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Working Remote

Q&A with Scott Grausnick, CEO of Harbinger Partners

Who is Harbinger Partners and why are they experts in talking about building a virtual workplace?

- Harbinger Partners is a technology staffing firm that focuses on consulting, contract-to-hire, and permanent placements to businesses in the St. Paul/Minneapolis and Omaha areas.
- Harbinger was created as a virtual company in 1999 at a time when a virtual office was almost unheard of, and over 20 years later, is still a dynamic, successful, profitable, and a 100% virtual company.
- Harbinger acquired Bass & Associates located in Omaha, Nebraska, in 2008. Bass was a traditional brick-and-mortar IT consulting firm that we successfully transitioned to a virtual environment.
- Because of both experiences, I can offer a unique perspective on the benefits and challenges of creating, transitioning, and running a virtual business.

What are the benefits of working virtually?

In today's world, the possible spreading of COVID-19 is making the move to a virtual workplace a necessity. Businesses that haven't allowed employees to work from home full-time are needing to make it happen quickly. For companies, it may be overwhelming right now, but there are enormous benefits for both the employer and the employee.

- There have been many studies that show that employees who work from home are often more productive than those in an office: less meetings, less noise, and less "people popping into your office for a 'quick' question" and then leaving 20 minutes later.
- No work commute allows companies to pull from a larger talent pool. With no daily commute, employees can work from home hours apart from each other. For example, one of our account executives and one of our recruiters live about 2 hours away from each other – but work closely each day.
- Allows for a happier, more balanced lifestyle for employees: staff can work if a child is home sick, be home to get kids on and off the school bus, and toss in a load of laundry or two! Additionally, it's easier for employees to incorporate exercise into their days, which boosts not only their health, but also productivity. I have one employee who does squats and lunges every time she is waiting for something to print!
- Employees are able to work when they are most productive. We have a few employees who start at 6:00 a.m., and others who start later. Yet, they all get their jobs done.
- From a finance standpoint, a virtual office is a huge cost savings. Not having office space rental or building maintenance costs save thousands of dollars per year. When we do have face-to-face meetings, our cost is simply a coffee or a lunch.

Working from home can be a huge benefit for the employer and the employee. Our employees all agree that they are more productive than if they worked in a traditional office setting. And they feel empowered, trusted, and valued – a great way to keep great employees happy.

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What are the basics of a virtual office?

There are three basics to creating a successful virtual office: technology, communication, and culture.

- **Culture** is the key to success.
 - Clearly outline roles, responsibilities, and expectations. It doesn't matter to me if my employees are walking their dog at 10:30 a.m. or going to the gym at 3:00 p.m. They know what they need to accomplish and by when.
 - That said, have metrics in place so there is some method of measuring the work that is being done and holding employees accountable. For instance, our sales and recruiting teams have goals to meet. Yes, there are ebbs and flows, but it can be very obvious if the right amount of effort is not taking place.
 - Finally, Trust. Trust. Trust. We are now in a world of self-directed employees. Give them guidance, be available to offer help, and trust they will do their job.
- **Communication** is an important piece to make working virtually work.
 - Set up tools to make sure the team is connected. We use Zoom video conferencing, as well as Slack, texting, and email to stay in touch. It sounds overwhelming, but it works almost seamlessly.
 - Isolation can be an issue for employees, especially if they are accustomed to a busy workplace.
 - Set up frequent touch points. We have set weekly and monthly calls, and some members of our team connect daily. We also take the first minutes of our group calls to visit about our personal lives. It takes only a few minutes, but keeps us all personally connected to each other.
 - I also personally call everyone often to visit and make sure everything is going smoothly.
 - Our teams in each division do meet face-to-face. The Minnesota sales team meets weekly at a coffee shop, and our administration team meets quarterly for a fun lunch. We also schedule division meetings and other fun family events.
 - Finally, it's possible to have fun together, even virtually. Team events such as virtual happy hours, team exercise, or a team coffee break all break up a day and help everyone feel connected.
- **Technology** done right can make working virtually easy.
 - Invest in equipment that will make your team members productive. This includes headsets, printers, scanners, and laptops. We also pay a portion of cell phone and internet fees.
 - Technology doesn't need to be fancy. Facetime on iPhones, conference calls from cell phones, hotspots for Wi-Fi – it all works.
 - Use tools that are cloud-based. This allows flexibility to work from anywhere. The Google Suite has a variety of useful features for collaborative working, and OneDrive is a great option for backing up files to the cloud. Our company database is also in the cloud and has additional features, such as mobile applications.
 - Security is key. The security component is critical to setting employees up to work remotely. If your organization doesn't have an employee or department that specializes in IT security, there are companies, such as Ostra, that provide comprehensive cyber security for companies of all sizes.
 - There are plenty of technology applications available that also make communication easier.

Can you highlight the challenges for today's world?

Today's situation is a bit different than when I started Harbinger or when we transitioned the Omaha division from a regular "go into the office" workplace to a virtual organization. It is a much more challenging scenario. How do we move to this model overnight?

Client Challenges

How do you take your current workforce and "allow" and encourage them to work from home? The shift cannot be taken for granted. It requires a re-tooling of skills and processes. Train. Trust. Verify.

- Stay structured. Schedule virtual meetings, one-on-ones, monthly reviews, etc. to keep everyone connected, informed and in "work mode."
- Realize that working from home looks different. Your employees are going to function in the way that works best for their individual situation. Be flexible and be understanding while focusing on results.
- Organize periodic in-person meetings (when medically appropriate). There is no substitute for face-to-face communication, so don't forget to organize times for your team to see one another when possible.
- Provide your team with resources to help them figure out how to be effective. Working virtually is a new experience for many people, so don't assume everyone knows how to do it well.
- Help cover some of the expenses related to working from home. For example, internet connectivity, cell phone charges, postage, printer and printer supplies, and other work-related items add up quickly.
- It may take employees a bit to get into the swing of working from home. They may need to coordinate space, equipment set up, and child care. Be patient, and offer help when possible. The first few days, employees may need more attention than usual.
- The culture can shift. Employees are working without constant supervision, feedback, and casual touchpoints with the team.
- When it comes to working remotely, security is critical but not impossible. If your internal IT staff has questions, there are companies who specialize in these areas and can help.

Employee Challenges:

With all the precautions being taken to contain the coronavirus, many of you may be faced with a new norm of temporarily working from home. Since Harbinger Partners has been a virtual organization since our inception in 1999, we can offer tips for making working remotely work.

- **Home Office:** Selecting a work location where you can stay organized but also walk away from at the end of the day is important. If you don't have a formal home office, try to find a location where you won't be competing with other daily household activities. For example, the kitchen table seems to be a great place – until it's time for dinner. Instead, setting up a workstation in a guest room, craft room, or another less-used location may be more efficient and less distracting for you. Be sure to include good lighting and ensure that your internet connection is strong.
- **Business or Casual:** Get up and get ready for the day as if you were going into the office. Because you are! It may seem like staying in pajamas is a good idea, until you have an impromptu video chat or need to spontaneously attend an outside meeting. In those moments, you'll be grateful that you are prepared and looking and feeling your best. Details still matter - even if you don't leave the house that day. It is the comforts of home, professionally executed.

- **Family Time:** It may not take long for you to “get into the groove” of working from home, but it can sometimes take family members longer to adjust. Be sure they understand that even though you are at home, you are really “at work.” For both your home family and work family, set up “interruption” expectations so you can balance both effectively.
- **Work/Life Balance:** Now that your work is in your home, it’s important to create a mental barrier to keep the two separate. Be sure to not let work overtake your time with friends and family and at the same time, limit distractions when you are on the job to not take away from work responsibilities. Keep work in your designated work space, and leave it at the end of the work day. Additionally, avoid taking your computer with you to another room at end the day. This practice will help you keep your priorities balanced.

If you find yourself struggling with household distractions, try setting up mini goals/treats for yourself. For example, if you accomplish a set number of items, reward yourself by folding that basket of laundry or unloading the dishwasher. Then back to work for the next set of tasks.

- **Break Time:** Take time away from your work to exercise, meditate, eat, or whatever keeps you energized. Without the many distractions of working in an office with others, it can be easy to stay focused on your work. While the extra productivity is good, moving your body each hour, even for a few minutes, is healthy. Also, since you won’t be walking in and out of buildings or up and down flights of stairs to get those 10,000 steps in, be creative in how you can incorporate movement. For example, if you have a conference call that you just need to listen vs. participate, do it on the treadmill.
- **Technology Tools:** Utilize tools available to you. Technology such as Slack, group texting, Instant Messenger, and video conferencing are excellent methods of communicating. Our team finds that video conferencing works great for staying connected. It can be helpful for group meetings and is also a great tool for one-on-one collaboration, especially when the technology allows screen sharing.
- **Accountability:** Even though you are working from home, you are still held to the same accountability on deliverables as when you are in an office. Making daily “to do” lists and limiting distractions like social media and television can help you stay focused and on track.
- **Isolation:** Working from home can be isolating. If this happens, it is important to reach out to others. One idea is to set up a video call with a co-worker to visit briefly. Consider it no different than visiting with someone in the hallway at work. It can break up the day and lift your spirits.
- **Working Style:** Once you’ve been working from home for a bit, you may find you have a different working style than when you are in an office setting. People who prefer to work 8:00 to 5:00 when driving into the office, may find that they are much more productive working 9:00-6:00 when working from home. If your employer approves, this can be one of the big perks of working remotely! Tools like Slack allow you to choose a status, like do not disturb, away from my desk, or out to lunch, so your co-workers know you are unavailable.
- **Over Communication:** When working remotely, the importance of communication goes to new heights. While timely responses and updates may seem obvious, don’t underestimate the power of a quick phone call with a friendly, “is this a good time to visit?” message on occasion as well. Additionally, some items are better voice-to-voice to avoid miscommunication.



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- **Employee vs. Parent:** To make the situation a bit more challenging, not only are employees working from home, but many have children who are home due to school closings. My employees who are parents of younger children can offer a few tips:
 - If it's possible, try flexing your schedule a little bit. Work a bit before they wake up or maybe finish that one task after they go to bed.
 - Depending on the task, it may be possible to work in a shared space. It can be productive if you are working on work while your child is doing school work.
 - Simply demonstrating what you're doing, such as a Zoom conference call, helps children understand and can cut down on distractions. They are often just curious.
 - During a video call or phone call, try setting up an activity that doesn't require supervision and will keep them entertained for a few minutes. A favorite movie or a new coloring book or toy can buy you uninterrupted time. Additionally, for older children who don't need as much supervision, play dates (when medically appropriate) are wonderful methods of sneaking in a bit of blissfully quiet work time.
 - Because kids are kids, there will be interruptions. Generally, our employees do not have children home with them all day, but when they are there, our staff is upfront with the team about possible interruptions or background noise.

Our employees have stated that they often are most efficient on days where they are juggling being an employee and a parent. They have limited time so they manage it wisely.