

# HOW REMOTE WORK HELPED OUR BUSINESS GROW



Embracing work from home at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a major shift in recruitment, retention, and employee satisfaction at Trillium Architectural Products, a door and hardware distributor in Toronto, Ontario.



BY TODD FARRELL

Back in March of 2020, when COVID-19 was new, spreading and scary, the management team at Trillium Architectural Products decided to ask employees to work from home. Everyone whose role could possibly be performed remotely packed up their stuff and headed home, leaving only our warehouse staff, technicians and a few others in the office.

Our bustling in-house team of 75 people was reduced to 15 almost overnight.

Like many other businesses and public health advisors, we thought a two-week “circuit breaker” would be enough to get us through the worst of the situation. We all know that it didn’t work out that way.

The pandemic dragged on and on.

Our head office and most of our staff is located in Toronto, Ontario, which had some of the

longest-running public health restrictions in North America. The province was locked down. Non-essential industrial, commercial and institutional construction projects were shuttered.

There was no telling when people would be able to return to the office.

The first few months of remote work were a major struggle for our team as we faced the same challenges that many other companies did. Like everyone else, we adapted out of necessity. Staff figured out how

to handle virtual meetings, resolved connectivity issues, and carved out office space in their homes.

Meanwhile, our management team continued to plan for a full return to the office. After all, we provide doors and hardware for corporate interior fit-outs. Shouldn’t we set an example and blaze the trail back to the office?

But every time we came close to inviting staff back, a new variant or a spike in local infection rates convinced us that it just wasn’t safe.

We were forced to work from home on a larger scale and for much longer than we would have ever anticipated.

In spite of some initial hiccups and general resistance from staff, as time rolled on something unexpected happened. Both management and employees began to realize major benefits from remote work.

People proved that they were dedicated and disciplined enough to work effectively on their own. Employees maintained our exceptional corporate culture and team atmosphere, even when we couldn't be present in-person. Managers learned how to support and lead their people in new ways.

And, surprisingly, our business grew.

As an employer, we decided to fully embrace remote work and let our employees choose where and how they wanted to work.

Here are some of the reasons why.

### **No Place Like Home**

Though many of our staff initially resisted remote work, the vast majority now prefer it to our previous in-office model.

We surveyed employees a few times during the pandemic to gauge how they felt about returning to the office. In the earliest surveys, people indicated they were hesitant to return because of safety concerns. Nobody wanted to get sick at work.

Eventually, when infection levels dropped and safety concerns abated, we surveyed staff again with one simple question: "Do you want to work in the office, hybrid, or full-time remote?"

Over 70% of eligible employees opted to continue working from home.

For many, the decision was easy.

In 2018, Toronto was ranked the worst city for commuting in North America (better luck next time, Los Angeles!). It was not uncommon for our employees to spend 90 minutes or more commuting to and from work each day.

People who used to drive or take public transit to the office have been saving thousands of dollars in travel costs. Even more importantly, they are gaining hours of their lives back. For these employees, going back to the old way of doing things would just seem foolish.

Workers who have children or live with elderly parents are better able to support their families while working remotely. For example, being home when a child is unwell without having to take a sick day or fall behind on a project makes life that much easier and less stressful.

"It's nothing short of life-changing," remarked one manager who drove 50 miles each day for the past 20 years and lives with his elderly father. "Being around for my dad is huge for my peace of mind. I'm even eating better than I used to by making my lunch every day instead of getting takeout."

There are some trade-offs, of course. Many of us miss the social side of work and seeing our colleagues face-to-face. Still, when given the choice, our team overwhelmingly decided to keep working remotely.

The fact that such a large majority decided to work from home was a factor as well. If only a handful of

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workers stayed remote, it would be easier to think of them as a separate entity. When nearly everyone is remote, including several senior managers, it levels the playing field.

## Work from Home...or Anywhere

Disconnecting work from the office has paid off for employees in other ways.

Some people have taken advantage of their remote situation by taking working vacations.

“It was fantastic. Just fantastic. You have to try it!” reported one employee who recently spent time on a working vacation in Hawaii. “The time difference meant I could work from about 2 a.m. to 10 a.m., when everyone at the head office would also be working. Then I had the rest of the day to enjoy the beach and tour the island.”

By working during these sojourns, employees don't use up their vacation days and can stay in their destinations for longer periods of time. This means they can immerse themselves in local culture and get more out of their visits.

Other people are heading out of the city to work from their cottages for the summer.

We've even had some people permanently relocate to other countries.

Our Chief Estimator decided to return to Europe to be closer to family. In the past, a move like this would have meant losing a great contributor when his circumstances changed. Instead, it was easy to keep him on board with almost no interruption to his team or our clients.

Now that we have truly embraced remote work, it simply doesn't make a difference whether an employee logs in from down the hall or the other side of the world.

## Recruitment Advantage

This philosophy also helped us solve a major operational issue—recruitment.

Door and hardware distribution is a niche industry. It is hard to find talented, experienced people. Even in a region with about six million people, we struggle to find local candidates for roles that require detailed, technical industry knowledge.

Once we embraced the idea of having a remote workforce—and learned how to manage it effectively—we found ourselves able to recruit from a much larger talent pool.

We have extended our recruitment efforts across Canada and internationally, which has helped us bring on highly qualified candidates we never would have found in our local market.

The numbers speak for themselves:

- Trillium has hired 22 new fully remote employees since the pandemic began.
- Half are in the Toronto area but prefer to work from home.
- The other half are spread across Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and the Middle East.
- Nine of the people who filled technical roles that require detailed industry knowledge (detailers and project managers, for example) are workers from outside our region.

The impact of that last statistic is massive. There is no chance we could have ramped up the company's overall technical expertise this quickly if we only hired from our local talent pool.

Offering remote work has made us more attractive as an employer as well. Two valuable, experienced people came to work for us specifically because their former

employers—our competitors—insisted that they return to the office.

It's clear. Embracing remote work has helped us scale up, gives us a serious advantage, and has made us a much stronger company overall.

## Summary

Before the pandemic hit, Trillium had tried remote work on a small scale. Our information technology team had experience setting up remote users and were aware of some of the tools required to keep someone connected.

Still, flipping a considerable portion of our employees over to remote work almost overnight presented many challenges.

With time, managers and employees were able to clear these hurdles and realize the benefits of remote work.

There are still challenges that need to be faced. How should we repurpose our nearly empty office space? What happens to events like our annual golf tournament now that many of us are overseas? Can we develop the same loyalty and connection to the company with people who have never set foot in our office?

It will take some effort to address these issues, so our adaptation to remote work isn't complete.

Even so, the advantages far outweigh the negatives for our employees and the company as a whole. At this point, it is hard to imagine ever going back to the way things were.

Here's to the new normal. +



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