

# Remote Work Revolution: Succeeding From Anywhere

## A Critical Book Review

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### ABSTRACT

*This is a book review of Tsedal Neeley's Remote Work Revolution: Succeeding from Anywhere, published by Harper Business, Illustrated Edition, 2021. ISBN: 9780063068308 (hardback). The review provides a critical evaluation of this management-focused work and assesses its contribution to the increasing phenomenon of remote work in the business world.*

**Keywords:** cross-cultural management, organizational behavior, remote work, telecommunications

### INTRODUCTION

The author of this work, Dr. Tsedal Neeley, is the Naylor Fitzhugh Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School. Specifically, she teaches the required Leadership and Organizational (LEAD) course in the school's MBA program. Prior to becoming an academician, the author had a rich background in the private sector, working for companies like Lucent Technologies and the Forum Corporation in a variety of roles that involved developing strategies for global customer experience. Dr. Neeley is the author of the award-winning work, *The Language of Global Success*, and has been widely published regarding the evolution of remote work, in general, and the development of distributed work environments, in particular. The learning curve for these were, of course, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic of the past two years, which makes this a timely work.

As a backdrop, the pandemic, which began in March of 2020, forced millions in office-based operations to remote work within their own homes. The workers that were most involved were middle to upper middle-class workers with higher educational attainment, primarily in the fields of finance, insurance, management, information technology, telecommunications, education, and technical services. Though comprehensive studies on this mass experimentation are underway, it is believed that many employees quickly became

receptive to remote work because it has offered the opportunities for more focused time, fewer interruptions, avoidance of office politics, and a more comfortable and quieter workplace environment.

This book is quite ambitious as it attempts to provide guidance to employees and others but particularly to managers regarding the use of digital tools and in developing appropriate blueprints to deal with an all-remote, but more likely, a more challenging hybrid environment involving remote work. In either scenario, companies have to achieve digital literacy and learn to deal with the utilization of tools for storage, using cloud, and modifying cyber security as well as addressing issues of creating effective communications with work teams that often cross different cultures.

The author emphasizes that company productivity depends on an effective transition to remote work. The key, she argues, is building trust, which is the glue that binds a work team together. Trust enables for a professional working environment that is more conducive to assessing and measuring the performance of employees. That primary criterion of trust building is paramount but depends to a great extent upon the focused effort of managers having to deal with the specific context that contains their particular circumstances. In other words, there are no definitive, one-size-fits-all formulas within the

book just as there are no definitive formulas in the effort to process a long-term workplace transformation.

The author emphasizes another major point, which is to appreciate the growing desire of employees, as a result of their experiences during the pandemic, to possess increasing autonomy. Many workers found that they were able to perform all or most of their work at home while becoming more productive but with greater flexibility in their schedules. Added to this was the lessening of time and commuting costs. With increased value in their autonomy, the levels of job satisfaction, personal happiness, and even a greater sense of job security increased, resulting in higher levels of productivity. In fact, the author found that those she surveyed increased weekly productivity by an average of 6.8 hours. The author argues that autonomy can drive productivity but only as managers perform the tricky task of motivating employees while being as invisible as possible. This is a challenge since too much self-autonomy can lead to out-of-sight which, in turn, leads to out-of-mind and, eventually, an out-of-touch mode.

A strong point of this book is organization. All of the work's chapters are written as a series of very compelling questions that are quick to engage the reader to learn the answers. The questions addressed are:

- How can we (re)launch to thrive in remote work?
- How can I trust colleagues I barely see in person?
- Can my team really be productive remotely?
- How should I use digital tools in remote work?
- How can my agile team operate remotely?
- How can my global team succeed across differences?
- What do I really need to know about leading virtually?
- How do I prepare my team for global crises?

Within each chapter, lessons are learned through interesting and poignant case studies, many derived from the author's thirty years of research in both the private sector and academia. Within these case studies, the

writing and tone are generally engaging and layman in approach. Added to the case studies are profiles of companies such as Unilever and Tek, a petrochemical firm, both of which experienced successful transitions to the remote workplace and the formation of agile teams. An "Action Guide" is provided at the end of the book, containing a series of charts to utilize in enacting helpful suggestions provided throughout the work. Clear explanations and, in general, ease in presentation provide ample evidence of the level of expertise possessed by the author. This is also evident in the "Notes" section at the end of the book, which is rich with recent references (and the author's accompanying commentary) that cover academic journals, studies, and general business publications.

To the extent that this work can be determined to be faulty depends upon the expectation of the purchaser. This work was primarily written for managers in order to help them develop productive and engaged remote teams. Therefore, individual practitioners seeking guidance on building a mostly or all-remote communication operation will be disappointed. In addition, those expecting a solid academic work, heavy on scholarly journal references, will be disappointed. The book was advertised as providing research-based guidance, but the guidance is mostly through case studies and not in empirical data. Also, though it was primarily written for the layman, some portions in the later chapters are laden with information technology nomenclature that sometimes resulted in a dry read.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the utilitarian benefits of the book far outweigh its weaknesses, and, certainly, the timeliness of this work cannot be overstated. There is no doubting that many companies were already exploring or outright moving in the direction of more remote work for employees in efforts to reduce the cost of workspace infrastructure and to deal with the specific nature of globalization and its phenomenon of global work teams crossing national boundaries and time zones. However, the Covid-19 pandemic caused abrupt closures of office workplaces and forced entire companies to virtual work within a very short period of time, causing disruption and new

challenges. Remote work, implemented incorrectly, can result in lack of synchronization, serious employee isolation, low morale, low motivation, and ambiguities regarding goals and assessments, as well as problems in establishing trust, bonding, and effective communications.

This book is quite informative, and useful. Therefore, it is not surprising that this work

was nominated for the 2021 Financial Times and McKinsey Business Book of the Year Award. It can be recommended for all types of readers, including students and academicians. However, it may be most beneficial to managers dealing with the challenge of organizing employees into an effective and committed remote work team within a digital environment.

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