meetings
Taking more initiative to make decisions without checking with management or colleagues because that would slow down processes
More preparation is required to overcome technical issues.
It stayed the same
stayed the same mostly. Everything has slowed down since it is impossible to get people in a meeting together (wfh has drastically increased the number of meetings)
My job is to influence the executives in their decision making. It remains the same.
Modified due to restrictions to enter the workplace at certain times
Stayed the same as still working with the same people
Need to have multiples meeting with stake holders and get the data that needed.

Improved due to unexpected situation
Actually same. Even before pandemic many of the team members used to work from home weekly twice and also my work responsibilities include interacting with onshore and offshore teams. So basically we were more or less working virtually prior to this pandemic. So the decision making ability is basically same.
It has more or less stayed the same.
Finding more time to network
There is less risk taking, which I like. Though, there is also less of tendency to challenge ideas at all. Could lead to challenges over the long term. Crucial or challenging conversations are hard over video or phone.
Some modifications -- e.g., more polling for collaborative decision-making (harder over video chat), more use of breakout rooms, some applications used to replicate processes like brainstorming.
Same
Same, was already pretty virtual.
Pretty much stayed the same - when consultation with team is needed, I typically wait for the next stand-up meeting or team meeting to talk about the item first. Might have had impromptu discussions a bit more when 100% in person.
Impromptu discussions with my team are slowed down by not being able to have hallway discussions, but the impact has not been that noticeable on decision-making.
I make decisions first, then let others know. In the virtual environment, "it is easier to ask for forgiveness than it is to get permission". Sometimes, I will take steps after deliberative thought, do the task, then let the team know. It tends to be faster than waiting to get approval. Of course, people are more forgiving in the virtual environment.
It has changed as communication needs extra time. The process has been changing as each team member now is more responsible to their tasks as if concerns or questions raise, it will take longer in order to be answered or helped (Technical issues take way longer to resolve virtually even with screen share)
I believe we have more collaboration between team members. More people involved to ensure everyone knows what is going on.
stayed same
Same
Adapted to virtual environment
Relying on team members who are more likely to respond in time online.
Same
same
Stayed the same
I feel I'm less in control of making decisions.
stayed the same
Stayed the same
Stayed the same
Modified, Adapted to the virtual environment. Had to consider people working from home situation before coming to a conclusion

Exhibit 19: Survey Responses About Team Recognition During the Pandemic in a Mostly Virtual Environment

Is your manager/director/CEO/Business Partner providing team recognition to team members the same way as before or has it changed? If so, please explain.
I feel it's increased as the company recognizes the challenges of the pandemic while the customer demands remain. My company offered 15% bonuses to onsite employees in April and May and everyone was paid their base regardless if they came into work or not. I have been able to give my employees some additional recognition for their current efforts and my managers have supported this. However, in person activities , happy hours and team buildings are now non-existent.
Same
Same
Same as before
After the team members complete a project we get a "thank you" email from our supervisor. Not much changed from before.
Same but I am trying myself to drive to use the tools for recognition and to drive others on the team to do the same
Almost the same. Praise comes in virtual meetings instead of live meetings.
It stayed the same
same, but really there should be more considering the increase in work
Same
No, recognitions now shifted heavily towards the online platform. i.e, email recognition became the primary method for recognizing
It's the same.
Previously we used to meet our partner on daily basis and can share the personal opinion but now its only meeting for work.
I guess it hasn't changed
No
Same.
Not in the same way as before
Yes, same way.
The same.
Roughly the same as before, mostly just digitized versions of what would have happened in person. Perhaps more 1:1 communication.
Same
Mostly the same: ACK cards, verbal praise.
This is the same (1:1s, performance appraisals, ACK cards)
Same.

No
Nothing has changed. If anything, the stress and pressure to get things done has been exacerbated by Covid-19. Putting out fires and dealing with crises has become the norm. Amazingly, this year has flown by due to overloaded work in the company. Too much work, too little time and people to get things done quickly.
No. Expectations stayed the same although some have been struggling to balance life and work.
Same way.
Same way (recognition is a normal topic of weekly team meetings)
Probably the same - Doing this virtually can be harder for some folks
No
More or less same.
same
More attention to making working from home more comfortable.
same
Team is being recognized more often, for things that wouldn't have been recognized previously. Trying to appease the masses
No
no - less recognition
Not much
yes