



Tips for Managing a Remote Team — Especially if it's a First for You

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As ever more employees around the world who have rarely — if ever — worked remotely find themselves logging on from home, managers face a daunting challenge in helping their teams maintain effectiveness while adapting to an unfamiliar work arrangement.

A recent Robert Half survey found that 54% of senior managers in Canada said their companies have expanded remote work options over the last three years. However, a separate survey of workers revealed that not having the right technology (47%), feeling less productive (31%), missed opportunities (25%) and feeling lonely (19%) were the main deterrent of those who have the option but don't use it.

This highlights the fact that telecommuting is a perk you need to implement thoughtfully. Leading a team that doesn't get a lot of face time (especially if it's something they're not used to) is a tall order.

How do you create an engaged and cohesive group when everyone is scattered across town — or in different countries? How do you build camaraderie, foster a positive workplace culture, and provide leadership and support from afar?

It's not easy. Fortunately, the following strategies can help you manage a dispersed team and keep everyone feeling productive and connected.

Make communication a top priority

If your team members have different schedules and work at various locations, you need to make sure pertinent information is easily — and frequently — communicated. Otherwise you risk having a disjointed and unproductive team.

Communicating expectations; setting up processes for documenting and sharing; and making sure staff feel confident with their technology, tools and resources are all key for a seamless transition to the home office.

That includes providing context for every project, which means having background on a project's history and who on the team is responsible for what. Contextual information should be documented in a central location, like a Google Doc, Teams site or wiki that all team members can access. Other basic information, such as project timelines and people's work schedules, should also be current and available.

A simple online calendar app, for example, can help ensure that everyone on your team, from the telecommuter to the on-site employee to the temporary staff member, can easily share and view the latest schedule details in one place.

No matter the technology you use, everyone needs to be on the same page about how the tools work and why they're being used — and be open to emerging communication options. Don't be afraid to try out tools and then retire them. The best way to ensure everyone stays connected and productive is to find what works best for your team, and sometimes that requires trial and error.

Keep in daily contact, but don't micromanage

When creating a calendar for your team, set times for when everyone will meet (virtually) and when you'll check in with team members individually. Also, let your staff know how and when they can reach you throughout the workday. After all, off-site employees won't be able to swing by your office to ask questions or get feedback.

The bottom line: Never let a telecommuter or remote worker feel like they're on an island. Aside from the department and individual meetings you schedule, try to connect with everyone at least once a day via instant message or email. Even better, pick up the phone for a quick call. Speaking with someone to discuss the details of a project or convey an important message is often more effective — and efficient — than typing out the words. It's also a way to build personal rapport with colleagues.

However, be careful not to micromanage. Telecommuters need to feel confident that their manager believes they'll work as hard as they would in a regular office, logging similar hours, hitting deadlines and maintaining productivity. If you're unnecessarily checking in several times a day just to see how things are going, your employees may feel like you don't trust them.

Make time for face time

While it's important to bring your entire team together on occasion, video conferencing is the best solution considering close contact isn't recommended at the moment.

Seeing everyone's face helps people feel closer together, regardless of where they sit. Watching people's mannerisms as they speak, laugh and listen helps the team get a good sense of each other's tone, communication styles and sense of humour, and can help everyone understand each other better when communicating by email and text.

Also, seeing your workers — even if virtually — helps you (and them) feel more connected. And it helps avoid miscommunication when giving feedback, because they can read your facial expressions and body language. So, before you dial the phone or write an email, ask yourself if sending a video chat invitation is the better option.

Emphasize work-life balance

Providing flexible work options, like a remote arrangement, is not only a great perk for your employees but is also a way to establish a culture of work-life balance. Being able to work remotely and avoid a long commute are benefits that can give your team members greater control over their lives. That, in turn, can increase their job satisfaction and loyalty.

In times like the ones we currently find ourselves in, the ability to work remotely can mean greater peace of mind for workers who may feel anxious about riding on public transit, working in busy office buildings or even unknowingly getting someone else sick.

However, it's easy for dedicated professionals to become workaholics when they embrace the telecommuter lifestyle. So, encourage remote employees to practice good time management. Set your own start and stop times, and have telecommuters do the same. And make sure you respect their schedules. Refrain from contacting workers outside of office hours, when possible. And don't expect a response while they're offline.

Master these strategies now to ensure future success

Telecommuting will only continue growing in popularity — and perhaps become a necessity under some circumstances. As a manager, it's essential to help every on-site employee, telecommuter, remote worker, freelancer and consultant on your team feel connected to each other, their work and the organization as a whole.

Your commitment to fostering team spirit and cohesiveness can increase morale and productivity. It also helps you prepare to be an effective leader of tomorrow as the global working world gets ever-more intermingled.