

# NANCY DREW, MY GRANDMOTHER, AND YOUR COFFEE BREAK

## *Relationship building during remote work.*

Last February, I entered the Client site on my first day not knowing that only two weeks later and like so many others, I would switch to remote work indefinitely as a result of COVID-19. I had been in consulting for less than a year at that point and my first engagement had us at the Client site every day, all day, allowing relationships to naturally build over coffee in the break room, shared potlucks on Fridays, and conversations in the hall. I have missed all of those contacts this past year; while I am an introvert at heart, I love getting my social energy at work talking about shared interests, side hobbies, and learning fun facts about those I get to work with. And while so many of us felt the angst and confusion about how to navigate a fully remote workplace, I felt the added pressure of being a novice and trying to build relationships with my Client, while also navigating the shift to remote work.

I had only met a handful of my new coworkers before switching to virtual interactions, and found myself on video calls introducing myself over and over again while worrying about how on earth I was going to create trust and real relationships when I had never met these people in-person. The boom in online articles about the benefits of turning on your video camera, muting yourself properly, and digital tips and tricks were all fine, but I felt that the virtual interaction lacked the element of human connection that we were, and still are, all striving for. I have been incredibly fortunate to continue with the same Client throughout this year and have been able to reflect back on what has helped me create meaningful relationships (side note: it's way more than just having your camera turned on!).

## THERE IS A TIME AND A PLACE FOR A DIGITAL BACKGROUND

As a former educator, I have many thoughts about virtual backgrounds during remote work. The teacher in me understands that social inequalities of home workplaces or close quarters of several individuals trying to work augers for the reduced intimacy of artificial backgrounds. I completely recognize that there are moments when a digital background takes away competing distractions and at times can also lighten the mood with creativity! However, I have found that taking note of someone's background can be an easy and natural conversation starter. One of my coworkers recently moved houses and we had fun working with her as she added to the bookshelves behind her, carefully crafting her work in real time and letting us in on the strategically placed pictures and carefully stacked books. Noticing that another coworker's clock in the background was a different time zone prompted a conversation that led to him sharing that he was working in a different state to be closer to his parents and family during this crazy time. Coincidentally, my mom has set up her remote office in my childhood bedroom, and has been asked about the complete collection of Nancy Drew books in the background of her "office"!

## EMBRACE THE EMBARRASSING AND EMOTIONAL MOMENTS

Name a virtual platform and we can all share an experience we have had or heard about of moments that were captured on camera for everyone in a meeting to see or hear and that we would give anything to erase from their memories. Similarly, the raw emotion of these difficult times has sometimes--inevitably-- bled into our professional spheres causing embarrassment or awkwardness. Instead of pretending these moments never happened, our team opted to acknowledge these moments during team meetings by sharing something funny or emotional that happened on a virtual

call. We heard a plethora of stories of kids wreaking havoc during important meetings, shared screen fails of iMessages displayed, and significant others shouting out the dinner menu from the kitchen for all of us to hear. There were also teary moments, such as when the stress of parenting during a pandemic became overwhelming and instead of turning off the camera, our colleague shared with us, through tears, that she was just having a really hard time. I lost my beloved grandmother in December and found myself unexpectedly emotional on a few calls and, while I was worried about being perceived as unprofessional, I instead shared where the emotion was coming from and was able to connect with colleagues who also had recently lost a loved one. Resisting the urge to look the other way when these moments happened allows us to deepen relationships and humanize the reality that we all were learning how to navigate the blending of our home and work selves as we work from our virtual offices.

## RECREATE YOUR COFFEE BREAKS (TOGETHER)

This isn't the "go for a walk over lunch" advice (but do it! Vitamin D is sustaining me during these dark Minnesota days!) but is instead a suggestion to recreate the same social breaks that you took at work talking to others while filling up your water bottle, grabbing a cup of coffee, or reheating lunch in the kitchen. The trick is that pre-Covid, these were inadvertent encounters by the coffee pot or spontaneous conversations in the hall; now we have to intentionally create some of these interactions but they are no less--and are arguably more--important. Just this morning, I had an 8 am virtual coffee date with one of my friends from my Client. I can't tell you how appreciative I was that, as I automatically transitioned to talking about projects, she steered me back to a conversation about our personal lives and the world around us. With this, she subtly reminded me that she wanted to check in with how I was doing and that we would get back to work in a few minutes. We are all mindful of people's busy schedules and try hard to make meetings efficient, but taking those 15 minutes this morning to connect with her and hear about life outside of work allowed both a human connection with a colleague as well as some head-clearing acknowledgment of the other issues occupying our thoughts. Just a few minutes after our coffee FaceTime ended, I noticed that she added a recurring coffee date each week, and I couldn't be more grateful.

The Consultant/Client relationship is at the center of all consulting work and the importance of personalizing a digital workplace cannot be overstated. Our work/home personas were easy to keep separate when we had an "office" and a "home"--so long as they remain blended, however, we should embrace every opportunity to make a human connection.



This TIP was written by Trexin Associate, Annalisa Tester. Annalisa welcomes comments and discussion on this topic and can be reached at [annalisa.testter@trexin.com](mailto:annalisa.testter@trexin.com).

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