

**FEELING TOGETHER APART
– BEHAVIOURAL CONTRACTS FOR REMOTE WORKERS**

A KNOWLEDGE ABILITY WHITE PAPER

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Author's note

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Another version appeared (pp 57-60) in *The IRS Handbook of Flexible Working* edited by Louis Wustemann, IRS LexisNexis, London, 2001, 0-40694-701-5.

INTRODUCTION

When people are asked about their experiences and expectations of working remotely — whether as teleworkers or as members of distributed groups or virtual teams — an interesting pattern emerges. The aspects that people rate as positive are to do with performance and the convenience and flexibility of remote working — all the plus points we've come to recognise. Heading the list of negative aspects are issues to do with relationships and interpersonal behaviour. Here respondents expose doubts and lack of confidence. For example:

- "How can I work closely with people I don't know?"
- "How often does my manager expect me to contact them?"
- "When should I use email and when should I use the 'phone?"
- "Is it OK to call other group members for a chat if I'm lonely?"
- "How do I know I'm not interrupting other people?"
- "If I'm stuck, is it OK to call for help?"

These concerns aren't trivial, and lead to real discomfort and potentially lowered performance. But how often are these interpersonal aspects actively discussed? Teleworking programmes usually are launched with great attention to work planning, work hours, facilities and

technology: all the things that managers are legitimised to handle. Similarly setting up virtual teams usually involves undivided attention to goals, budget, plan and deliverables. What is rarely on the agenda, however, is interpersonal behaviour.

It isn't all management blindness, however. We rarely attend to these interpersonal aspects of remote working because in the face to face office they're near-invisible. Working face to face, we pick up innumerable subtle cues about our colleagues, the accepted norms of behaviour, and how and when to interact with others. But when we move to remote work — especially in new groups — all these cues are missing.

Hence the need for behavioural contracts. These are mutual commitments — not legal documents — about the behaviour that individuals can expect of their colleagues, managers and reports. They're two-way and every-way: not just what a manager can expect of their staff. Behavioural contracts are increasingly being created by managers who lead teleworkers or and virtual teams and who recognise that working together apart is different to working together together.

The key role of behavioural contracts is to surface and get commitments about interpersonal behaviour and communication issues that otherwise may not receive attention. Unless behavioural contracts have been agreed, the signals that people need in order to work comfortably and successfully with each other will stay out of sight. Misunderstandings — or worse — will persist.

MISUNDERSTANDINGS

It's often surprising what misunderstandings have persisted prior being investigated in behavioural contracts. A teleworker in Holland was shocked when she found that she'd been annoying her colleagues because she only answered her email once a day. When she explained that she was always working flat out and this was her way of minimising interruptions, her colleagues immediately understood and then agreed to handle their emails this way themselves.

And there can be professional and cultural issues. In a multinational company an Italian marketing manager was leading a virtual team that included British engineers. He felt they were failing to keep him informed of progress — even that they didn't like working with him. The engineers, however, assumed that weekly emailed progress reports, which were the norm in their part of the company, would be sufficient. Once the topic was discussed in the course of developing a behavioural contract, the matter was easily settled. They agreed to supplement the emailed reports with an audio conference on Wednesday mornings.

Finally, behavioural contracts can settle some deeply-felt but unvoiced problems. All the members of a UK virtual workgroup of field service engineers spent long days on the road. Each got home and then did at least an hour's paperwork. Each privately felt that they owed the

company this extra time because they'd been slow in handling their work that day. When they all talked about this together, however, they discovered that everyone else put in this extra time. As a result they contracted with their manager to informally operate a 'time off in lieu' scheme. But the psychological impact of sharing their experiences was just as important. One said "It was such a relief to find that needing to work a long day, something that I felt was a personal failing, was what everyone else did."

EXAMPLE TOPICS

Topics in a behavioural contract can cover any aspect of working together that people decide are important. Below are some examples. Each comprises a number of questions to be investigated by a whole remote group, or adopted as the agenda for a discussion between a manager and an individual teleworker.

Relationships

- Do we feel that relationships within this group are important?
- Do we commit to do all we can to improve the quality of relationships within the group?
What will we practically do?
- Will we offer each other help and assistance even if this is outside our agreed work?

Communication

- What are our norms for responding to others' emails or phone calls? Half a day, a day, or what?
- When do we prefer to be contacted? What are our working hours?
- What sort of topics are OK for us to deal with through email, and what sort of topics need a phone call or a face to face meeting?

Management

- Does the manager commit to running 'a level playing field' so that people who are remote don't lose out (for example, fail to be informed or consulted) compared with people who work physically close?
- Do we all understand what frequency and level of reporting the manager needs from people who are remote?
- What decisions can individuals make for themselves, and what decisions need to be referred back to the manager or the whole group?

RANGE OF TOPICS

The three topics illustrated above are selected from those that remote workers usually find important. But behavioural contracts can address almost any aspect of remote working (working together apart). "If in doubt put it on the agenda, because you never know if everyone's expectations are in line," goes one piece of advice. If a group hasn't worked together before, or is a virtual team with organisational diversity, then it's more important to

check that everyone's expectations of working practices and behaviour are aligned. Behavioural contracts also become crucial in cross-cultural virtual teams. There they counteract hegemony by building an agreed team culture that is different from the national cultures of any of the participants.

CREATING A BEHAVIOURAL CONTRACT

The most effective way to create behavioural contracts is to hold a face to face session involving everyone who will be working together apart. In this session, which kicks off from the simple question "How are we going to work together?", everyone engages in an open, mutual investigation into usually-unspoken topics. And with skill, these sessions can be run remotely, using group communication tools like audio and video conferencing or a discussion forum.

This is best done during the launch of a remote group or virtual team, or when someone starts working as a teleworker. But it can be done any time, particularly when a group's membership changes, or when there are signs that a group is losing energy or fragmenting.

It's great to decide to build a behavioural contract from scratch, but guidelines are available. Knowledge Ability's *Virtual Team Builder* provides background material, a script, and set of twelve topics containing nearly 100 questions from which a manager can develop what's suitable in their situation. These are especially helpful when a manager isn't confident of delving into difficult topics unaided. Alternatively, externals can be asked to run a session. Often the objectivity that someone outside brings with them makes an external facilitator a better choice.

Regardless of who runs a session to create a behavioural contract, three aspects are important:

- There needs to be organisational recognition that established practices can be challenged. If people decide how they want to work together, the organisation needs to respect that, even if it's counter to the way things are usually done. (Incidentally, this is a great way for an organisation to learn what's different about remote working.)
- Thus, creating a behavioural contract can take some courage. It can be difficult — if one isn't practised — to bring matters of interpersonal behaviour out into the open to be explicitly discussed.
- Participants need to discuss topics in an open, non-judgemental manner. And they need to be authentic. That means getting in touch with one's goals, preferences, expectations and assumptions so that one can make sustainable commitments to others (walk the talk).

TEAM-BUILDING

Building a behavioural contract is one of those times when the journey is as important as the destination. The experience of having taken part in a group discussion of often difficult and personal topics is a key outcome. Talking openly and authentically with one's colleagues and manager about how to work together, surfacing one's own values and expectations, and hearing those of others, is itself a team-building process. That's why behavioural contracts are interventions that build the relationships, mutual support and trust that turns a set of individuals into a team.

COMMUNITY STATEMENT

While a written behavioural contract is important, it's only a reminder of the commitments that people have made to each other. It has no force other than the strength of those commitments.

Nonetheless, the a group behavioural contract can itself become a motivating exhibit. A summary can be turned into what we call a Community Statement. A Community Statement is a poster (or electronic equivalent) showing key facts about the group and its membership, if possible with a picture of members. But most importantly, it displays the behaviours that everyone has committed to in working with each other.

The Community Statement reinforces group / team identify and membership. It can be displayed at the HQ office, by desks wherever remote workers are, or broadcast electronically on a web page. It's the flag that everyone can feel good about saluting, because they built it themselves. It helps them feel together apart while they work together apart.

NOTICES

This paper

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This paper is based on concepts and experience developed as part of Knowledge Ability's **Virtual Team Builder** facilitation and training (see www.knowab.co.uk/wbw2c1.html). This has been offered as part of our WORKING BY WIRE™ curriculum for teleworkers and virtual teams since 1998.

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