

# Making better decisions and engaging a remote workforce

*How online assessments can help leaders support  
at-home workers to reach their potential*



Questionmark Viewpoint

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## Introduction

Now more than ever, helping workers reach their potential really matters.

Whatever the industry, the ability to change and adapt will be at the heart of survival. Employees must be agile to adapt. New skills must be quickly acquired. With economic uncertainty ahead, employers must ensure that their best team members don't seek new opportunities to build their careers elsewhere.

As this report will show, engaging and motivating the workforce has never been more challenging. The factors that prevent employers from performing at their best are exaggerated by Covid-19 and the widespread remote working which has been made necessary by social distancing measures.

Most acutely, as the world prepares for a winter of uncertainty, employers simply do not have the usual tried and tested tools of pay rises and promotions at their disposal. They must find new ways of helping their people to do their best.

The decisions employers make about staff engagement are crucial. Informed decisions will transform line management, refine communications, and make training more relevant than ever. But if decisions are not based on an understanding of the current state of play, they risk compounding existing problems.

This report explores how the information from online staff assessments can help give employers a true picture of what's happening with their workforce so they can make good decisions around staff engagement. Assessments help employers ensure they get the most out of remote workers and give their teams the support they need.

### Questionmark Viewpoint

Questionmark Viewpoint is a series of white papers and reports that we produce to explore the challenges that our customers are facing, and which we help them address. These papers are based on what we are hearing from customers, and on research from other experts.

## The causes of low staff engagement?

Conversations around increasing engagement, often start with an analysis of the factors that create problems with motivation and encourage staff turnover.

Based on conversations with customers, we have detected four common obstacles to building an engaged and motivated workforce.

### **1) The lack of career development**

Money might make the world go around, but it is often not the biggest factor in ensuring employees remain in post. Nor is it what motivates them to reach their potential.

According to research by LinkedIn, 94% of employees are likely to remain with a company longer if they believe their employer is investing in their career.<sup>1</sup>

In a survey of 250,000 workers, the Work Institute found that career development is the number one reason that people leave a job. Some 22% said they had left a role to progress their career. Just 9% looked for a new opportunity purely to secure a higher salary.<sup>2</sup>

With economic uncertainty ahead many employees will be concerned about how their careers will be able to develop.

### **2) Not feeling that they, and their skills, are valued**

Facebook conducted an exercise to discover why team members left the business. It found that those who stayed were 33% more likely to believe they were using their skills to contribute to the business.<sup>3</sup>

This sense of personal value can come from an employee seeing how their contribution helps meet business objectives. Of course, this often requires explicit validation from

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<sup>1</sup> <https://learning.linkedin.com/resources/workplace-learning-report-2018>

<sup>2</sup> <https://employeebenefits.co.uk/employee-retention-top-5-reasons-employees-leave-their-jobs/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://hbr.org/2018/01/why-people-really-quit-their-jobs>

managers. Team members often feel underappreciated when they don't receive regular positive feedback.<sup>4</sup>

In creating a sense of value and appreciation across teams, numerous studies have pointed to the importance of managers. A Gallup poll of more than one million US workers found that the primary reason people quit their job was because of a bad boss or immediate supervisor.<sup>5</sup>

As the saying goes, people don't leave jobs. They leave bosses.

### **3) Lack of team spirit**

Employees want to contribute to business goals. But they also want to feel part of a team. In 2019, Gallup's annual Work and Education survey found that relationships with co-workers was the second most satisfying aspect of work for employed Americans.<sup>6</sup>

Further research by Gallup has established that people who have a best friend at work are likely to be significantly more engaged.<sup>7</sup>

During lockdowns and with more people having to work from home, maintaining work relationships will be all the more important.

### **4) A sense of uncertainty**

"Perceived job insecurity" can seriously undermine a worker's performance. Research at the University of Leuven indicates that fear of losing a job can be more stressful for employees than the actual reality, should that happen.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://b2b.kununu.com/blog/why-do-good-employees-quit-leave-their-job>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/employees-dont-leave-companies-managers-brigitte-hyacinth/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/195143/workers-satisfied-job-dimensions.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/320297/invest-employees-wellbeing-afford-not.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/17/your-money/uncertainty-about-jobs-has-a-ripple-effect.html>

A further study by Washington State University suggests that when worried about losing their job, workers are less likely to pay attention to crucial parts of their role, including health and safety regulations.<sup>9</sup>

These problems are compounded by the fact that employees worry that confessing their concerns and stress to managers will make it more likely that they will lose their job.<sup>10</sup>

Though it is not always possible to give cast-iron reassurances, employees will value an open culture in which it is possible to discuss any concerns.



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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/17/your-money/uncertainty-about-jobs-has-a-ripple-effect.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/article-details/staff-fear-redundancy-if-they-admit-to-feeling-stressed-at-work>

## How is working from home impacting engagement?

The factors explored above can occur at any stage of the economic cycle or a firm's development. Initial evidence, however, suggests that many of these vulnerabilities are magnified by Covid-19 and widespread working from home.

It is still too early to measure the long-term effects of the Coronavirus crisis on career development. However, early indications suggest that it is having a negative impact. A survey for Doodle found that 41% of employees feel their career development has stalled during the first months of the pandemic and 9% believe they have gone backward.<sup>11</sup>

Feedback from line managers matters. But is positive and constructive feedback as forthcoming as it should be when people are working remotely?

In a traditional office situation, a manager may deduce from facial clues and body language that a team member needs encouragement or praise.<sup>12</sup> Rarely is this possible when teams are geographically scattered.

Even though teams enjoy less face-to-face contact, the radical change in circumstances has not immediately eroded work-based friendships.

In some cases, co-workers have made more effort to stay in touch with one another and offer support, albeit at a distance.

Nevertheless, many workers feel increasingly lonely.<sup>13</sup> A survey for LinkedIn found that older workers in particular miss the time they spent with co-workers.<sup>14</sup> Managers recognize that more thought must be given to ensuring new starters can form friendships with other team members.<sup>15</sup>

Less surprisingly, but more worryingly, living amid a pandemic has increased rates of stress and anxiety. Research by TELUS International found that 75% of American workers have

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/the-covid-19-effect-on-career-development-forward-backward-or-stalled/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/martifischer/2020/04/07/feedback-practices-for-employees-working-remotely/#7a914a8b5709>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/the-covid-19-effect-on-career-development-forward-backward-or-stalled/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/work/employees-putting-in-38-extra-hours-a-month-as-work-home-life-lines-blur-1.4253279>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.themuse.com/advice/starting-new-job-remotely-coronavirus>

struggled to work due to anxiety caused by Covid-19. The vast majority (80%) would consider quitting their job if they believed an alternative employer could offer greater mental health support.<sup>16</sup>

There are also indications that employees are battling with burnout and struggling to maintain work/life balance. A poll by recruitment consultancy Robert Walters found that 47% of managers in the UK are worried that staff are at risk of burnout.

The same study discovered that 87% of workers felt pressured to put in more hours when working from home.<sup>17</sup> A similar poll for US workers found that 58% were seriously overworked with 35% attributing it to Covid-19 based circumstances.<sup>18</sup>



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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chriswestfall/2020/10/08/mental-health-leadership-survey-reveals-80-of-remote-workers-would-quit-their-jobs-for-this/#45cf625a3a0f>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/half-of-managers-fear-staff-are-burning-out-because-of-covid-19>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/employee-burnout-from-covid-19-on-the-rise-with-58-of-us-workers-reporting-burnout-301122967.html>



## How can employers build engagement?

Every employer will need their own engagement strategy to ensure they are supporting and getting the best out of remote workers.

Common principles are emerging.

**1) Over-communicate** - if in doubt, communicate. When the pandemic first hit, employers did a good job of communicating to workers in a crisis. Research has indicated that employees viewed corporate leaders as one of the most trusted sources of information in the initial phases of the crisis.<sup>19</sup>

As working from home becomes more normal, employers must continue to give the same thought and attention to their regular communications.

To ensure that they are hitting the right notes, managers must have a clear read on how the workforce is feeling about the current situation, what their particular 'pain points' are and where they may need additional support and reassurance.

**2) Make the most of face-to-face contact** - depending on the local circumstances, some employers can physically meet with their teams on occasions. In these situations, the usual line-management or team-meeting agenda may need a re-vamp.

Priority should be given to talking about issues that are best discussed face to face. These might include personal issues, performance feedback and in-depth conversations around personal development.

To create the time for such conversations, managers should explore other mechanisms to gather information typically obtained in meetings.

**3) Greater focus on career development and training** - in a previous Questionmark Viewpoint report, ["Workplace Training Without the Water Cooler"](#), we

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/communications-get-personal-how-leaders-can-engage-employees-during-a-return-to-work#>

explored how, prior to social distancing, much training and professional development occurred organically among teams.

Employers must consider how the 'water cooler' moment can be replicated virtually. But they must also explore offering more intentional training around skills, knowledge and attitudes that previously developed seamlessly.

In a world where employees do not interact with different teams and business functions socially, their understanding of how their role fits the bigger picture can diminish.

**4) Establish personal career development plans for each employee** - workers need to know that their development is taken seriously. By being intentional about the career development of each team member, managers will learn more about an individual's aspirations, performance and training needs. These could lead to a greater understanding of how to motivate a particular employee.

Thanks to a wealth of online training resources, it is increasingly possible for individual employees to pursue their own bespoke training plan.

**5) Create safe social gatherings** - depending on local circumstances, bringing limited numbers of team members together to socialize may be possible.

To ensure this increases morale, rather than adds to anxiety, managers will need clear information on their team's attitude toward mixing and their understanding of good social distancing practice.

**6) Establish a working from home etiquette** - at the beginning of the crisis, priority was rightly given to helping employees work from home effectively. Managers needed to ensure the right kit was distributed and that team members knew how to navigate a new world of video conferencing and collaboration apps.

Now it's time to dig deeper into culture. But to do so employers must first have a clear read of the state of play.

## How assessments can help leaders make better decisions

Leaders have recognized the benefits that online skills assessments can bring to making better decisions around learning and development.

During the first months of the lockdown, a wide range of employers significantly increased their usage of our enterprise-grade assessment platform.

These assessments give employers robust and up to date information on the skills that workers possess.

Managers can quickly identify where strengths and weaknesses lie.

Additional training can be introduced to develop needed skills.

By testing participants after the training has finished, assessments can show if it worked.

But the role of assessments in helping employers build engagement and develop their staff can go much deeper.

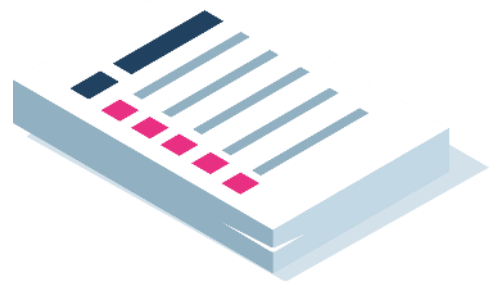
- **Identifying concerns and anxieties** – staff surveys and assessments can reveal where stressful situations are emerging. They can identify ‘pain points’ for staff. By gathering this information in advance of meetings, managers can spend more time addressing them during much cherished face-to-face contact. Senior leaders can tailor communications more effectively and sensitively.
- **Capturing individual training needs** – assessments can help create a tailored training program for individual employees. By testing a team member’s current skills, employers can quickly see what’s missing.
- **Powering certification programs** – traditionally countless core skills were developed through junior employees being able to observe their more experienced co-workers in action. As work patterns change, formal certification programs could ensure employees develop the necessary skills and help create a deeper sense of career development.

Effective certification programs must be underpinned by robust assessments. By making training tangible, employers can increase engagement with training. One way of

achieving this is to award a digital badge that staff can display on their email signatures and social media.

- **Ensure the right people are promoted** – by assessing existing team members, employers gain an objective read on which employees have the skills to progress to the next level. Where necessary, internal certification programs can be introduced to illustrate which team members are making progress toward a development goal. This empirical data allows decision-makers to sense check any cognitive bias which may be clouding their judgment.
- **Assess readiness for meet-ups** – for some teams, more regular physical and social contact would be welcome. For others it could add to anxiety. Surveys can reveal how ready teams are for more contact. Assessments can highlight their awareness of social distancing protocol, allowing managers to make a reasonable assessment as to whether they can be managed safely.
- **Building a work-from-home culture** – are middle-managers expecting staff to stay logged-on all night? Are customers requesting constant access to key personnel? Do some workers feel tied to their desk while others believe simply 'listening out for the phone' constitutes a valid working arrangement?

Assessments can reveal different attitudes to remote working among employees. Once the current state of play is clear, leaders can set clear expectations and build a fruitful remote working culture.



## Conclusion

The factors that prevent employees making their best contribution have been magnified by remote working.

Feedback is harder to give and solicit. Teams feel disconnected. Burnout seems to be all but ubiquitous. Living against the backdrop of a pandemic and economic hardship have sent anxiety levels rocketing.

But the decisions employers take make a difference. Leaders that have established a strong bond of trust with employees must take good decisions to ensure it is strengthened and maintained.

Online assessments can give employers the information they need to make these decisions. Skills tests identify training needs. Attitude assessments allow for greater sensitivity in business processes and interactions.

We have worked with a range of employers around the world to help them make the best people decisions around managing the remote workforce. If you would like to begin a conversation about how we can help, please get in touch.





## About Questionmark

We help organizations and their people unlock their potential to deliver better performance.

Questionmark provides a secure enterprise-grade assessment platform and professional services to leading organizations around the world, delivered with care and unequalled expertise. Its full-service online assessment tool and professional services help customers to improve their performance and meet their compliance requirements. Questionmark enables organizations to unlock their potential by delivering assessments which are valid, reliable and fair, which can be defended.

Questionmark offers secure powerful integration with learning management systems (LMS), learning record stores (LRS) and proctoring services making it easy to bring everything together in one place. Questionmark's cloud-based assessment management platform offers rapid deployment, scalability for high-volume test delivery, 24/7 support, and the peace-of-mind of secure, audited U.S., Australian and European-based data centers.

## Working with Questionmark

To further explore how Questionmark could work for your organization, or to book a free consultation and demo, please see: <https://www.questionmark.com/request-demo/>

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