Remote Managers Are Having Trust Issues

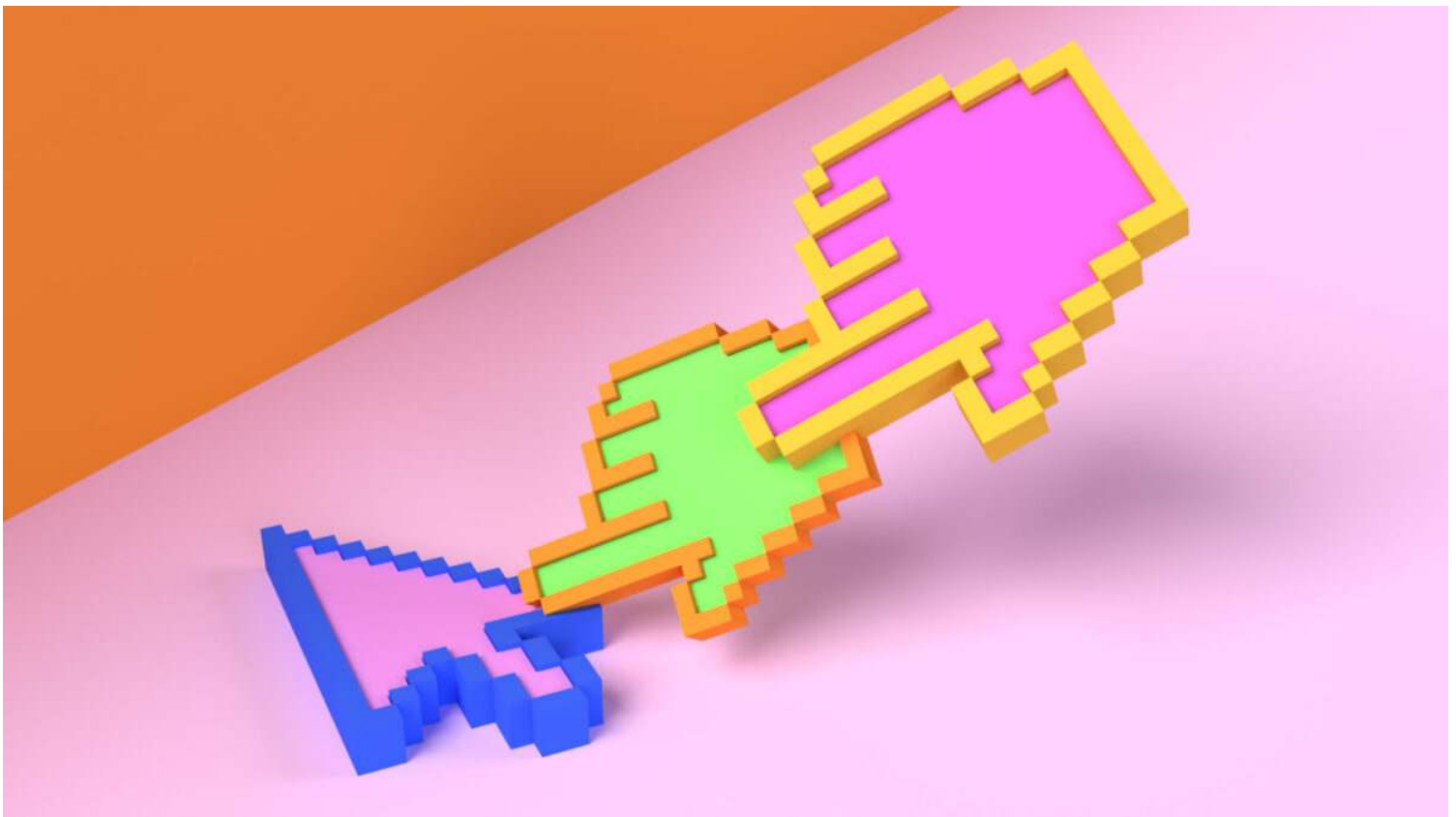by Sharon K. Parker , Caroline Knight and Anita Keller

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Illustration by Simoul Alva

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Covid-19 has thrust many leaders into remote management which requires a different skill set than face-to-face management. They have been forced to make this transition quickly, and for the most part, without training. While some jobs have proven adaptable, many sectors are not well-suited for the remote environment and many workers have home lives that present overwhelming challenges. As a result, some managers may be finding their roles more difficult than before — and making their subordinates' lives more stressful as they struggle to adapt.

Even prior to the pandemic, managing teleworkers presented unique obstacles. Research shows that managers who cannot "see" their direct reports sometimes struggle to trust that their employees are indeed working. When such doubts creep in, managers can start to develop an unreasonable expectation that those team members be available at all times, ultimately disrupting their work-home balance and causing more job stress.

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If we look at what is happening today and consider the many scenarios employees may be facing — especially those with compromised finances or families to care for — we can hypothesize that certain workers are struggling to perform at the same level as they did before, or at the least, are seeing some changes in their degree of productivity. This, in turn, could create a negative spiral in which manager mistrust leads to micromanagement, which then leads to drops in employee motivation, further impairing productivity.

To investigate this hypothesis, my team and I invited remote workers all over the world to participate in an ongoing longitudinal study that began mid-April of this year. We developed a survey of 92 questions to investigate how Covid-19 is impacting both managers' and employees' work, well-being, and productivity. Among other questions, we asked participants whether they have the opportunity to choose when, where, and how they carry out their jobs, whether work interferes with their home life, and whether they experience technological hassles. We also asked participants how they feel at work, in an effort to measure levels of engagement, emotional exhaustion, anxiety, or enthusiasm.

More than 1200 people in 24 different countries — working in industries ranging from manufacturing and science to real estate, education, and financial services — completed the first survey. We are currently following up with these people in subsequent surveys.

Our preliminary findings suggest that many managers are struggling in their roles, and would benefit from more support. As we suspected, our research also suggests that better quality management will improve remote workers' wellbeing and performance.

**Managers' Self-Confidence, Beliefs, and Trust in Remote Workers**
About 40% of the 215 supervisors and managers in our study expressed low self-confidence in their ability to manage workers remotely. Twenty-three percent of managers disagreed with the statement "I am confident I can manage a team of remote workers" and another 16% were unsure about this ability. Similar numbers reported lacking the confidence to influence remote workers to do their job well, and coordinate a team of remote workers effectively. These findings suggest a lack of self-efficacy for managing remote working, with self-efficacy referring to the belief in one's own ability to master challenging situations.

A similar proportion of managers had negative views about remote workers' performance. Thirty-eight percent of managers agreed that remote workers usually perform worse than those who work in an office, with 22% being unsure (see the chart below). Though it is encouraging to see that not all managers who participated in our survey shared this belief, with 40% disagreeing, the fact that, together, more than half of respondents agreed or were unsure suggests that many still have rather negative views about this work practice.

Many managers were also dubious about whether remote workers can remain motivated over time, with 41% agreeing with the statement "I am skeptical as to whether remote workers can stay motivated in the long term" and a further 17% being unsure.

What Managers Believe About Remote Worker Performance

Percentage of managers who agree/disagree with the statement: "The performance of remote workers is usually lower than that of people who work in an office setting."
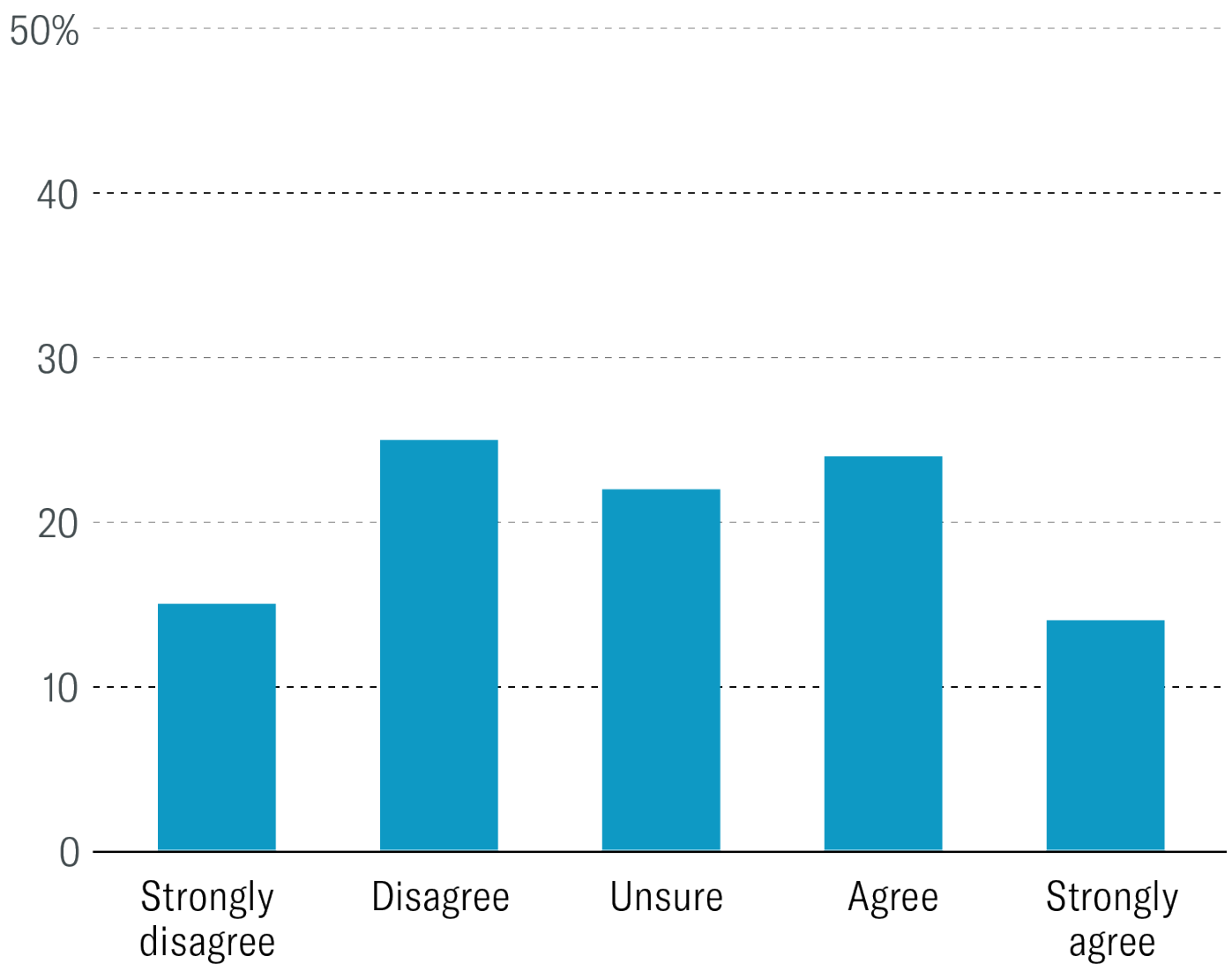
Generally negative attitudes about this form of working seemed to spill over into the way managers' perceived their own employees as well. Quite a few managers reported not trusting the competence of their own employees, with almost one third (29%) questioning whether their employees had the required knowledge do to their work, and more than one quarter (27%) agreeing that their employees' lacked essential skills.

Altogether, the picture is not a rosy one, suggesting a substantial number of managers have low confidence in their capability to lead remotely, have rather negative views about this work practice, and distrust their own workers.

Drivers of Managers' Self-Confidence, Beliefs, and Trust
To understand for whom these beliefs arrive most often, and when, we explored the factors that drive them. While one might predict that managers who have more experience with working remotely would have more positive beliefs, experience was not a significant driver.

There were, however, some consistent demographic factors. Controlling for a range of other factors, men were more likely to have negative attitudes to remote working, and to mistrust their own employees' competence. For example, whereas 15% of female managers reported that they lacked "confidence in their employees' work skills in the past week," for male managers, 36% percent had little trust in their employees' skills.

In addition, those managers who defined themselves as in non-managerial/non-professional roles (such as technical or administrative roles), had lower self-efficacy for managing remote workers, more negative attitudes, and greater mistrust. For instance, 53% of managers from non-managerial/non-professional roles agreed that "the performance of remote workers is usually lower than those of people who work in an office/work setting" compared to 24% of those in managerial/professional roles.

Younger managers were also more likely to lack self-efficacy for leading remote workers. Twenty-five percent of managers under 30 years of age did not feel they could coordinate a team of remote workers effectively, whereas only 12% of managers over 30 years of age had this lack of self-confidence.

The wider context that the manager operates within was just as important as the demographic factors. First, for those managers who reported that their organization provides little support for flexible working, the level of self-efficacy for managing remote workers was lower. It seems that when a company is genuinely committed to flexible working, they provide practical support (e.g., training) and they convey positive messages of openness about this work practice (e.g., a willingness to be flexible about the specific arrangements), both of which appeared to increase managers' self-efficacy for leading remote workers.

Second, managers who reported lower job autonomy in their own work, close monitoring from their own boss, and a high degree of mistrust from their own boss had more negative beliefs about remote working, and greater mistrust of their workers. These findings suggest a social learning process in which managers learn how to supervise and treat their workers by observing their own managers. We believe this is because, when their own managers treat them with mistrust by closely monitoring them, they associate this behavior with being a manager and

replicate it in their own leadership action. In other words, we believe they start to think that close monitoring and micromanaging is what the organizations expects of them.

Workers' Experiences of Being Managed at Home

Do managers' beliefs about remote work spill over to affect employees? Although it was not possible to link managers with their specific direct reports in this study, our analysis of the worker data suggests the answer to this question is likely *yes*.

We focused these analyses on the N = 617 workers who are working from home for four or more days per week. Quite a few of these workers reported very high levels of close monitoring. Twenty-one percent agreed (with 24% being unsure) their supervisor constantly evaluated their work. Eleven percent agreed (with 21% being unsure) that their supervisor/manager "keeps very close tabs on me by frequent checking." Workers who reported high levels of close monitoring tended to be those in technically-oriented jobs (e.g., sales, laboring), consistent with our finding that managers with non-managerial/non-professional roles had more negative attitudes towards remote workers and greater mistrust of their own employees.

Many workers also experienced a strong sense that their supervisor does not trust their ability to do the work. Thirty-four percent agreed that their supervisors "expressed a lack of confidence in their work skills." Similar numbers reported that their supervisor doubted their ability to do the work, and felt that the supervisor questioned whether they had the knowledge required.

An even larger number of workers reported feeling that they needed to be constantly available, such as being expected to respond to electronic/telephone messages immediately, be available at all times, and be responsive after work hours. These results suggest the prevalence of an "always on" culture for workers

at home, which is one that crept into many of our lives through the widespread use of ICTs such as mobile phones, and that has been shown to be prevalent in remote work situations.

How Remote Workers Experience Being Managed at Home

Percentage of workers who agree/disagree with the statement: "Over the past week, I was expected to respond to electronic/telephone messages immediately."
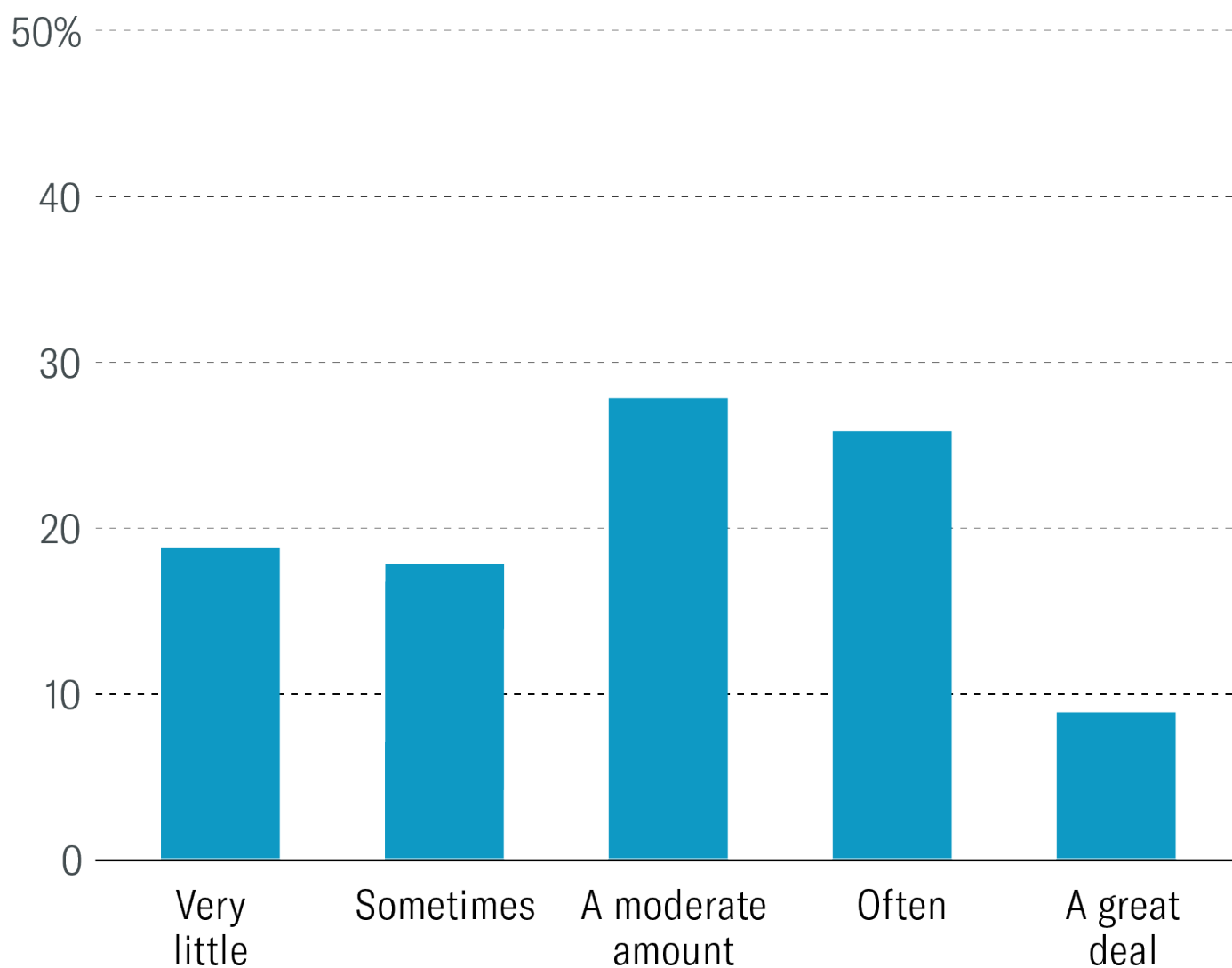
Crucially, these experiences of home workers appear to have negative effects. First, regression analyses controlling for a range of demographic factors show that anxiety at work is greater for those workers experiencing high levels of close monitoring and a strong belief that their supervisor does not trust them. For those workers reporting low levels of monitoring (less than 2 on a 5-point scale), 7% were often or always anxious when doing their job. But for those reporting high levels of monitoring (more than 4 on a 5-point scale), 49% were often or always anxious when carrying out their job. This impact of monitoring is a significant issue given mental health challenges during the pandemic.

Second, work-home conflict — such as one's ability to work being negatively affected by the demands of children — is greater for those workers with high levels of close monitoring and pressure for constant availability. For those workers reporting low levels of monitoring, 26% reported their work demands interfered with home and family life. But for those reporting high levels of monitoring, more than half 56% had high interference between work and home/family demands.

This set of findings accords with existing research that shows that an "always on" expectation increases work-family interference. However, right now, such an approach might be even more damaging because people are working in situations with additional pressures, such as children being in the house due to home schooling.

Third, from a productivity perspective, it is not logical to think that just because people are physically at their desk and closely monitored that they will perform well. Micromanagement is not an effective way to get the best out of people. Our

findings are consistent with this reasoning. They show that the more a worker feels mistrusted, the lower their perception that they are performing their core tasks well.

Five Ways Forward

Our research conducted during Covid-19 shows that a large number of managers are struggling with the effective management of people working from home, with this translating into many workers feeling untrusted and micromanaged by their bosses. The consequences of poor management at this time — for workers, families, and the economy — suggest the urgent need to help develop managers' skills in this area. Based on our research, we recommend:

1. **Start at the highest level possible.** It is very difficult to expect managers to act differently than their own leaders. The managers who struggled with leading remote teams had low job autonomy and excessively controlling and low-trust bosses. This result suggests that organizations much create change at the highest level possible.

2. **Provide practical and moral support for remote working within the organization.** Organizations need to move beyond rhetoric about supporting flexible working and actually enact this support by, for example, ensuring workers have the equipment needed, providing resources to support staff wellbeing, allowing extra leave for workers if needed, and giving training to support flexible working. These changes will not only help workers who are operating from home, but will help managers because they give a strong signal about the company's genuine commitment to this work practice.

3. **Educate managers about the potential benefits of remote working — when it is designed well.** Existing research on teleworking shows that it can be more productive than office working, but the benefits arise largely because of the greater autonomy afforded to remote workers. If autonomy is low and

micromanagement high because of managerial mistrust, benefits of remote work are unlikely to arise. Managers need to understand the work designs that need to be put in place to facilitate effective remote working.

4. **Train managers in how to devolve job autonomy, and to check in rather than check up on.** Simply telling managers to trust their employees is unlikely to be sufficient. Rather, they need to learn new skills of delegation and empowerment to provide their workers with greater autonomy over their work methods and the timing of their work, which in turn will promote worker motivation, health, and performance. Sometimes managers confuse autonomy with abdication or abandonment of employees. Managers need to learn that autonomy doesn't mean less communication with employees. Frequent and regular communication are even more important when employees have autonomy. But rather than checking up on people as a way to micromanage them, managers need to check in with people and provide them the information, guidance, and support to work autonomously. Our study suggests that those supervising others, yet who do not define themselves as managers or professionals, need such training most.

5. **Train managers in how to manage by results.** Managing by results goes hand-in-hand with job autonomy. When you give people the discretion to decide for themselves how and when they will work, it is important to assess whether they are delivering the results. Hence, managers need to put more focus on the outputs of the work than the inputs. An extreme version of managing by results is a Results Only Work Environment (or ROWE) in which you take little or no notice of when or where or even how people do their work, so long as they deliver the results. ROWE was first shown to be effective for performance in Best Buy, and subsequently shown to have success in other companies. Managers of people working from home during the pandemic might not need to be quite as extreme as those in ROWE environments — but they do need to untether their workers and trust them to do their work without constant

checking.

It seems that during the Covid-19 pandemic, some managers are having a hard time adjusting to managing employees without "line of sight." Hand in hand with managers' struggles, many employees are feeling the negative effects of close monitoring and distrust from their bosses. The good news is that these managers can be supported and trained to manage their employees more effectively from a distance.

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