



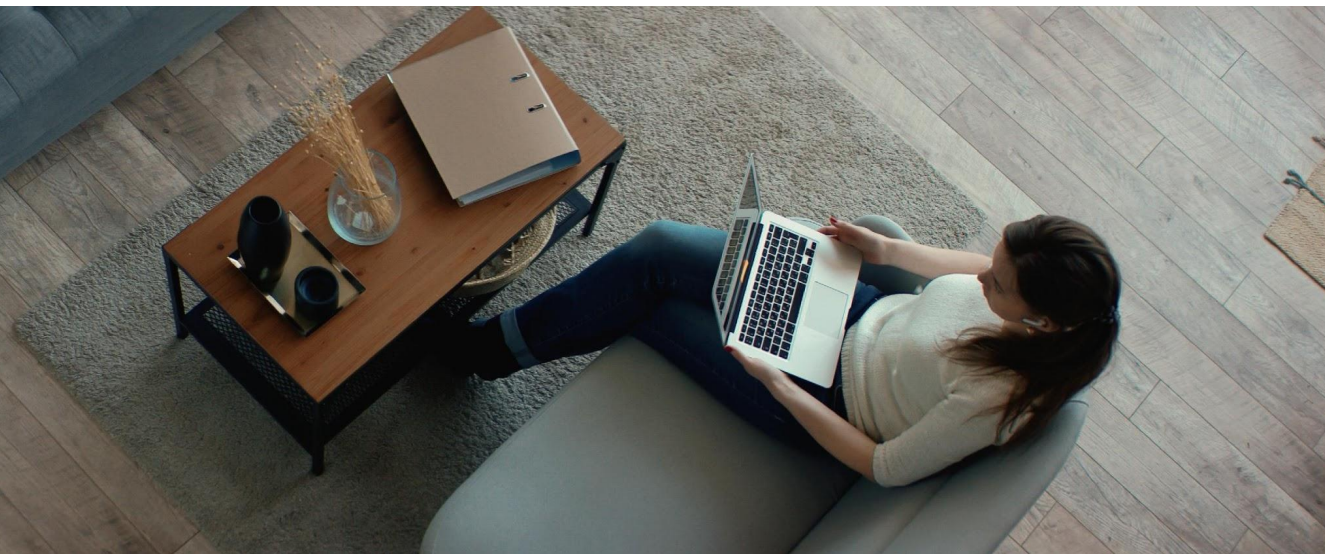
Virtual Improvement

How to maintain momentum with a remote workforce.

KaiNexus

Introduction

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted normal life across the globe, the shift to a more flexible, agile, and distributed workforce was well underway. According to [SmallBizGenius](#), in 2019, 4.3 million Americans worked from home at least part time and telecommuting has grown by 115% in the last decade. Of course, the pandemic turned remote work from an option to a necessity for millions of more workers overnight.



The Way People Work Has Changed

Whether driven by COVID-19 or the strong cultural and market forces that favor virtual workforces, managing remote teams is not without challenges. Leaders dedicated to continuous improvement must take great care to maintain momentum even when in-person conversations are not possible.

This eBook will provide some ideas for keeping your improvement culture alive, executing common improvement techniques, and ensuring broad employee engagement - regardless of where team members are located.

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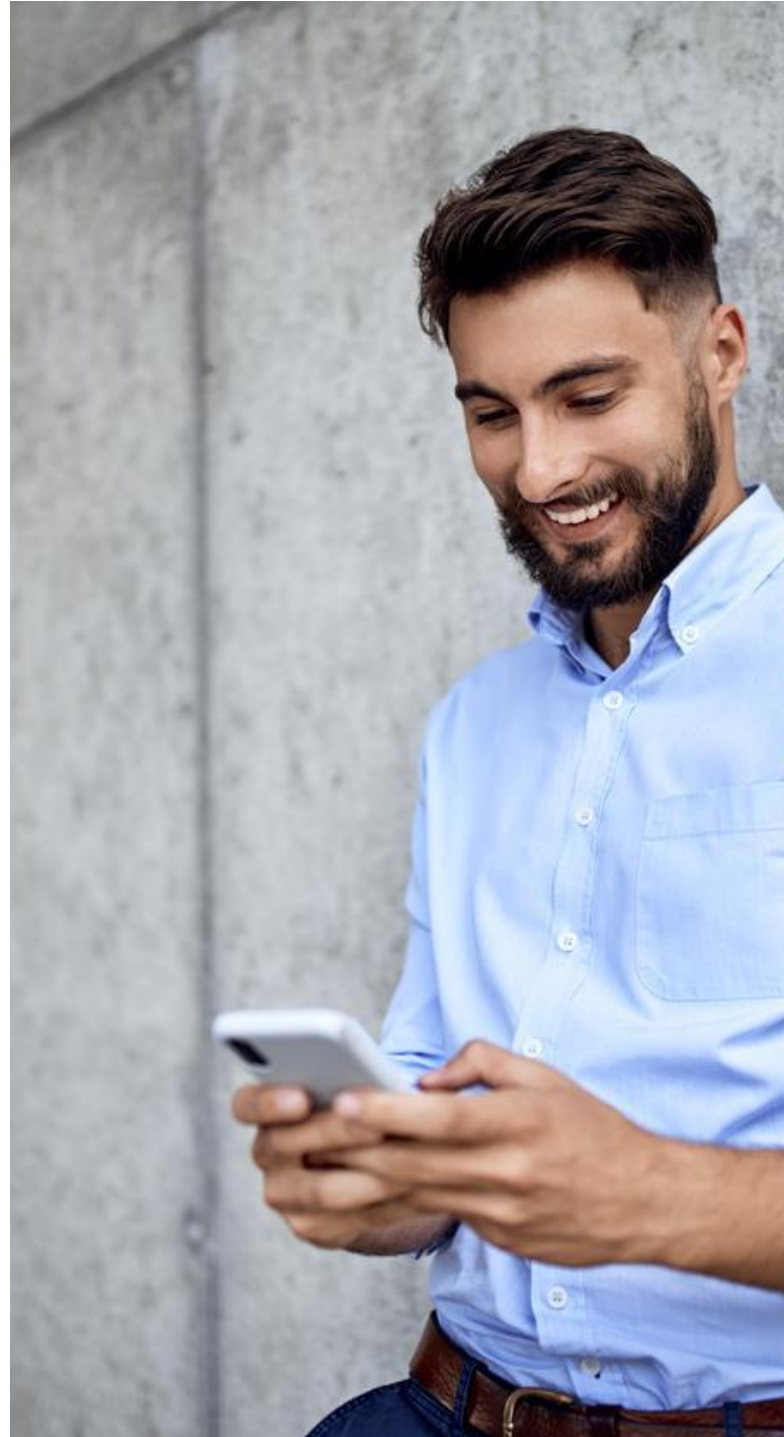
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Chapter 1

THE IMPROVEMENT IMPERATIVE

Maintaining employee engagement in your improvement culture with a virtual workforce is a challenge, but it is possible with careful planning and the right tools.



How to Keep a Remote Workforce Engaged in Improvement

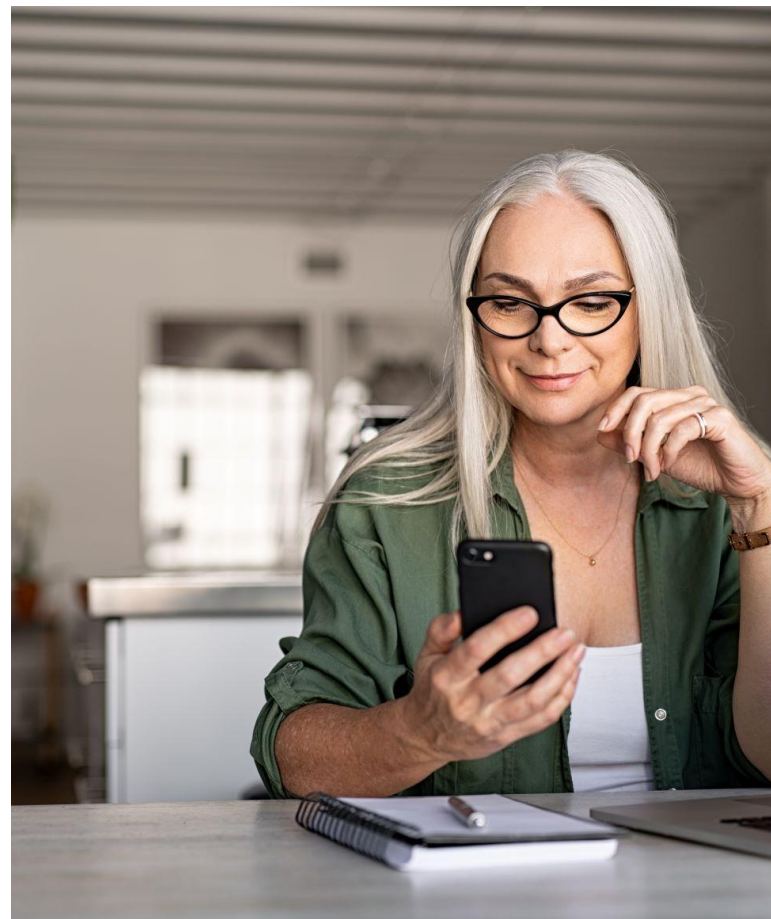
Your employees are your greatest source of information and innovation, and that doesn't change just because they're no longer on-site. Their emotional investment in the goals and objectives of the organization is essential for success.

Keeping enthusiasm high and burnout low is challenging with remote teams, but it's not impossible. Here are a few things to keep in mind.

Plan Communication

Remote work often causes feelings of isolation, especially for people who aren't used to it. It's essential that team members have a regular cadence of communication and know when they can expect to hear from the organization's leaders.

Consistency is essential. When there is a communication void, people become uncertain about their performance and the state of the company. Email is great, but those who directly manage others should pick up the phone or video call—a lot.



Ask for Ideas

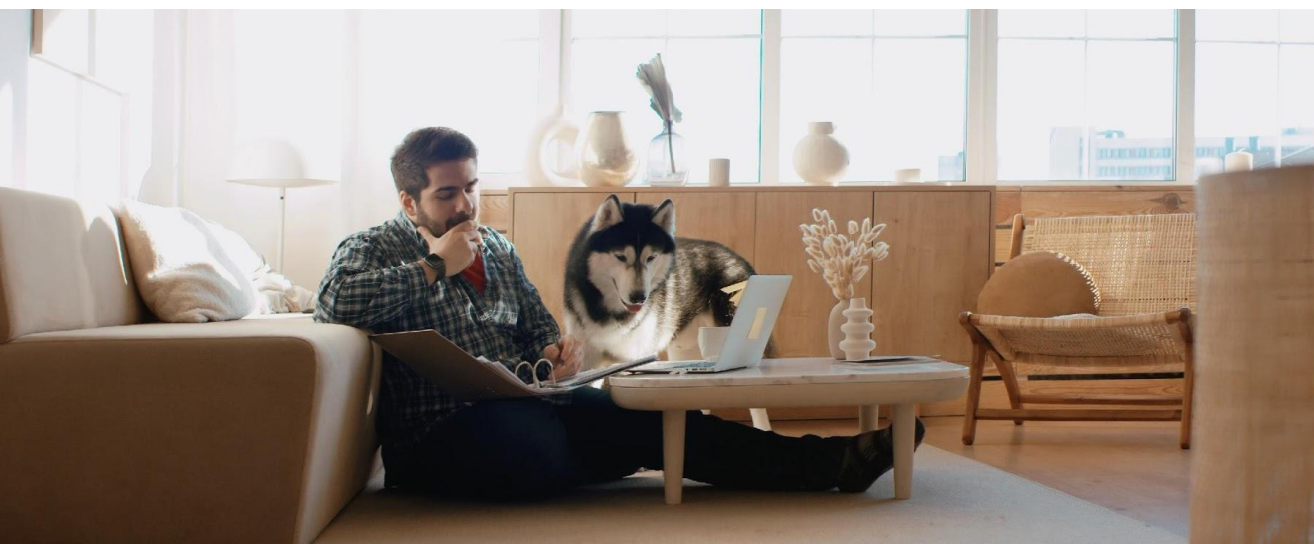
There is no doubt that the switch to remote work will open up opportunities for improvement. Be sure that employees know that they are welcome to submit ideas and give them some categories of improvements to suggest. You might want to ask for suggestions about communication, technology, customer service, and HR support during the transition.

Attend to Infrastructure

There are some basic foundations that are necessary for effective remote work. Make sure that all employees have a functioning high-speed internet connection. Consider whether everyone who needs it has access to the VPN and any shared file services that you use. If you aren't using a cloud-based phone system that supports remote work, this might be the time to consider one.

Evaluate Remote Working Tools

KaiNexus is the perfect platform for managing your team's improvement projects because it is online and can be used from any device at any location, but there might be some other technologies that could be helpful as well. Video conferencing is an excellent way to bring teams together. For example, you might do your daily huddles using KaiNexus and Zoom or Google Hangouts.



Set Clear Expectations and Align Goals

Keeping everyone heading in the same direction is tough when employees are nearby; when everyone is remote, the challenge is more significant. That's why it is essential that every employee understands their role in responding to the changing needs of the organization and its customers. There must be a clear path from the organization's short-term and long-term goals to each person's daily responsibilities.

Remote work requires a significant degree of trust. Not being able to see team members working directly can be uncomfortable for managers. It can be uncomfortable for employees as well because they want others to know that they are productive. That's why a clear set of performance measurements should be in place to help both supervisors and team members know that work is getting done.

Safeguard the Culture

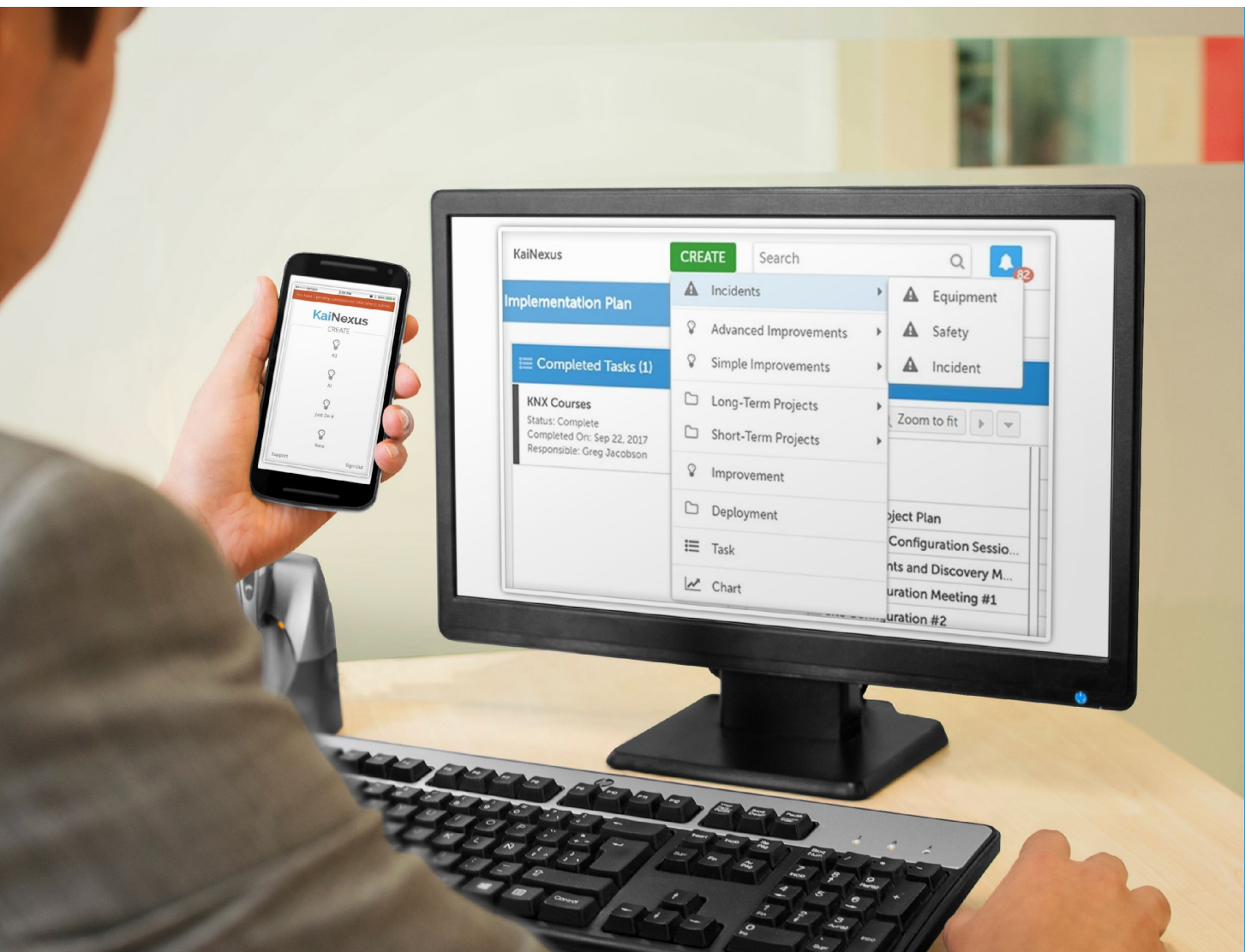
You've worked hard to build a culture of improvement, innovation, and trust. It isn't easy to maintain that when people don't see each other every day, but it is possible with effort and intention. Brainstorm with your team about ways to help people feel connected. It may be a good idea to have informal team meetings that focus on how people are coping with the isolation and challenges of a virtual workplace.



Chapter 2

Remote Improvement Events

Improvement work does not need to be impeded by the fact that your team is physically distant.



Special Considerations for Remote Improvement Events

Many leaders are finding themselves faced with managing a 100% remote team for the first time. The challenge is amplified by the fact that remote work is new to most employees, and even getting together for an in-person meeting once in a while is impossible.

Unfortunately, business challenges and process defects don't disappear because there's a pandemic. In many cases, they just get worse. The good news is that remote rapid improvement or Kaizen events can be effective when approached thoughtfully.



Pick Your Targets Carefully

It is always important to match rapid improvement events up with the right kinds of challenges. After all, they get 100% of the attention of a small team over several days. That's a significant commitment, so the potential rewards need to be pretty high. This is especially true during uncertain times like the ones we face right now. It's critical to be clear about why this issue needs to be tackled.

Be Sure the Executive Sponsor is 100% On Board

Since people won't see team members engaged in the event, they may be tempted to assign other tasks. That's a surefire way to derail your event. Leaders must be clear that team members are unavailable for other work during the event and that alternative resources will be made available. If executive support is missing, expect roadblocks.

Choose a Strong Facilitator

Every kaizen event needs someone to guide it through the planning, execution, and follow-up phases. Until your team gets the hang of it, doing your event without getting into the same room will add an extra degree of difficulty. That's why we recommend choosing someone who has experience either running kaizen events specifically or managing a remote team. Later on, new team members can get the chance to grow by leading an event, but this probably isn't the best time.

Define Roles and Authority

One of two bad things can happen to remote teams that don't have a clear set of roles and responsibilities. Either everyone makes their own decisions without consulting others and chaos ensues, or everyone is so afraid of making the wrong choice that nothing gets done. Don't let that happen to your event. Everyone should know their responsibilities and what decisions they can make on their own and which require consultation.



Set Reasonable Expectations

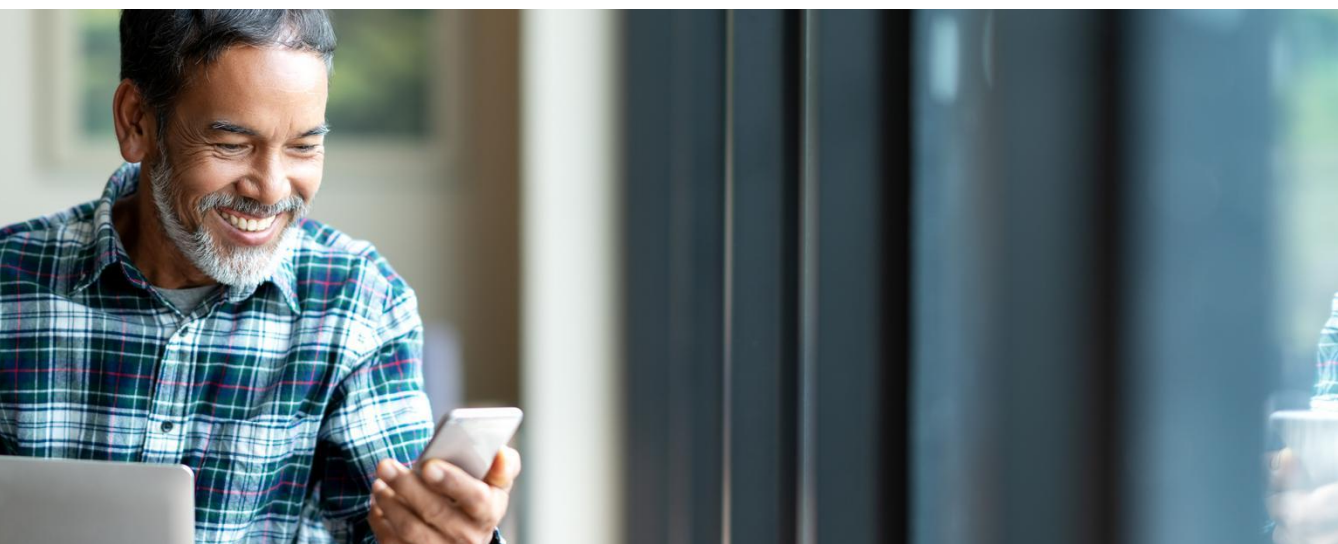
We said earlier that the expected results from a kaizen event must be significant in order to justify the resources. Still, in this case, we recommend being somewhat cautious and picking achievable targets. Even the most dedicated employee who is newly working from home, potentially with children who can't go to school or daycare, will be distracted. This is a stressful time for everyone. That doesn't mean improvement work needs to come to a halt, but leaders must be realistic and compassionate.

Don't Skimp on Planning

Whether your kaizen event will be successful is decided before it even begins. Planning and laying the groundwork is crucial and takes time. Don't be tempted to skim on defining the charter, preparing the roadmap, and documenting desired outcomes because you are in a rush to solve a pressing problem. Even though kaizen events are sometimes called "blitzes," you need patience.

Use Online Software

Many organizations use physical huddle or Kanban boards to manage kaizen events. That's not going to work with everyone at home. If you switch to online software designed to facilitate improvement to manage your project, everyone will have access to the tasks, documents, and data from wherever they happen to be. Mobile apps are ideal for remote employees, as well.



Establish Rules of Engagement

This is generally good advice for managing remote teams. There is a flow to how communication happens in an office that won't exactly translate to the remote-based world. For example, employees may know that a closed door means the occupant isn't to be disturbed. No one knows if your home office door is open or closed. So, talk about how team members will be available to each other. When is it best to use text messaging or instant messaging services like Slack? When is the facilitator available for ad hoc phone calls? Kaizen events often include people who don't work together every day, so being open about the flow of engagement is a big help.

Designate a Quiet Period

Every bit of advice you'll read about managing remote teams will tell you to communicate openly and often. Kaizen events by nature involve lots of back and forth between team members, so add those things together, and you've got a ton of messages and calls. That can make it very difficult for employees to concentrate on work that requires their full attention. It is smart to designate a specific period during which everyone can work on their individual tasks without any non-urgent interruptions or scheduled meetings. People can still log progress in the improvement management system, but for that hour (or however long you decide), they won't reach out to others unless there is an emergency.



Use Video Conferencing

The team will need to meet at least once a day for the duration of the event. Video conferencing is the ideal way to conduct these meetings. Video is more effective than audio-only conference calls because seeing others reduces the number of interruptions and requests for comments to be repeated. It also humanizes people. (We all want to see your cat.) If you don't have a video conferencing service in place, now is a great time to look for one.



We have always known that remote workers can be productive and engaged in improvement work, but given the abrupt change for many people, extra care is needed if you want your remote kaizen event to succeed. These tips should go a long way to help.

Chapter 3

Virtual Gemba Walks

As leaders, managers, and employees alike all grapple with the sudden disruption in normal work and life, go easy on yourself. It is going to take some time to adapt. Processes and tools that worked well in the first few months of the year will need to be adjusted, particularly if your team is now working from home.

Gemba Walks are the perfect example. If your employees work from home and practice social (physical) distancing, you can't possibly go to the place where work is being done. But Gemba walks are such a valuable improvement tool, and if ever there was a time for identifying ways to make processes run better, this is it.

Although the situation isn't necessarily ideal, there are ways to adapt the Gemba walking technique and still enjoy the many benefits. Here are a few tips.



Keep the Purpose in Mind

While the ultimate goal of a Gemba walk is to identify and later implement improvement opportunities, showing respect for employees is its guiding principle. You do not need to be in-person to show respect for your employees. The difference between a Gemba walk and a project management meeting, for example, is that Gemba walks focus not on the outputs that are produced but instead on the way that those outputs are produced.

Respect is demonstrated by communicating concern about whether employees have the tools, resources, and support they need to do their best work. That's more important than ever right now. While you won't observe this in person, you can discuss it over the phone.

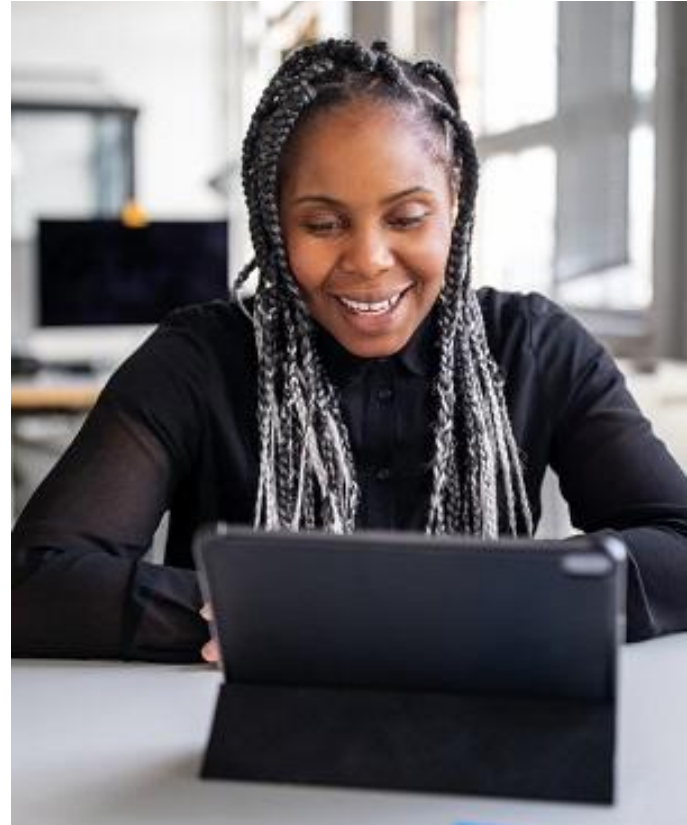
Incorporate Video Conferencing

Face to face interaction is the most effective form of communication. If you can't be there, video is a good second choice. You probably won't be able to observe your employees performing their tasks as you would at the office, but you can discuss what's adding value and creating friction. When they see you on video, your team will know that they have your undivided attention. There are many inexpensive video conferencing options, and some companies are even offering it free for the duration of the need for social distancing.



Focus on Process, Not People

Gemba walks, whether physical or virtual, are not performance management meetings, nor are they a way to figure out who to blame. Gemba walks are about the processes that workers use to get things done. In the case of people suddenly working from home, there are probably many new processes or familiar ones that need to operate in a different way. For example, if productivity declines, a Gemba walk to assess the processes and identify any roadblocks is a great idea. Blaming the person for not working hard enough is not.



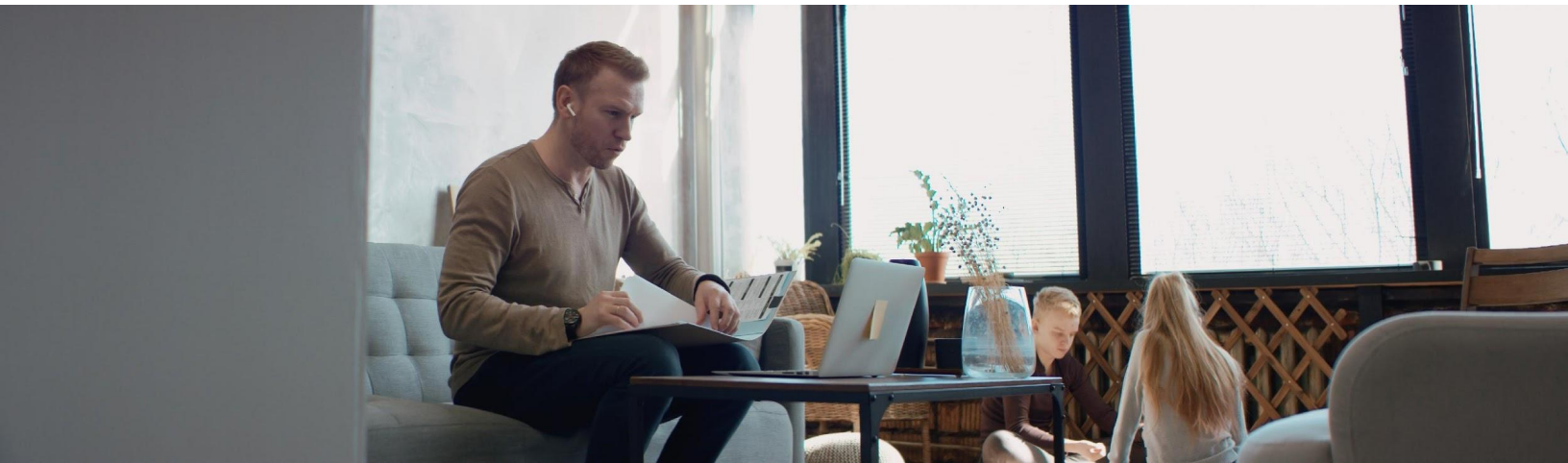
Follow the Standard Process

A remote visit to the Gemba should be taken just as seriously as one done in person. Be sure to plan ahead by identifying the processes you'd like to discuss. Be prepared with questions. Why, where, how, who, and when are always useful.

As you discuss each process, be sure to document your observations. Do you notice any opportunities for improvement? Does the discussion lead you to another process that should also be evaluated? Are there questions for other people, teams, or departments?

Walk, Then Change

With everything happening so quickly and uncertainty all around, it will be tempting to implement changes on the fly. While it may be necessary to innovate more quickly than usual and take risks that might have seemed too big weeks ago, don't get into the habit of making changes during a Gemba walk. Collect your observations, reflect, and then consider changes. There might not be time for a full PDSA cycle, but at the minimum, know what you want to achieve with the change and how you will measure it.



Chapter 4

Avoiding the 8 Wastes of Lean While Working from Home

Millions of workers across the globe have suddenly transitioned to working from home. There are many practical and physiological challenges to this abrupt change, so give yourself a break if everything hasn't been smooth sailing.

Fortunately, the continuous improvement principles that help us be efficient in the office can also apply to working from home. The eight wastes of Lean, for example, create friction and lower productivity for remote workers as much as they do on a factory floor.

Here are some ideas for spotting and eliminating them while working from home.

Inventory

The waste of inventory is related to the excess production and storage of items that are not needed at this time. You probably don't have a garage full of products waiting to be shipped to customers, but you might find the waste of inventory if you think about it in a different way.

At home, excess inventory may be a pile of documents that you don't need to work on right now or boxes of office supplies that just gather dust. It might mean applications on your desktop that you never use or old files that could be archived. Think about improving your efficiency by getting rid of physical and electronic "stuff" that you don't really need.



Overprocessing

Overprocessing refers to work that is not strictly necessary and doesn't provide additional value. In a factory, this might mean adding features to products that customers don't use or want. When working from home, overprocessing might take the form of layers of approval for minor decisions or perfunctory reports.

A common problem that remote workers face is the need to enter the same data into multiple systems. This is a classic case of overprocessing that can often be addressed with systems integration.

Movement

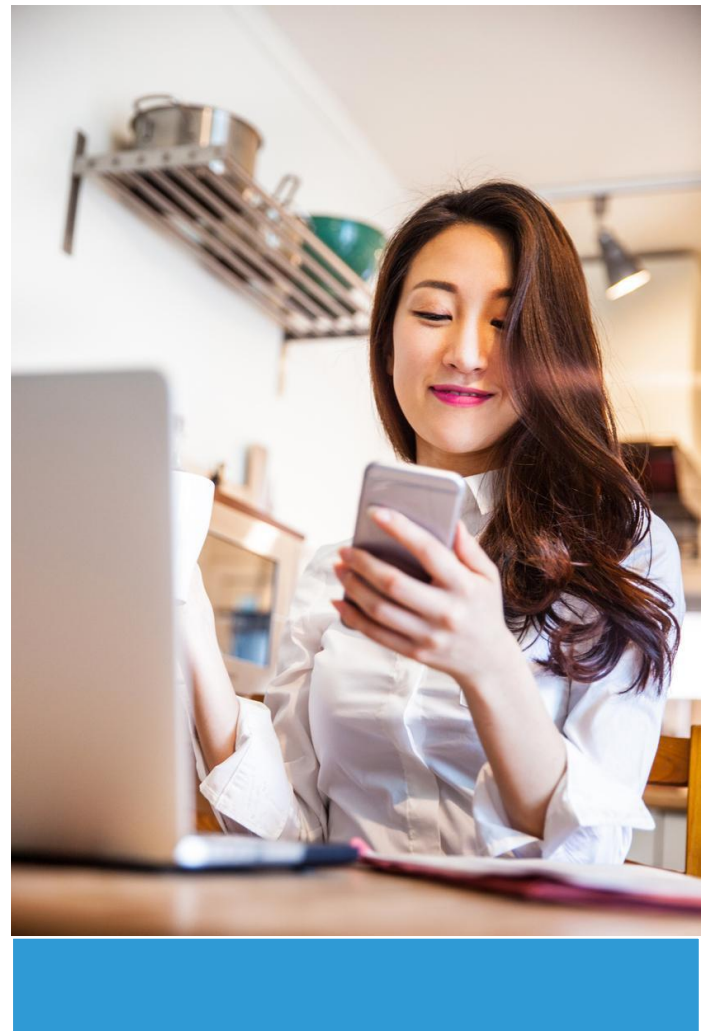
In an office or factory, the waste of movement happens when people must go from one place to another to get needed items or perform process operations. This can occur at home as well if your workspace isn't well-appointed.

Do you have the things you need at hand in the space where you will be working? Are your phone and charger located nearby? Is the equipment that you share with others, like printers, situated in an easily accessible space? Depending on your house's size, you might want to consider getting a small water cooler or coffee machine for your workspace to eliminate unnecessary trips to the kitchen.

Transportation

While the waste of movement involves people's unnecessary motion, the waste of transportation addresses the unneeded movement of things. When everyone is working from home, the biggest cause of the waste of transportation is usually email.

Documents get sent from one computer to another, creating duplicate files and a dubious chain of custody. This problem can be significantly reduced with the use of shared files, such as Google Docs. It is also helpful to store documents directly in the system that is used for improvement management rather than sending them to and from individual users' inboxes.



Waiting

The waste of waiting occurs whenever a process is waiting for inputs or information from another source. It can take the form of waiting for decisions, approvals, or work from a peer. The usual flow of information and work you experience in the office is probably quite different from what you experience working from home.

To reduce the waste of waiting, it is a good idea to schedule planned check-in times between supervisors and team members. Improvement management software with alerts and notifications is a big help. Electronic Kanban boards are also an effective way to visualize work and avoid both waiting and backlogs.

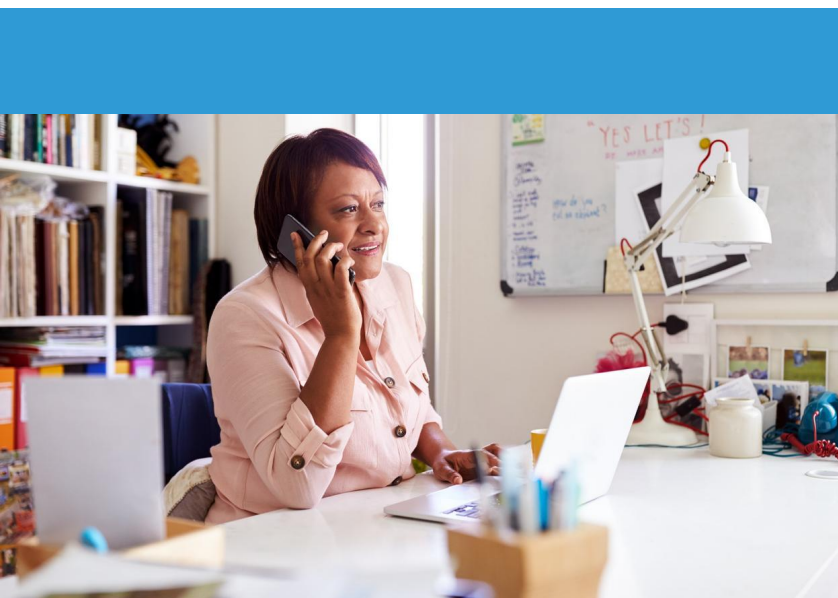
Overproduction

Overproduction happens when too much of something is produced. It is a problem because it leads to the related wastes of transportation and inventory. In a remote environment, overproduction often takes the form of unnecessary meetings (calls), meetings that last longer than required, or having the wrong people in meetings.

Although communication is crucial when everyone is distributed, too much of a good thing becomes a productivity drain.

Defects

It's easy to understand defects in terms of the production of widgets, but defects take many forms. For information workers, defects can be bad data entry, spreadsheets that contain errors, software errors, and information that isn't effectively communicated or well understood. It pays to be especially aware of the potential for defects if you've unexpectedly become a remote worker. It might be wise to add an extra peer review for vital work product. It is also smart to avoid multitasking and do what you can to minimize interruptions.



Human Potential

Perhaps the biggest risk of waste for remote workers is the waste of human potential. Personal and professional development might not be at the top of the list right now, but they should not be ignored. Leaders should help employees find ways to continue to learn and develop new skills. Team members should proactively seek out opportunities for growth. Many organizations and educational institutions are offering online classes, which can help break up the boredom of social distancing.



About KaiNexus

KaiNexus is the ultimate cloud-based SaaS platform that supports continuous improvement. KaiNexus helps you execute and manage your improvement program throughout the entire improvement journey.

From daily improvement on the front lines to rapid improvement events, Lean projects, and strategy deployment, KaiNexus gives your people a single place and a standard method for capturing improvements. From there, it pushes each idea through to completion.



Organizations of all sizes in all industries in every stage of the improvement journey use KaiNexus. Their unifying commonality is that they recognize that continuous improvement is vital to the success of their organizations and that, like with all other complex business processes, they need a platform from which to manage it. They work to engage their entire organization in improvement and value the ideas and opinions of their front-line workers. Our customers strive to develop the methodologies and leadership behaviors critical to developing an improvement culture and understand that they need software to support those elements.

If this sounds like you, KaiNexus would be a good fit for your organization. [Contact us](#) to learn more.

Features

- Top-Down & Bottom-Up Improvement
- Strategy Deployment
- Multiple User Types Available
- Visual Management
- Impact, Activity & Engagement Reports
- Intuitive Charts and Data Tracking
- Smart Notifications
- Email Submission
- Configurable Improvements & Projects
- Class & Certification Tracking
- Cross-Functional Team Collaboration

Support

- Dedicated Account Manager
- Onboarding Configuration & Support
- Email & Phone Customer Support
- Online Support Documentation
- Video Training

Technology

- Data Encryption
- SSL
- iOS and Android App
- iPad and Android Tablet Enabled