Author Talks: Tsedal Neeley on why remote work is here to stay— and how to get it right

In a new book, Tsedal Neeley details how organizations can build and lead a culture of trust and inclusivity in a remote-work environment.

Photo by Evgenia Eliseeva

In this edition of *Author Talks*, McKinsey's Eleni Kostopoulos chats with Tsedal Neeley, the Naylor Fitzhugh Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School, about her book *Remote Work Revolution: Succeeding from Anywhere* (Harper Business, 2021). The award-winning scholar and expert on virtual and global work offers teams and managers a road map for navigating the enduring challenges of a virtual workforce. An edited version of the conversation follows.

What problem were you trying to solve with this book?

I started to work on this book project close to three years prior to the pandemic. It's been a topic that I've pursued for nearly 20 years because I was convinced that technology was going to change how we worked, how we connected, and how workforces would be arranged. But never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that the whole world would migrate to remote work, and never did I imagine that it would be in the midst of a pandemic. It pains me that this is how the virtualization of work has happened.

What are launches and relaunches, and why are they crucial to success?

Launches and relaunches have long been established by pioneering sociologists as the way to start a team in the most effective way. Richard Hackman was a Harvard sociologist who studied teams in all forms, in all contexts, for about 40 years and concluded that when you launch a team the right way—meaning you set it up— you are actually creating the conditions for that team to be effective. In fact, this will increase the likelihood of success for teams by 30 percent, which is significant.

The idea of relaunch is to make sure that we are realigned, focused on our shared goals, very clear about our capabilities, our contributions, our resources, and our constraints; that the norms we had established are still working for us, so that we can revise and update given the dynamic nature of all of our lives; and to ensure that there is psychological safety, as my friend and colleague Amy Edmondson would say, in the work team. I recommend you do this every six to eight weeks or so in a remote team because it's so easy to get derailed when you're not co-located.

Building trust from a distance

How do you build trust remotely?

Trust is one of the most studied elements in virtual work. I'm talking about decades worth of work to try to determine the answers to questions such as "How do we establish trust?" "How do we maintain trust?" "What does trust look like when we barely see people in person and don't have the opportunity to have the watercooler conversations and all the ways that we know we build trust?"

There are two types of trust. The first one is called cognitive trust, which is grounded in the belief and the understanding that others are dependable and have the competencies to be able to collaborate effectively on a common task. The second type of trust is called emotional trust. And it's grounded in the belief that others have care and concern for us.

Leaders and managers must ensure that they are developing emotional trust with the people that they're working with. People need to know that their managers and leaders care about them.

The cognitive trust you can almost confer right away. In virtual work, the term for this is actually swift trust—"Once I know you've got the qualifications to do the work, and once I know that you're dependable, that you're reliable, I will give you trust and we can get to work."

But emotional trust takes much longer to develop, requires empathy, self-disclosure, and spending time with people, and it has this big temporal dimension. Time is really important for that second type of trust.

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One in four women are considering downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce. How should organizations respond?
It's incumbent upon organizations to find ways to retain women. It's a loss that's going to be incredibly difficult to undo. We already know that diversity is the challenge—and an issue and a concern for many organizations. We know this. So if people are struggling to meet their professional demands because of the challenges and the demands across other parts of their lives, then we need to take the gifts that remote work gives us, like flextime.

Some of the smart companies that I've had the pleasure of working with over the last 12 months have tried to truly understand the *whole* person. And what that means is they try to see what they can set up between certain hours of the day—when families with children, for example, have gap times. What activities can the companies actually put in place to help parents and families?

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From 'work from home' to 'work from anywhere'

Let's talk about the return to work. What's next? How do we get it right?
The first thing you want to do is survey your employees to truly understand their preferences in terms of how they want to see their work arrangements post-COVID-19—meaning do they want one or two days a week of remote work? Do they want remote work full time? Do they want nothing to do with remote work? What do they *really* want? And these surveys should be collected anonymously, so that we truly have a real picture of what people want.

Once you understand that, you want to develop a policy that looks at a hybrid model if you decide to move in a direction that includes remote work and in-person work. Ask "What does that look like for us given the critical tasks that we need to accomplish

in our organization, given our stakeholders, and given the kind of rhythm—the cadence of work—that we want to achieve?"

For some it's giving people full freedom. "You can come in and out based on the work that we do." For some, "we actually want people in on these specific two days a week to ensure that we have co-located times." For others, it's "work for two weeks remotely and then come in for two weeks remotely."

You'll also need to articulate your revised cultural norms. The culture of your organization has newly changed, so "What are our cultural norms?"— meaning "What are the appropriate behaviors that we want to espouse to maintain the type of culture that is right for us?"

Then, of course, you want to make sure that you're upskilling your entire workforce on remote work and digital-mindset competencies. And in many instances, depending on your size, you may want to consider adding the role of a chief remote officer to the C-suite to ensure that there's oversight across the entire workforce on systems, structures,

processes, culture, people, and training and that all of these pieces are not only aligned but part of the executives' level of work.

Was there anything that surprised you in writing the book, in the research or response?
I would say that I was reminded about how disciplined we have to be in ensuring that our work and nonwork lives are not blurring to the extent that our well-being is under attack and to ensure that we're disciplined and thoughtful about the digital tools that we're using to do work—as opposed to ad hoc decisions on whether this is a synchronous conversation or an asynchronous conversation, whether we're using lean or rich media—in order to not only avoid tech exhaustion but also to work smart.

In some instances, we need to capture, store, and reuse our communication events. If we use the phone when in fact we want to capture, store, and reuse whatever we're working on, we should make different digital choices.

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well-being" but then send emails at all hours of the night and weekend without making clear "Please, don't respond until Monday morning." That's confusing. That's mixed signals. The discipline part is incredibly important.

How does remote work make an impact on an organization's culture?
Many people are concerned about the change that remote work might bring to their culture. But the reality is that change has already happened by the sheer fact that we are now operating remotely. And culture means asking "What are our shared values" and "What are our shared norms"— meaning "What are the appropriate behaviors and attitudes that we espouse in our organization?"

Remote work and virtuality have shifted our norms of working and what's appropriate: How do we make decisions? How do we connect? How do we problem-solve? It's shifted all of that. So the culture has already changed, and the thing to do now is think about how you will revise or update your culture so that people can thrive in a remote environment and adapt to this new world.

Holding on to what was before is how people are going to get in trouble. We need to be forward-thinking, embrace the things that we love, change the things that we don't, and accept the fact that our cultures as we know them have changed forever.

Tsedal Neeley is the Naylor Fitzhugh Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School. **Eleni Kostopoulos**, a digital publishing manager, is based in McKinsey's New York office.