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# VIRTUAL TEAMWORK & TEAM ROLES

**Survey analysis**







## Virtual teamwork and Team Roles: survey analysis

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During the past decade, many organisations began to take advantage of the benefits of virtual teamworking, recognising the opportunity it presents to deploy the best human capital for the project at hand, regardless of geographical location.

During 2020, everything changed. A great many organisations moved rapidly to remote working, in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, without necessarily having strategies in place to measure the effects. Since the change happened so quickly in many organisations, the ramifications are not yet fully understood.

Remote working reduces running costs, allows employees better to manage work-life balance and improves diversity, giving the team a broader perspective and boosting productivity. However, virtual working has its drawbacks too—the risk of isolation, presenteeism, missed cues and technology failures, to name but a few. Given restrictions imposed by national lockdowns in many countries, most employees

working remotely are working from home, in makeshift office spaces, amidst distractions from family and other responsibilities. This presents quite a different picture to virtual working in its previous incarnation, where teams might collaborate across geographical boundaries, but in offices or dedicated work spaces.

At Belbin, we wanted to find out more how ‘going remote’ is affecting all areas of work, including engagement, productivity and management. We wanted to get a better understanding of the benefits and drawbacks according to teams themselves, and to understand what part Team Roles can play in how we adapt to virtual teamwork.

At the end of 2020, we surveyed 142 individuals, most of whom had been exclusively working remotely for the past six months, and some of whom had either remained in the workplace or had been doing some of each (henceforth referred to as the ‘combined group’).

[Here's what we found...](#)

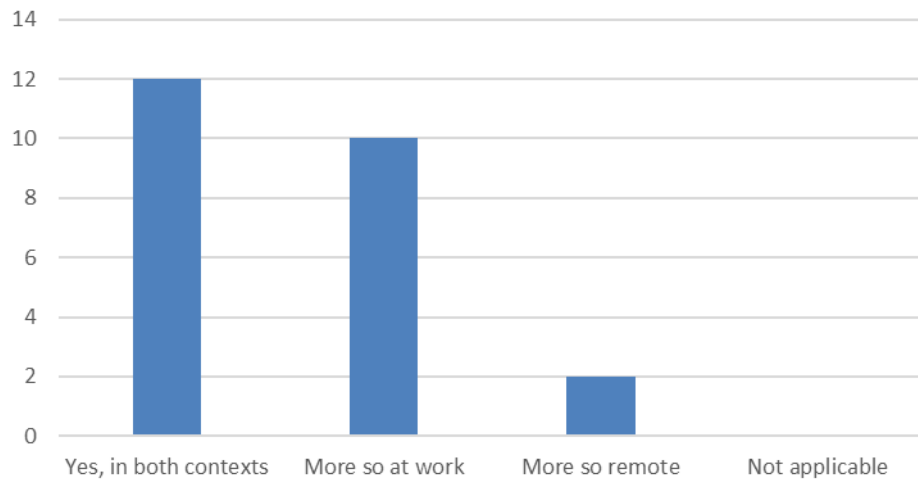
## Engagement

**M**ost of those who remained in the workplace noted no change to their levels of engagement. Amongst the combined group, half of respondents noted that engagement levels had not changed, whilst 42% indicated that they had been more engaged in the workplace. Only 8% said they were more engaged when working remotely.

Among remote workers, it was a different story. Far fewer were more engaged, with the majority either maintaining previous levels of engagement or reporting less engagement.

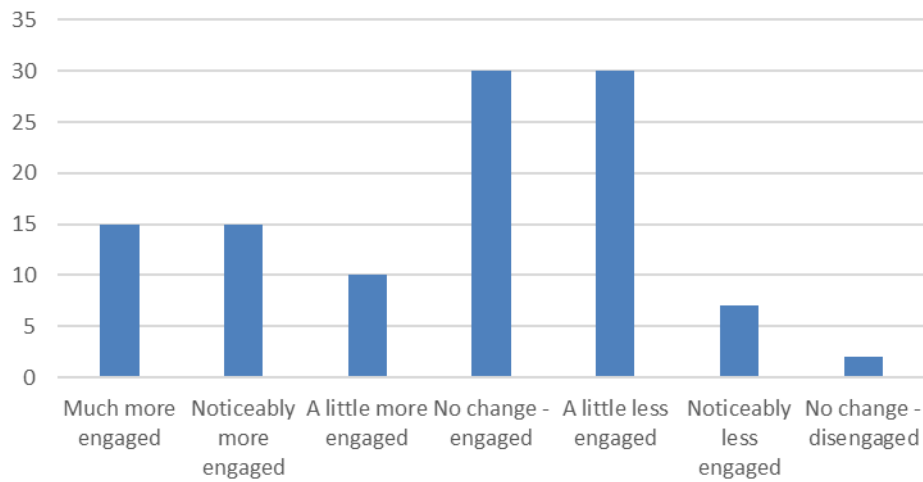
Breaking down the results by Team Role, Resource Investigators (RI) seem to have become less engaged than other roles on the whole, whilst Co-ordinators (CO) have generally seen engagement levels increase more than their counterparts with other Team Roles. We could surmise that RIs have become less engaged because their needs of meeting new people and going outside the organisation are not being met in the same way when working remotely. It is interesting that Co-ordinators have become more engaged. This suggests that many have found new strategies for drawing out contributions from others in the context of virtual teamwork.

## I am engaged with my team



Source: Combined group

## Engagement with team for remote workers



Source: Remote workers

## Productivity

For most who remained in their workplace, productivity levels remained the same. For the combined group, productivity was good in both contexts. Of the rest of this group, most felt more productive when at their workplace, rather than when working remotely.

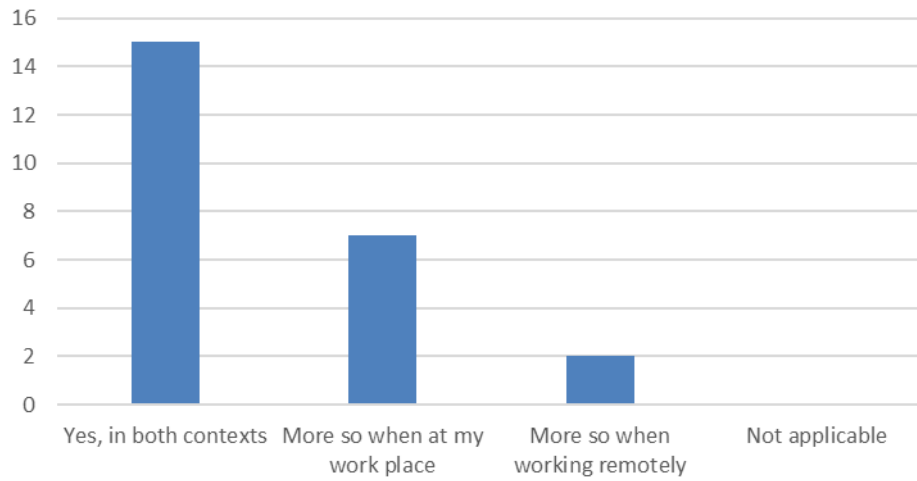
For those working remotely, the picture was more mixed.

Most remote workers felt that their productivity had either increased or remained the same. In terms of Team Role split, it was Implementers and Completer Finishers who reported the highest productivity levels, with around 47% saying they were much more or noticeably more productive. Since these roles are task-focused, it could be that individuals with these Team Role strengths felt more able to be productive than those whose work relied more

heavily on collaboration or discussion.

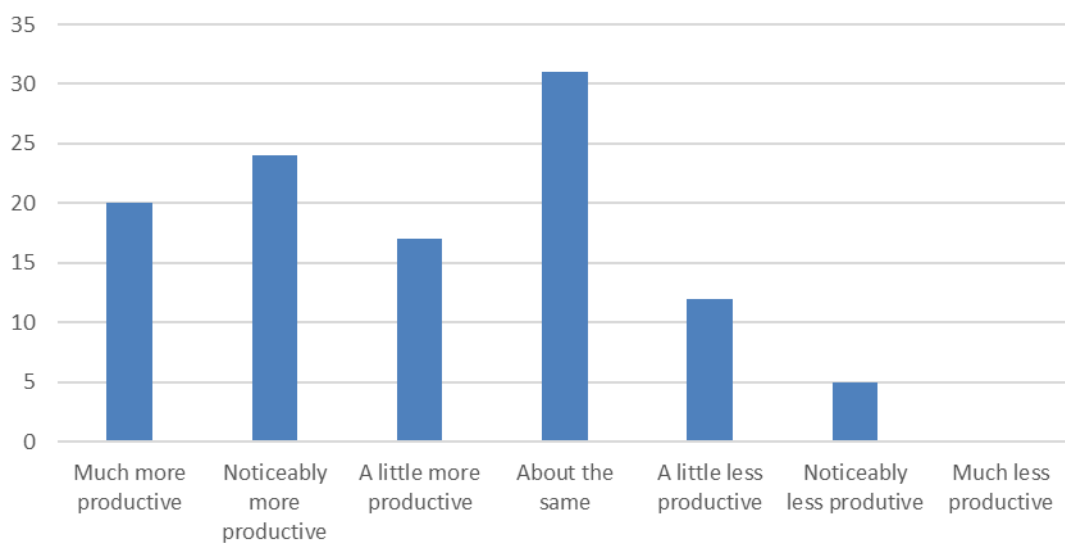
These roles were closely followed by Specialists, who are generally autonomous and effective at working alone. Among those who reported lower productivity were Plants, Resource Investigators and Monitor Evaluators. It is possible that our focus during the pandemic has shifted from generating and evaluating new ideas to maintaining the status quo, so that the function of those generally involved at the start of projects is more challenging when working remotely.

## I am productive



Source: Combined group

## Over the past six months, how productive have you been?



Source: Remote workers only

## Meetings

**F**or those who had remained in the workplace, there was no pattern in responses regarding meetings. The combined group were split evenly once more between those who said that the frequency of meetings was the same, and those who stated that meetings were more frequent when working remotely. When it came to efficacy, there was a further split between those who claimed that meetings were equally effective in both contexts and those who reported that meetings in the workplace were more effective. Few stated that remote meetings were more effective.

Of those who have solely been working remotely, the greatest number said that meetings were more frequent and more effective, followed by the group who said that not much had changed with regard to the frequency or efficacy of meetings.

We have faced distinct challenges in meeting online, including getting to grips with online conferencing tools and learning new skills, such as how to modify conversational turn-taking when communicating through a screen and how to interpret facial expressions and body language in a virtual environment.

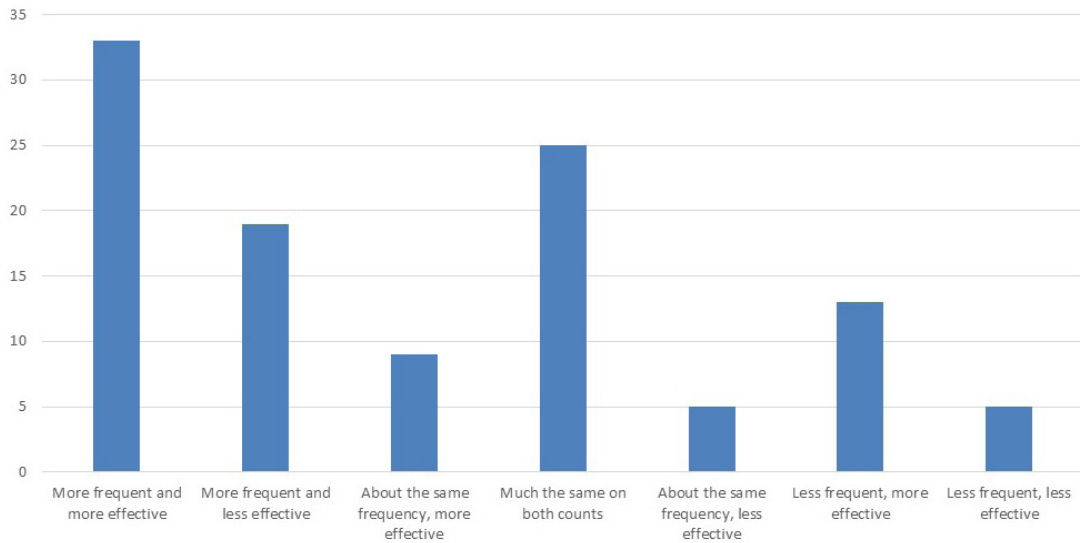
It is interesting to note that those who met online generally rated the effectiveness of meetings more highly than those who were able to meet in both contexts. This could be because the remote group devised new strategies to make online meetings more effective, or simply that the availability of in-person meetings shifted perspectives on effectiveness.

On the whole, Monitor Evaluators were the most likely to state that nothing had changed, in terms of the frequency and efficacy of meetings. The social roles (Resource Investigator, Co-ordinator and Teamworker) tended to report more positively, claiming that meetings were more frequent and effective.

Of those who viewed the meeting situation most negatively, most were Plants, Resource Investigators and Shapers. This might support a hypothesis that, in some organisations, meeting time was used primarily for planning and implementation, rather than for originating new ideas, which might have led to lower satisfaction with meetings or excluded people with these roles altogether.

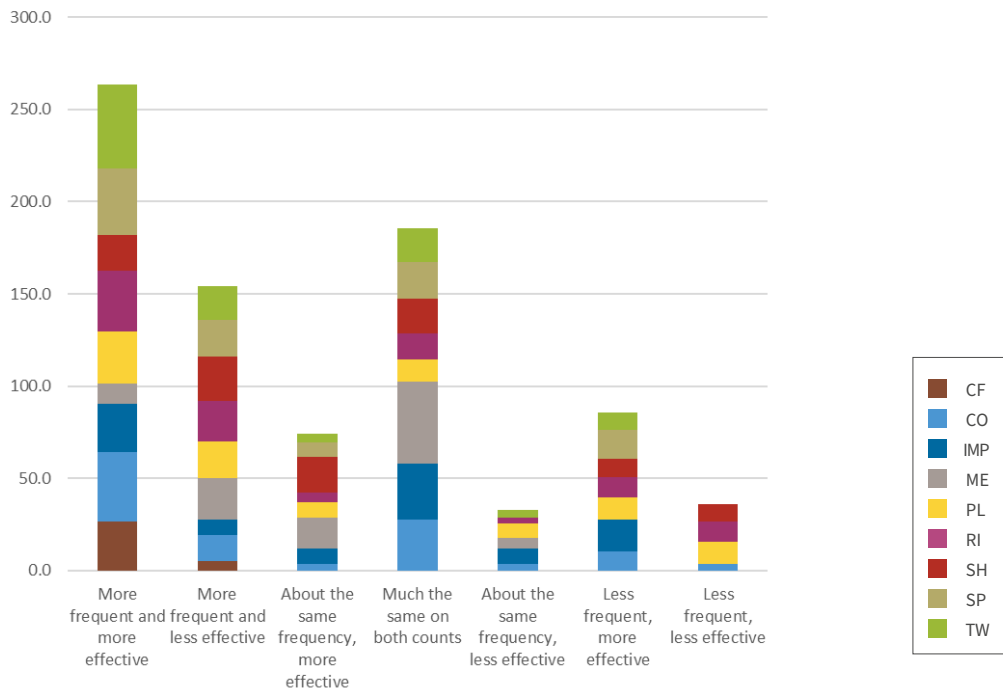


## Frequency and efficacy of meetings



Source: Remote workers only

## Frequency and effectiveness of meetings



Source: Remote workers only

Source: Remote workers only

## Management

**M**anagers who had been working only in their workplace were the most positive, with 50% reporting that they felt noticeably more capable and 33% indicating that they felt a little more capable.

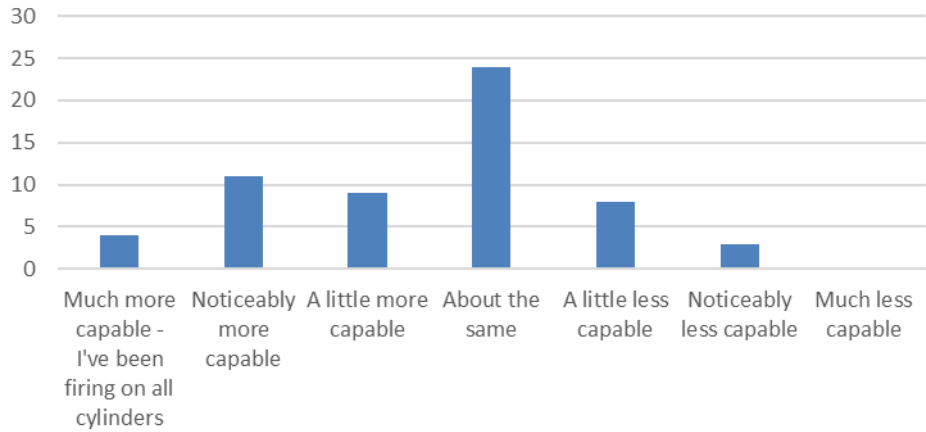
Of our managers who had been working in both settings, 56% were happy with their performance in both contexts and 38% felt that they managed better in the workplace. No manager in this group felt that their remote performance was better.

For managers who had solely been working remotely, the picture was a little different. Again, the largest group (41%) felt that their management performance had been the same in both contexts, but they were more likely to be positive about remote working, with 40% claiming that they had been more capable (whether a little, noticeably or much) and 19% reporting less managerial capability.

It is interesting that, once again, the remote group reported more positively on remote working, in general. It's difficult to know whether this group's perception of the effectiveness of remote management was inflated because they had no grounds for comparison, or because those who struggled with managing remotely took the opportunity to return to the workplace sooner.

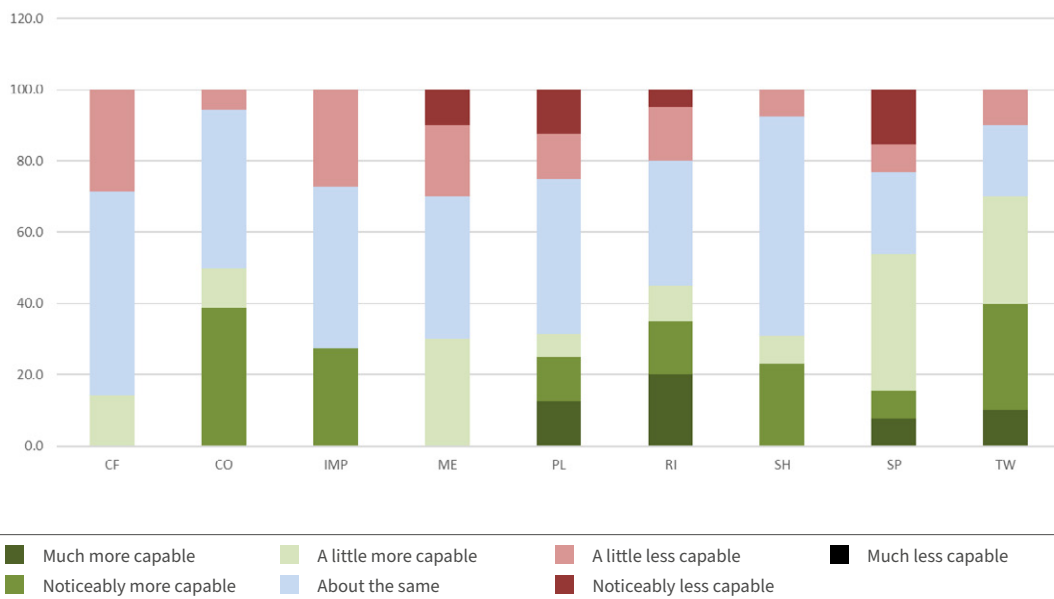
In Team Role terms, the social roles showed most confidence in their managerial performance when working remotely. Completer Finishers and Monitor Evaluators were notably more equivocal, although this might reflect the wording of the question and how each Team Role is likely to respond (Monitor Evaluators are unlikely to refer to themselves as 'firing on all cylinders')! Completer Finisher, Implementer and Monitor Evaluator managers felt their managerial capabilities to be most negatively impacted by remote working overall, whereas Plants and Specialists (who tend to work alone and perhaps struggle most with communicating ideas and concepts effectively) were the most likely to report a significant decrease in their managerial capabilities.

## How do you feel about your capabilities as a manager over the past six months?



Source: Remote workers only

## How do you feel about your capabilities as a manager over the past six months?



Source: Remote workers only

## The perceived drawbacks of remote working

**W**e asked our respondents, 'Whilst working remotely, what (if anything) have you missed about your workplace?'

Both groups we surveyed primarily missed seeing colleagues face-to-face and the spontaneous ideas that arise through discussion. These seemed to rate more highly than logistical issues, such as travelling and keeping boundaries between work and home clear.

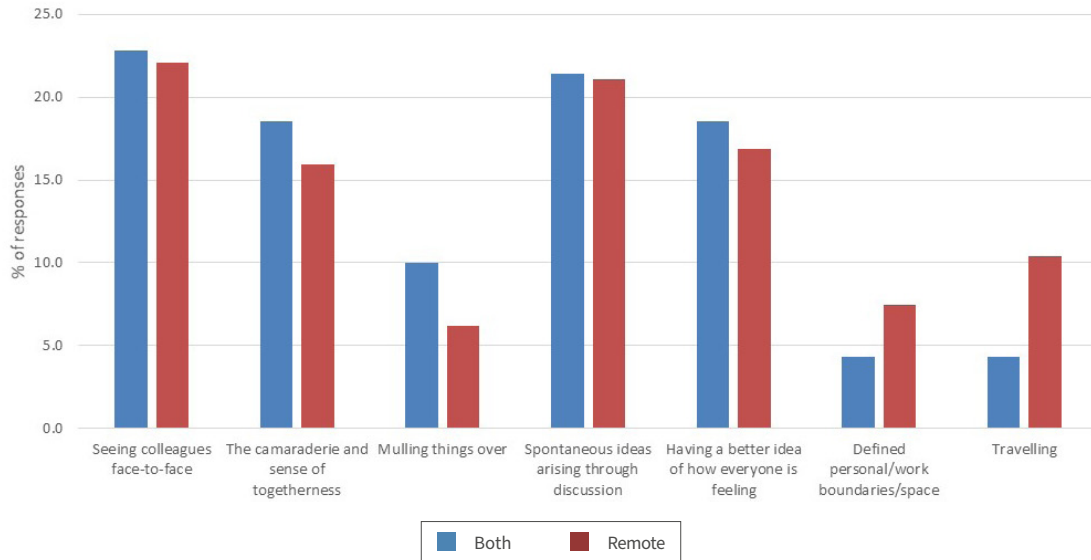
For the most part, those who had only worked remotely responded in the same way as those who had been to work for some of the time. Those who only worked from home were more likely to miss defined boundaries (and more obviously, travelling), whilst the combined group tended to miss mulling things over more than their remote working counterparts.

Those who worked in both contexts gave 3.04 responses on average, versus 2.83 from those who only worked remotely, further supporting the idea that those who worked in both contexts are those who are generally less keen on remote working.

When analysing the Team Role split, Completer Finishers, Teamworkers and Co-ordinators most missed seeing colleagues face-to-face. Resource Investigators and Teamworkers were the most likely to miss the camaraderie and sense of togetherness. Teamworkers, Completer Finishers and Specialists were the ones to want a better idea of how everyone was feeling. Whilst it could be predicted that those with prominent social roles would feature amongst these groups, the Completer Finisher and Specialist results are more surprising. Specialists were also far more likely than any other Team Role to miss defined boundaries between work and home.

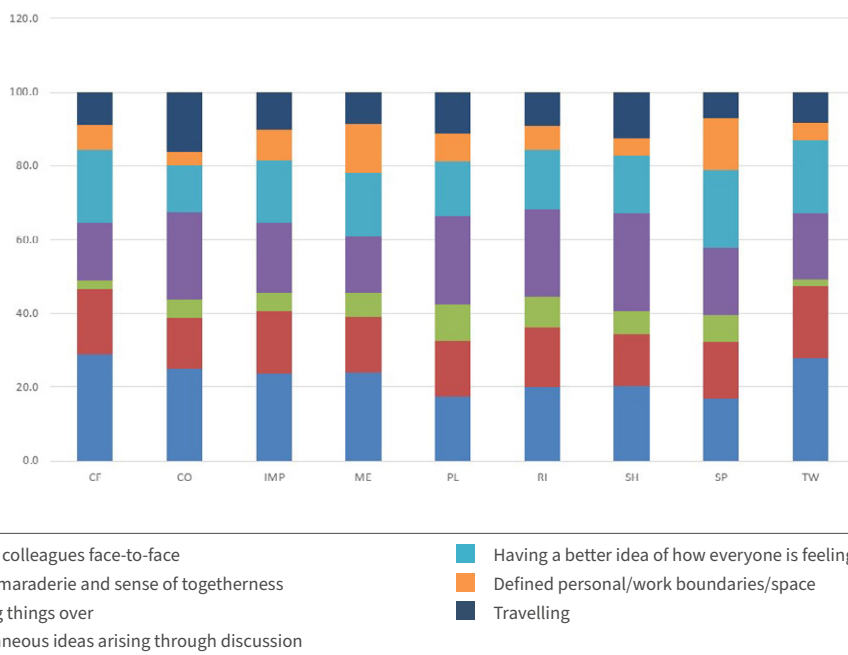
Shapers, Plants and Resource Investigators were the most likely to miss mulling things over and the spontaneous ideas that arise through discussion. These Team Roles are generally involved in the creative process at the outset of a project and in facilitating change, so it stands to reason that they would miss this spontaneity.

## Whilst working remotely, what (if anything) have you missed about your workplace?



Source: Remote workers and combined group

## Whilst working remotely, what have you missed about your workplace?



Source: Remote workers and combined group

## The benefits of remote working

**W**e asked our respondents, ‘What (if anything) have you enjoyed about remote working?’

Once more, our solely remote group reported more positives about remote working, supplying 3.55 responses on average, versus 2.69 from the combined group.

In response to this question about the benefits of remote working, those we surveyed were more likely to identify practical considerations, such as the lack of commute and the ability to adopt a more flexible schedule. Those who solely worked remotely were more likely to say that there were fewer distractions at home. If this wasn’t the case for those who divided their time, perhaps this goes some way to explain the preference of the mixed group for office working.

Those who worked in both contexts were more likely to see the benefits of being able to customise their work environment, suggesting that some might have chosen where to work, depending on what was required on a given day.

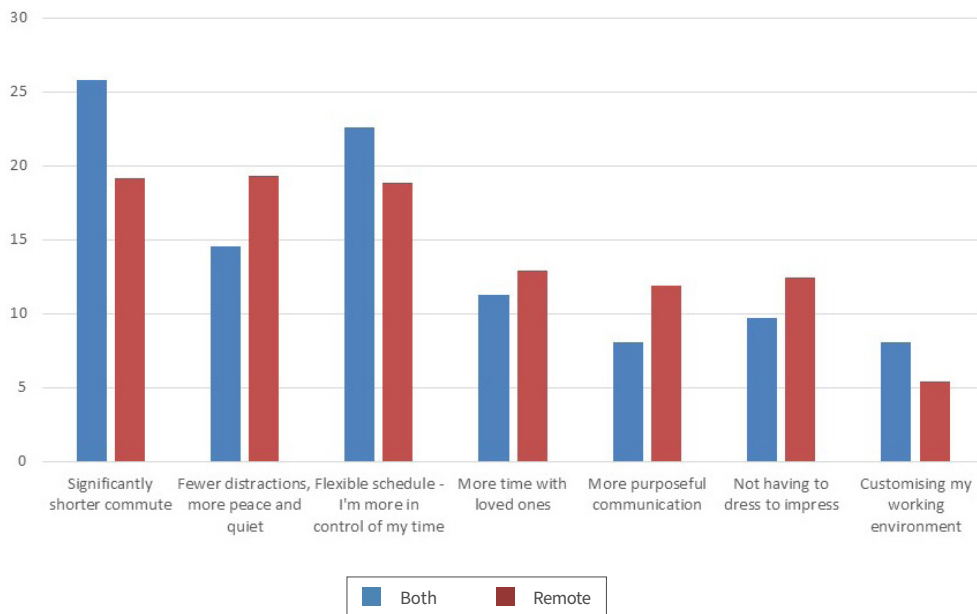
In Team Role terms, Shapers were the most likely to value a shorter commute, which fits well with their reputation for impatience! They were also among the highest scorers for reporting flexibility of schedule as a benefit of remote working.

Monitor Evaluators and Shapers tended to like the lack of distraction more than other roles. We might have expected to see Completer Finishers and Specialists among the highest scorers here, since they tend to require focus for in-depth work. However, remote working (especially if working from home) might have provided more, rather than fewer distractions for some, so there could be other variables at play in this case.

More predictably, Plants and Resource Investigators were the most likely to report the benefit of a more flexible schedule. These roles tend to work in a less structured way, so it could be that remote working allowed them to move away from the strictures of office working and towards a way of working which is greater suited to their strengths. It would be interesting to know whether these roles felt more creative when working remotely.

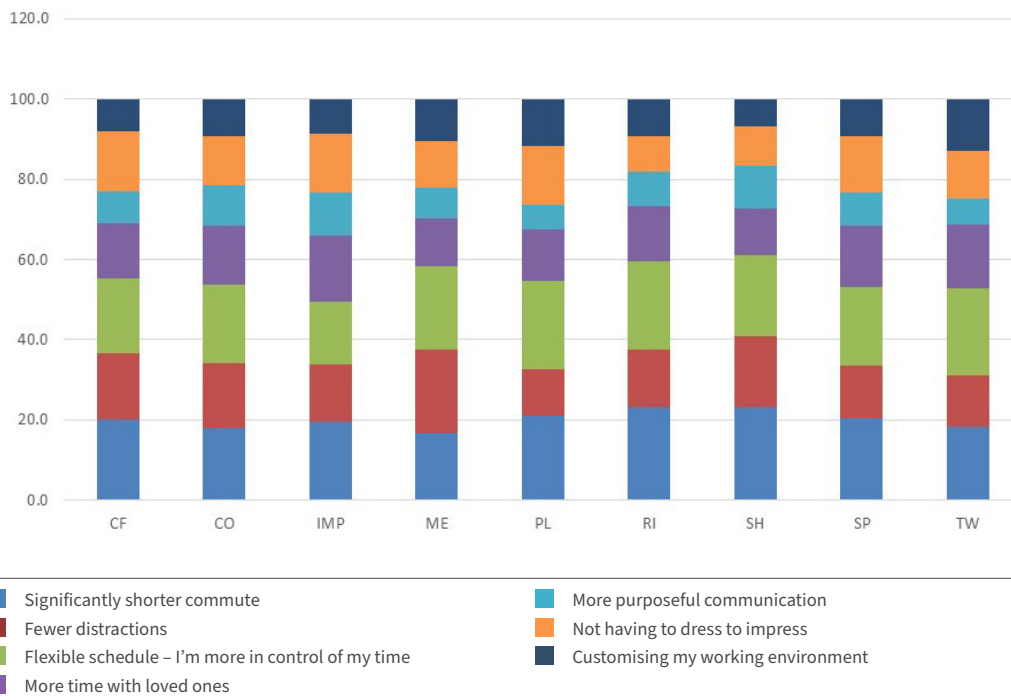
It was primarily Implementers and Shapers who felt that remote working allowed for more purposeful communication. As two of the action-focused roles who prize efficiency and getting things done, this seems in keeping with Team Role theory.

## What (if anything) have you enjoyed about remote working?



Source: Remote workers and combined group

## What have you enjoyed about remote working?



Source: Remote workers and combined group

## Conclusion

**W**hilst remote working seems to be increasing productivity, engagement levels are under threat. Many of our managers are finding strategies to manage their virtual teams and it would be interesting to understand whether their teams also shared this view of increased managerial effectiveness.

There was a clear Team Role divide when reporting the benefits and drawbacks of remote working. Those with prominent task-focused roles tended to indicate more positive experiences overall, whilst those with social roles and involved in the early stages of a project felt more constrained by virtual teamwork.

On the whole, those who only worked remotely reported more positively on remote working than those who worked in both settings, suggesting that the latter group might have returned to the workplace as soon as possible because they were struggling with remote working. The group who remained in the workplace showed fewest discernible patterns in their responses and so acted as a quasi-control group.



**BELBIN<sup>®</sup>**

Belbin has been building and empowering high-performing teams for over thirty years. We're proud to be using our wealth of experience and new insights to help organisations all over the world adapt to virtual teamwork. We have the metrics and the techniques to facilitate your team's journey. Call or email our friendly team to find out more.

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