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Remote: Office Not Required—A Book Review

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Remote: Office Not Required—A Book Review

Abstract

Remote: Office Not Required by Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson offers a novel perspective into the modern workplace practice of remote work. This book provides an outline for becoming an expert in remote work, both as a leader and as a practitioner. Fried and Hansson describe tools and methods that help practitioners find success when implementing remote work and explain how to avoid common obstacles. Although drawbacks and challenges exist, the authors maintain that remote work is likely more compatible with organizations than leaders might think, maintaining that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

Keywords: [remote work](#), [telecommuting](#), [productivity](#), [innovation](#), [technology](#)

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Introduction

Remote work, often called telecommuting, has been a growing trend since the oil crisis of the 1970s and has become increasingly prevalent with the emergence of the internet and information and communication technology (P. A. Hill et al., 2020). In *Remote: Office Not Required*, Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson share the knowledge they gained from direct experience as pioneers in the development and implementation of remote work as a workplace practice for over 20 years within their software company Basecamp.

Content Overview

Fried and Hansson (2013) explain that "remote just means you're not in the office 9am–5pm, all day long" (p. 108). They build a compelling case for incorporating remote work into organizational operations. Benefits include access to top talent, reprieve from commuting, and improved productivity, to name a few. They also address common excuses managers make when defending the status quo of traditional offices (e.g., "but collaboration requires face-to-face interaction" and "how will I know if employees are actually working?").

In addition to making a case for remote work adoption by organizational leaders, *Remote* provides an outline for becoming an expert in remote work, both as a leader and as a practitioner. Fried and Hansson address the tools (e.g., video conferencing, chat software) and methods (i.e., asynchronous communication, project management, etc.) that help leaders find success when implementing remote work. They also call attention to common pitfalls of remote work, such as employee burnout, isolation, and micromanagement, and demonstrate how Basecamp and other organizations have overcome these obstacles. While Fried and Hansson

are bold in their assertion that remote work is an advantageous business practice, they are frank about the constraints and trade-offs. They clearly accept that there are drawbacks and challenges to operating as a distributed workforce, and they admit that remote work is not compatible with every organization. However, the authors maintain that remote work is likely more compatible with modern organizations than leaders think, maintaining that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

Written well ahead of its time, *Remote* is even more relevant in the COVID-19 era than it was in 2013 when cloud technology (i.e., data storage and computing power) such as Google Drive, Box, Dropbox, Zoom, Slack, Trello, and Asana had only a portion of the features we use and take for granted today. Author Susan Cain describes how Fried and Hansson's work offers a game-changing perspective for business leaders: "*Remote* is the book twenty-first century business leaders have been waiting for: a paradigm-smashing, compulsively readable case for a radically remote workplace" (Fried & Hansson, 2013, back cover).

Traditionally, books for business leaders focus on methods and practices to improve productivity of employees, unearth breakthrough ideas, or enhance workplace culture within the context of the physical office work environment. Fried and Hansson offer persuasive reasoning for decentralizing organizations while demonstrating how the advantages of such unconventional change exceed the safety of maintaining the status quo.

Finally, Fried and Hansson do not just theorize about remote work—they have practiced it throughout their careers. Their knowledge comes from practical experience of growing a small business into a global enterprise while living on different continents. They explain how "remote work opened the door to a new era of freedom and luxury" (Fried & Hansson, 2013, p. 10) and assert that such a practice is not only the future of work, but the present.

Appraisal of Ideas

The authors point out that "offices have become interruption factories" and "a busy office is like a food processor—it chops your day into tiny bits," making it difficult to "get meaningful work done when your workday [is] shredded into work moments" (Fried & Hansson, 2013, p. 13). Interruptions as well as meetings and commutes are taxing on employees. Thus, it should be no surprise that the literature correlates remote work with the following advantages: increased productivity, decreased absenteeism, improved employee loyalty, declines in turnover rates, and better overall organizational performance (E. J. Hill et al., 1998; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Kurland & Bailey, 1999; Martin & MacDonnell, 2012; Pérez et al., 2002).

Adopting a new workplace practice requires a great deal of change and disruption. Fried and Hansson warn that a transition to remote work requires leaders to manage for performance over presence, likening the old style of management to "managing chairs." The authors clarify that "the role of a manager is not to herd cats, but to lead and verify the work" (Fried & Hansson, 2013, p. 182). They also encourage leaders to free themselves and their employees "from the 9am-to-5pm mentality . . . [because] it's the work—not the clock—that matters" (Fried & Hansson, 2013, p. 23).

In regard to talent acquisition and recruitment, the authors underscore the notion that "great talent is everywhere, and not everyone wants to move to San Francisco" (Fried & Hansson, 2013, p. 31). Indeed, the best and most diverse talent in the world does not all reside in the same zip code, and remote work allows organizations to access talent anywhere in the world. According to the literature, organizations that adopt the

practice of remote work are better positioned to attract and retain top talent and cultivate more diverse human resources (Eversole et al., 2012).

In addition to recommendations for managers, the authors dedicate an entire chapter to effective remote work practices. They discuss setting routines, regularly seeking out changes in scenery (i.e., working in difference spaces), being a proactive communicator, and determining when to stop working. They also note that remote workers must be intentional about creating boundaries for work and nonwork activities because it is common to see remote workers actually overworking.

Conclusion

Fried and Hansson's work in this text was far ahead of its time. It would have been fitting for the world to have paid attention back then, but as the old Chinese proverb states: "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now." *Remote: Office Not Required* is an indispensable guide for remote work best practices and offers valuable insight for Extension. Learning how to be effective remote workers and managers will allow Extension professionals to fulfill their land-grant missions and offer continuity of business operations through the COVID-19 pandemic and future natural disasters.

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