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Logged on from the Laundry Room

How the CEO's of Google, Pfizer and Slack Work From Home

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Leadership / Being CEO
Coronavirus Pandemic

Take-Aways

- CEOs are managing their companies from home.
- When a “shelter-in place” order is in effect, nobody wants unreliable internet service – especially a CEO.
- Even working from the privacy of your home, the environment today is extremely stressful.
- Pharmaceutical executives feel responsible for more than their employees.
- Keeping businesses going is urgent when so many small companies face life-or-death situations.
- Everyone compromises to stay in business and stay healthy.
- CEOs proactively manage their own and their employees’ mental health.

Recommendation

The CEOs of major American firms are working from home as they self-isolate during the coronavirus pandemic. Chief executives who might be rushing to meetings in SUVs or private jets instead are hosting video conferences in makeshift home offices. While coping with their private lives, these CEOs try to keep their companies strong, protect their employees and deal with supply chain disruptions. *The New York Times*' David Gelles offers a glimpse into the lives of those at the top of the corporate pyramid trying to get an internet signal from the laundry room.

Summary

CEOs are managing their companies from home.

Sundar Pichai, who oversees Google and YouTube as the chief executive of Alphabet, works from a beautiful home office in Silicon Valley with built-in bookcases and a large plant. It seems appropriate for the CEO of one of the most important internet companies.

"It's a miracle you can run a company this way."

He seeks to keep disinformation to a minimum and, with most of his employees working from home, to keep web services running well amid high demand. Pichai reports a "spike" in usage of Google's G-Suite and Hangout. He notes that an added responsibility while he's working at home is helping his teenage daughter cope with the current circumstances.

"Nobody prepares for this."

Chuck Robbins, is the CEO of Cisco, which manufactures and runs networking equipment. While proud of his corporation's role in teleworking, he admits he's not sure he was prepared to work online fulltime.

*"None of this technology was designed to support the entire world working from home...
The Webex teams haven't slept in days."*

In the face of soaring customer demand, Cisco has set up teams to make sure large companies experience smooth remote communications for function that range from individual conversations to high-level meetings which use the company's Webex conferencing software.

When a "shelter-in place" order is in effect, nobody wants unreliable internet service – especially a CEO.

Stewart Butterfield, the chief executive of Slack, isn't leaving his home in San Francisco, so he's hosting work-related video conferences from there. But his home is in the middle of renovations, and the only place he can get a strong internet connection is the laundry room, so Butterfield runs his company – and chaired an "all-company" video meeting – from there.

“Slack, the messaging company, has experienced a sharp spike in usage in recent weeks, as much as 30% above previous highs of messages sent per day.”

Slack’s business is messaging, and the current crisis has boosted message-per-day usage by 30% more than Slack’s previous busiest day on record. Sign-ups for new clients, Butterfield says, align with how the coronavirus affects various countries. Even with most employees working from home, Butterfield is reporting Slack’s “most productive week.” He remains mindful that this surge won’t go on forever, and he doesn’t want people to tire of Slack.

Even working from the privacy of your own home, the business environment is extremely stressful.

The chief executive of Nasdaq, Adena Friedman, split her team into two shifts, one week at home and one week in the office. On weekends, cleaning services prepare the office for the coming week. When it’s Friedman’s week to work at home, she stays in Chevy Chase, Maryland with her husband and grown children. She starts her days with her usual workout and breakfast and then monitors fluctuating markets. Her husband and sons work from home, too.

“Ms. Friedman follows the same routine each workday. She wakes up at 5:30 a.m., rides on her Peloton, eats breakfast and gets to work.”

Friedman meets online with executives and other businesspeople working at home. One of her primary tasks is to be certain that banks – whose workers are mostly at home – clear trades and maintain meetings with other home-bound executives. One virtue of this arrangement is that it gives her a glimpse into people’s private lives; nonetheless, Friedman finds the current environment incredibly stressful.

Pharmaceutical executives today feel responsible for far more than their employees.

One thing that Albert Bourla, CEO of the pharmaceutical company Pfizer, likes most about working from his home in Scarsdale, New York is hearing his wife and “college-age” daughter bicker. The sound provides a comforting backdrop to his work. Bourla says that each day begins and closes with them arguing.

“When not delighting in his reunited family, Mr. Bourla is grappling with the immensity of the challenges confronting Pfizer.”

Bourla’s company is crucial to the healthcare system. He feels a duty to Pfizer’s 90,000 employees and a profound urge to help end the pandemic. Pfizer is researching treatments and a vaccine for Covid-19. Pfizer has offices in Asia, so Bourla experienced the coronavirus crisis in its early days. He learned that people grow weary of working at home. He notes that in the first two weeks, he found it oddly tiring. And, he says, it still feels abnormal.

Keeping businesses going is urgent when so many small companies are in a life-or-death situation.

Gregg Renfrew is chief executive of Beautycounter, which creates makeup and shampoo and distributes its products not through retail outlets, but via a “network of [predominantly female] consultants.” She finds it difficult to work from her home in Pacific Palisades in Los Angeles, mostly because her husband distracts her from video calls.

“Ms. Renfrew has been trying her best to manage the disruption wrought by the coronavirus — fortifying her supply chain, increasing the production of some essential items and postponing some product launches.”

Her most urgent task is dealing with the supply chain disruptions the pandemic generates. Renfrew boosted production of certain products and forestalled the market launch of others. Given the problems facing small business owners, she’s working under great pressure. She feels it’s urgent to keep her company – with 50,000 consultants who depend on her for their living – up and running, especially when so many small businesses are at risk.

Everyone is making compromises to stay in business and to stay well.

Giovanni Caforio is the chief executive of the pharmaceutical firm Bristol Myers Squibb. He began following the coronavirus crisis sooner than most people in the United States, in part because his brother is a doctor in Rome. Caforio is working from his home in Princeton, New Jersey. His wife and two children are at home with him, and they all are trying to adjust to the “new reality.” His wife runs a nonprofit from home and his son moved in after his school in Scotland canceled its term. His daughter, a high school senior, is coping with having neither a prom nor a graduation ceremony.

“We’re adapting to a new reality.”

Caforio notes that Bristol Myers Squibb relies more on the United States and Europe than on China for its supply chain. He finds that European hospitals are “stockpiling” his company’s items in preparation for possible shortages. Caforio is empathetic about the problems his employees face, since many of them are working from home, where everyone must balance his or her personal life and job. Caforio recognizes the needs for “trade-offs.”

Wise CEOs proactively manage their own and their employees’ mental health.

Marc Benioff, CEO of Salesforce, deals with both personal and work issues from his home office in San Francisco, as do most of Salesforce’s 50,000 workers. Though accustomed to doing business via networking, Benioff reports an astounding quantity of “inbound communication.” Increasing his at-home responsibilities, Benioff’s father-in-law lives with him and his mother has dinner at his house nightly. A Buddhist, Benioff has increased the time he spends meditating.

“I am learning new levels of sensitivity.”

He's found that 36% of Salesforce workers are facing mental health difficulties from the stress of the pandemic. His company has launched a "daily mental health call" to foster "meditation and mindfulness."

[Editor's note: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious viral respiratory disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) also known as "novel coronavirus." The disease was first reported in December 2019, from Wuhan, China, and has since spread globally, resulting in the 2019–20 coronavirus pandemic which affects people and businesses worldwide.]

About the Author

David Gelles writes the Corner Office column and other features for *The New York Times*'s Sunday Business section.



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