

# How companies can bring the water-cooler chat to working from home

[Natasha Boddy](#) Jun 29, 2020 – 12.00am

No commute. Increased productivity. More flexibility.

While the [shift to remote work](#) during [COVID-19](#) has been praised for many things, there's one thing that is much harder to do over Zoom: the water-cooler chat.



The remote working experiment during COVID-19 has forced many companies to innovate as they try to foster a strong workplace culture. *Les Hewitt*

Experts warn remote working will have unintended consequences for [workplace culture](#) and bosses will have to be much more deliberate in fostering a positive and cohesive environment for staff if it's here to stay.

"Leaders have to be purposeful about developing and nurturing a positive,

inclusive culture when working remotely – it's unlikely to happen by itself," said organisational psychologist Rachel Setti.

Building a strong workplace culture is always hard, and can seem even more so when no one is in the office.

But Joel McInnes, chief executive and founder of FlexCareers, argues leaders are yet to face their toughest challenge on the culture front as employees start to return to the office part-time.

"The really hard part will actually come when we have hybrid teams – where some employees work in the office, and others at home," he said.



Deliveroo's Libby Hay enjoys a virtual lunch with her co-workers. *Eamon Gallagher*

Dr Melissa Giles, consulting director at management consultancy Interchange, agreed the pandemic was going to cause a seismic shift in workplace culture.

"If you think of an announcement of a new strategy, it's going to be the CEO on video talking to you," she said. "Is that as impactful as a town hall

when you're all in the same room and there's that energy that comes from it?"

Ms Setti said the complexity of remote working posed an added challenge for bosses because misunderstandings could increase and wellbeing issues might be missed because bosses and colleagues had less opportunity to notice behaviours.

"From a culture and politics perspective this may lead to a sense of disparity and lack of team cohesiveness, particularly within teams where trust was an issue prior to isolation," she said.

The downstream impact can vary from lack of productivity and output to poor morale and job satisfaction.

The remote working experiment during COVID-19 has forced many companies to innovate as they try to foster a strong workplace culture while staff have hunkered down at home.

Bonding over lunch has been a long-held tradition at many workplaces, and many employers have been keen to keep the tradition alive, albeit virtually.

Friday team lunches have been the most popular, with a 50 per cent spike in orders compared to other weekday orders, according to figures from Deliveroo.

Burgers are the most popular cuisine, with pizza a close second. Poke bowls and Vietnamese top the list of healthier options.

One unnamed company runs mystery lunches where staff members order a meal for a co-worker based on what they think they would like to eat; another business in Sydney surprised its employees by ordering



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ice-creams to be delivered to 63 different home address.

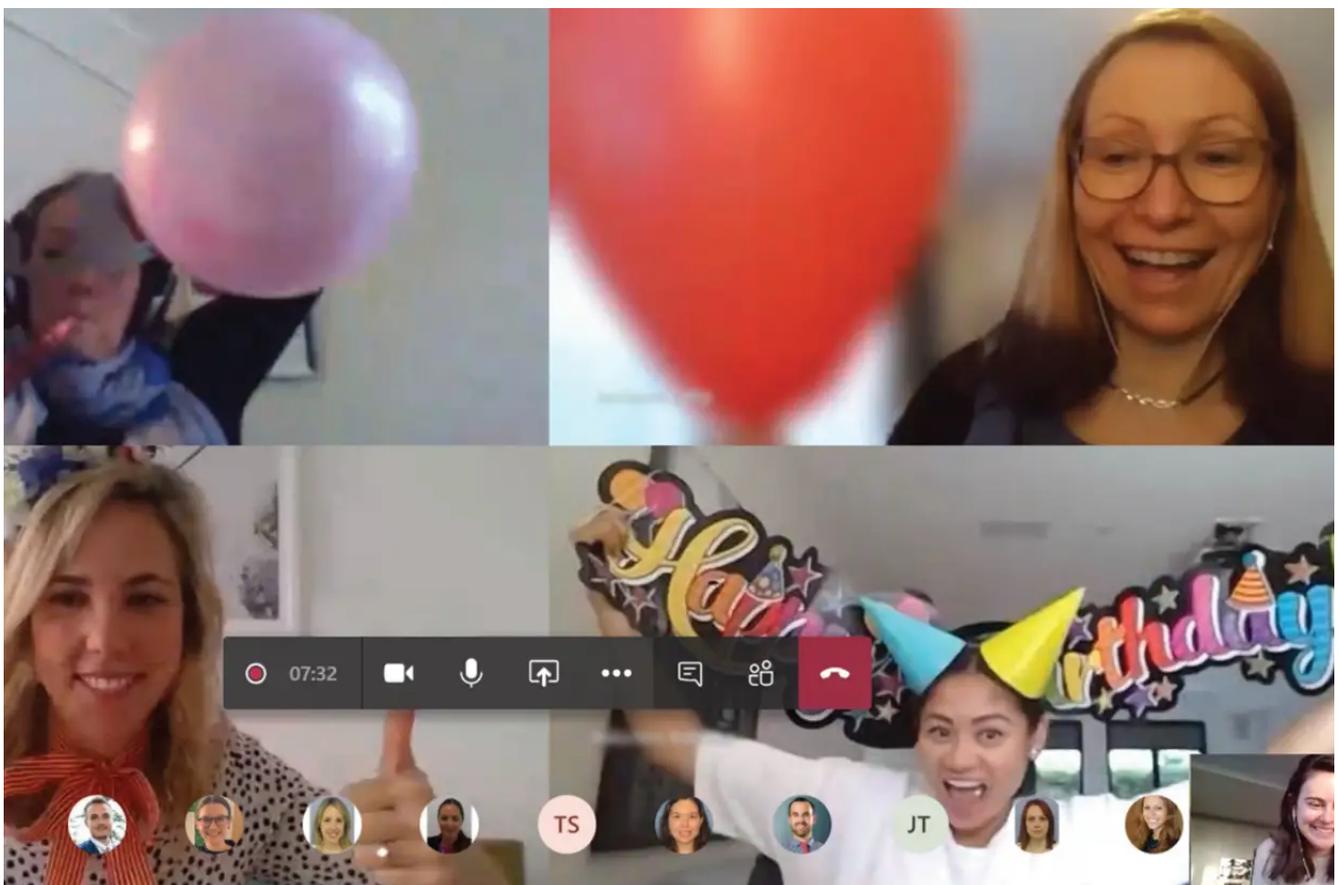
food," says Deliveroo Australia chief executive Ed McManus. *Arsineh Houspian*

"Often the real conversations and real ideas come up informally and often that's over food," said Deliveroo Australia chief executive Ed McManus.

"I guess companies are using it as a way to engage their employees, but I think it goes a bit deeper than that in terms of trying to recreate that environment that is naturally created when people are together over food."

Deliveroo's corporate arm has reported strong growth, with figures up 37 per cent, month-on-month, from March to April. It is on track for similar growth in May.

[Xero](#) is one company that has seen value in having virtual lunches, but the cloud accounting giant has also tried some creative ways of keeping staff spirits up during the pandemic, including a Rubik's Cube challenge where staff compete for the fastest finish.



An iso-party for PayPal's Danielle Grant.

At PayPal, staff have been encouraged to take part in "walk and talk" catch-ups and the payments giant has been running competitions for the best TikTok dance videos, family and pet selfies and games to guess which pets, artworks and home office set-ups belong to which colleagues.

PayPal also launched professionally led virtual pilates and PT sessions and mindfulness sessions during the work day.

Xero managing director Trent Innes said communication was key in fostering a strong workplace culture during the pandemic.

"The biggest challenge for employers is making sure they create an environment that advocates open lines of communication and promotes people staying connected," he said.

PayPal's ministry of culture co-chair Danielle Grant said: "Managing employees you don't see day-to-day has unique challenges, especially those who were onboarded during or shortly before lockdown.

"Getting to know new colleagues personally is trickier without face-to-face social opportunities, but it is really beneficial for effective working relationships and can be done virtually with a bit of creativity and determination."

Mr Innes believed COVID-19 was breaking the stigma around working from home and companies saw it could be done successfully with access to the right tools.

Ms Setti said trust was the backbone of good organisational culture and leaders could foster this by "walking the talk".

"In other words, setting realistic expectations; creating a shared vision; providing regular, clear and transparent updates to all staff; avoiding micro-management; clarifying required output; and measuring staff on achievement rather than hours worked," she said.

Mr McInnes said leaders would need training to be more inclusive and to

conduct more frequent "touch-points" with remote workers.

"This is the reality for the next 12 to 18 months, so we need to start thinking about how we're going to make sure that leaders do not forget workers who have to be at home more due to various commitments and issues," he said.