



Work From Home During a Global Pandemic Project Summary

Lauren Morris, Spring 2020

Background and Our Design Challenge

In Spring of 2020 a global pandemic, due to the respiratory virus Coronavirus D- 19, shut down the state of Wisconsin after a public health emergency was declared March 12th. With that, Madison Metropolitan School District, like many other districts across the country, was closed down and quickly transitioned to operating remotely. With such a sudden and unexpected act, we were ill equipped to transition to full time work from home or virtual learning. Working from home was new to MMSD, and staff and teams are trying to adjust to effectively collaborating and working remotely, an option that had been effectively discouraged in previous years. As an eveready innovation team, when the Executive Director of RAD asked us to explore the departments experiences, we jumped at the chance to investigate and possibly impact the work from home (WFH) culture, or lack thereof, in MMSD.

The idea was that staff in Central Office could benefit from exploring people's experiences over the last month to help identify what is working, what is not, what we should continue, and what may need to change. Knowing that other departments were in the thick of some massive work and/or not knowing their interests in pursuing such an opportunity at the time, ROCKiT was asked to start the mission within RAD. As part of the project, two ROCKiT innovation strategists, two ROCKiT innovation externs, and an analytics supervisor for the Research, Programming and Evaluation Office (RPEO) got together to interview all 20 staff with different job titles, descriptions, and expectations, in the Research and Data Department (RAD), including each other.

Research/Empathy Inspiration to Insight Generation

The design team set out to gather evidence of the current WFH state and culture within RAD, compile resources from external organizations around their WFH norms, find resources to inspire, inform and guide our work, and create WFH recommendations for norms, guidelines and resources for MMSD staff that are rooted in evidence. It was quite a feat to do completely virtually, and in only a week, but the team accomplished it. From there, team members added the data from each of the interviews to a digital collaboration workspace (Mural.co) for visual collaboration. Team members uploaded important notes and quotes from interview notes, assigning each interviewee a different color. We clustered related statements into themes and used to create a client profile. We removed identifiers (spouse for husband/wife, supervisor for boss/specific name, colleague for specific name, etc) from Mural cards in order to keep the anonymity for insight sharing. Finally we used the themes to brainstorm how might we statements and potential tests for improving a WFH culture.

We decided that the research and best practices we found, although useful, were ill-equipped to inform what remote working looks like in a broader sense, and especially during a global pandemic. We gathered over 40 documents and articles from various blogs and guides including some from Forbes, CNN, The Harvard Business Review,, LinkedIn, Google as a company, American Family and MMSD, that note a wide variety of business processes and expectations. General expectations were built around business and technology models in high powered and high revenue environments with eurocentric male values on professionalism. Research and articles don't address public education and the Central Office is a subset of that sector. Therefore our best practices will have to accommodate public school districts, with limited resources, an intentionality around workforce diversity in ethnicity and economic status, and with the reality of the current childcare-less, co-working circumstances.

Empathy Inspiration to Insight Generation/ Ideation

From the interviews, the team learned a ton about how previous district culture trickled into the remote working space, what were some of the standard work from home best practices, and how both of these were impacted by the pandemic. Many clients mentioned positive aspects of working from home, such as significantly shorter commutes, the potential for more flexibility in their schedules, the chance to take meaningful breaks and eat or walk or run an errand, and in some cases less distractions as people couldn't simply knock on an office door. They overall enjoy the option to work from home.

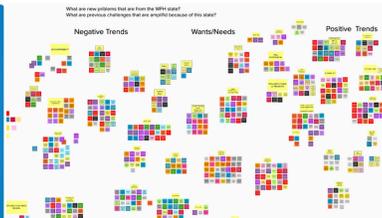
What it Took

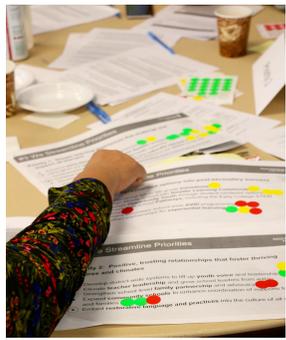
From the Design Team:

5 Design Team Members--
4 ROCKiT team members and 1 RPEO team member

Approximately 90 hours, split between the 6 team members over 6 weeks of time, 8 work sessions

20 additional hours for team lead prep and review





On the other hand, there were other significant distractions, such as care-giving obligations (brought on by the lack of childcare for some), access to sufficient workspaces, resources and supplies in the shared setting, and the universal trauma that surrounded the pandemic. Limitations in communications and collaboration, whether it be a lack of ease or perceived over-reliance on zoom, MMSD has a meeting heavy culture that doesn't always translate to productive for all participants. They desired systems and structures for effective collaboration and better ways to manage and track projects so that collaboration runs more smoothly.

Other pain points for interviewees included muddled boundaries and expectations, maintaining balance and self-care (especially where siloed expertise burdened some staff over others), as well as angst over uncertainty for the future and lack of permanent superintendent. Staff also voice concern in a lack of trust from the district as they engage in WFH and desire improved systems for accountability, as they view productive work is not about minutes at their desk but the ability to complete tasks efficiently and effectively.

This led the design team to begin to brainstorm solutions to address things like...

- How might we improve accountability and role clarity while working from home during a global pandemic?
- How can we better prepare for potential future transitions in the case of further emergency. What are work from home necessities and how can the district provide them?
- How might we bring the ease of leaning over to a coworker for help to the virtual work realm/ improve communication, without relying on giving out our personal phone numbers?
- How might we create a flexible work from home system that allows for balancing collaboration and independent obligations, work and family/child care needs?
- How can we be more efficient and more mindful with our meetings?

"I think MMSD is doing the best they can right now, I'm glad that I can still work without going into a physical building."

Like any project, there were some limitations. The data collected, although expansive for the department may not translate to other areas of the district as it does not represent the more universal WFH experience; for example, there are no single parents on the RAD team. The design team also recognizes the benefits and drawbacks of interviewing colleagues internally. They can either be extremely honest and forthcoming because of the trusting relationship, or extremely guarded and intentional to avoid discomfort within the team. The design team attempted to account for that by removing indicators from shared insight generation documents and were strategic about who conducted interviews, especially where supervisors were concerned.

Additionally, there are other considerations to be taken when remotely conducting a design mission that we'd previously taken for granted. Because we had so many interviews, a short time, and unprecedented need for internet access at home, we ran into internet bandwidth issues and other technical mishaps - like volume and microphone problems, as well as zoom and note-taking fatigue. We found the downloading of insights a little more difficult as well. For example, Sharpie and Post it notes on a board go a lot faster for jotting quotes and insights and reorganizing them into themes. Mural took a lot more time, but allows the design team to keep clean and useful, digital copies of the theming, with the potential to edit in the future.

Ideation/ Build, Measure, Learn [Prototyping]

The design team planned a series of testing options to address different components of the client profile. There were the options to use email tags or Slack to improve staff concerns about efficient and effective communication, create flexible work day schedules with blocks of meetings and non-meeting times (to allow for flexibility and focused work during the week), create essential tools lists for quick transitions between office and working from home, and creating more definitive rules around meetings to increase production. The design team lead took these recommendations to office leaders within the department in an attempt to determine which assumptions and solutions to focus on testing. Many of the team leaders were already working to address many of the aspects brought up in empathy interviews, other components didn't seem as relevant as teams had settled more into routines. Maybe we missed the mark as designers, maybe the leaders were using the learnings and already improving, maybe it was difficult to get a ton of enthusiasm under the already stressful circumstances. Additionally, many of the largest pain points for interviewees seemed to be tied up in interactions outside of the core department team, so testing things such as slack channels that the greater district staff wouldn't be familiar with seemed overwhelming for office leaders. Either way, the insights presented to department and office leadership seem to have a positive impact on the RAD department working from home during a global pandemic.

"I love that it only takes 30 seconds to get coffee and start work."

"...no one could have foreseen this and given the state of the world right now."

"...we are taking some bad cultural expectations into new realm..."