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We improvised remote work – now we need to enhance it

By Theodore Klein

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Theodore Klein, Managing Partner at Boston Strategy Group, shares the perks and pitfalls of working from home, as well as how it can be improved

The pandemic was and continues to be a worldwide disaster that women have been forced to bear a disproportionate brunt of. Not only did 2.2mn women leave the labour force at the height of the pandemic, but women with children were **far more likely to leave or be fired** than their male counterparts. Faced with overcoming the largest share of the challenges, it's then unsurprising that women have been at the forefront of the remote work revolution. A study from **FlexJobs** found that in a "post-pandemic" world, **68%** of women prefer remote-only work as opposed to just 57% of men

To the profound dismay of many senior executives—primarily male—vehemently opposed to remote work, **female professional staff** have reported being more satisfied with their work-life balance and productivity². In fact, among 18 remote work benefits identified by FlexJobs, women self-reported enjoying more benefits than men in **16 of 18 categories**. It seems apparent then that women have a far more significant stake in remote work's success both presently and moving forward.

Remote work's drawbacks

It's not all positive news, though. The ability to collaborate with coworkers and communicate in real-time has suffered for many during the remote work transition. **Zoom, Teams, Webex**, and others might be practical professional tools, but they are undoubtedly poor substitutes for in-person communication. In a professional culture in which it is all too common for women to be overlooked or outright interrupted, Zoom and its counterparts only exacerbate the problems endemic to the modern work environment. An often-cited study conducted at the **University of California**, Santa Barbara, analysed recorded conversations to reveal that more than **95% of interruptions** between men and women were caused by the male communicator.

Furthermore, hybrid and remote work, while having many, many advantages, has one key disadvantage; it diminishes interpersonal "face-time." Numerous academic and neuropsychological studies have shown that being physically "present" in communication leads to a higher degree of interpersonal trust. Similar studies have found that increased trust leads to greater productivity and, thus, higher profitability. And higher profitability is most often a highly valued business metric. Now that we have a bit of distance from the pandemic's worst effects, it's vital that we take the time to evaluate remote work and improve it.

Improvising a remote work solution

If the remote work revolution was improvised to ride out a once-in-a-generation calamity, it seems only logical that we can improvise our way to a more productive, communicative, and profitable future. Applied Improvisation (AIM) is an innovative, science-based experiential learning tactic that can strengthen, enhance, and improve connections in today's remote work environment. The principles and techniques that the field is based on will be familiar to those that enjoy improv comedy. Still, AIM's professional applications are no laughing matter to companies like **Google, McKinsey, Facebook, Visa, Astra Zeneca**, and **Twitter** that have leveraged them.

What does applied improvisation look like?

AIM is taught by experienced instructors, in person, typically at an office or during a professional retreat. Though the programs are concise, the precious few hours spent can have profound impacts on remote work skills moving forward.

Connecting improvisation techniques with business management requires diving into the fundamental improv concepts and extending them to the business environment. Participants are taught how improvisational principles and guidelines like awareness, connections, presence, give-and-take authenticity, and agreement shape one's thinking and allow them to overcome challenges in the moment and in a remote work environment.

By the end of an AIM session, participants will aspire to enable human achievement by embracing trust, finding playfulness, providing support, serving the greater whole, and achieving key business goals.

*"In the past two years, more female clients have been seeking my services because they have trouble getting heard in virtual meetings. Turn-taking is difficult, interruptions are frequent and awkward, and many find themselves being talked over or ignored – "Zoom fatigue" is a reality that studies show disproportionately affects women. AIM can help these women leaders by boosting their confidence, presence, and sense of self-worth, making it easier for them to speak up and command the room – even over video." - **Claire Fry, CEO, and founder of Vocal Confidence***

What remote work skills are improved?

From improving mutual trust to team building, AIM supercharges human connection. Think of it like a seasoning that heightens the flavour of a dish. Dishes you enjoy will be made even better, while the tastes of those you dislike will become readily apparent. In a business setting, discovering the strengths and weaknesses of your coworkers and yourself is crucial to developing professional skills and improving management capabilities.

These skills are even more critical in a remote work setting, where the nuances of communication are often lost. AIM enhances core communication competencies like active listening, responsiveness in challenging situations, and the ability to engage in civil discourse. It helps individuals learn to read the room, both in-person and virtually, and embrace empathy to strengthen connections. For women, who are **nearly three times more likely** to feel exhausted after Zoom meetings than men, AIM empowers them to reclaim their energy for more productive purposes⁴.

*"Women in the workplace often shoulder more labour regarding conversational manoeuvring, routine communication, and the maintenance involved in team cohesion. In a remote workspace, these aspects of keeping a team functional become more challenging and, arguably, even more important. AIM instruction improves everyone's ability to communicate productively and reach shared understanding more efficiently, so a team with this background will be less reliant on a few individuals to keep everybody on the same page." – **Kayleigh Kane, AIM Instructor and Intimacy Director and Coordinator***

The future of remote work starts now

For the disproportionate number of women affected by toxic work cultures, the fact that remote work is here to stay is welcome news. The improvements in work-life balance and overall professional satisfaction cannot be overstated, so it's essential that we address remote work's challenges with creative solutions like AIM. By enhancing professional competencies such as communication, collaboration, and emotional aptitude, Applied Improvisation gives both women and men the tools needed to improve productivity when physically distant. The future of remote work depends on it.

Words: Theodore Klein, Managing Partner at **Boston Strategy Group**

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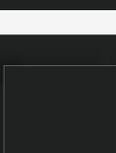
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