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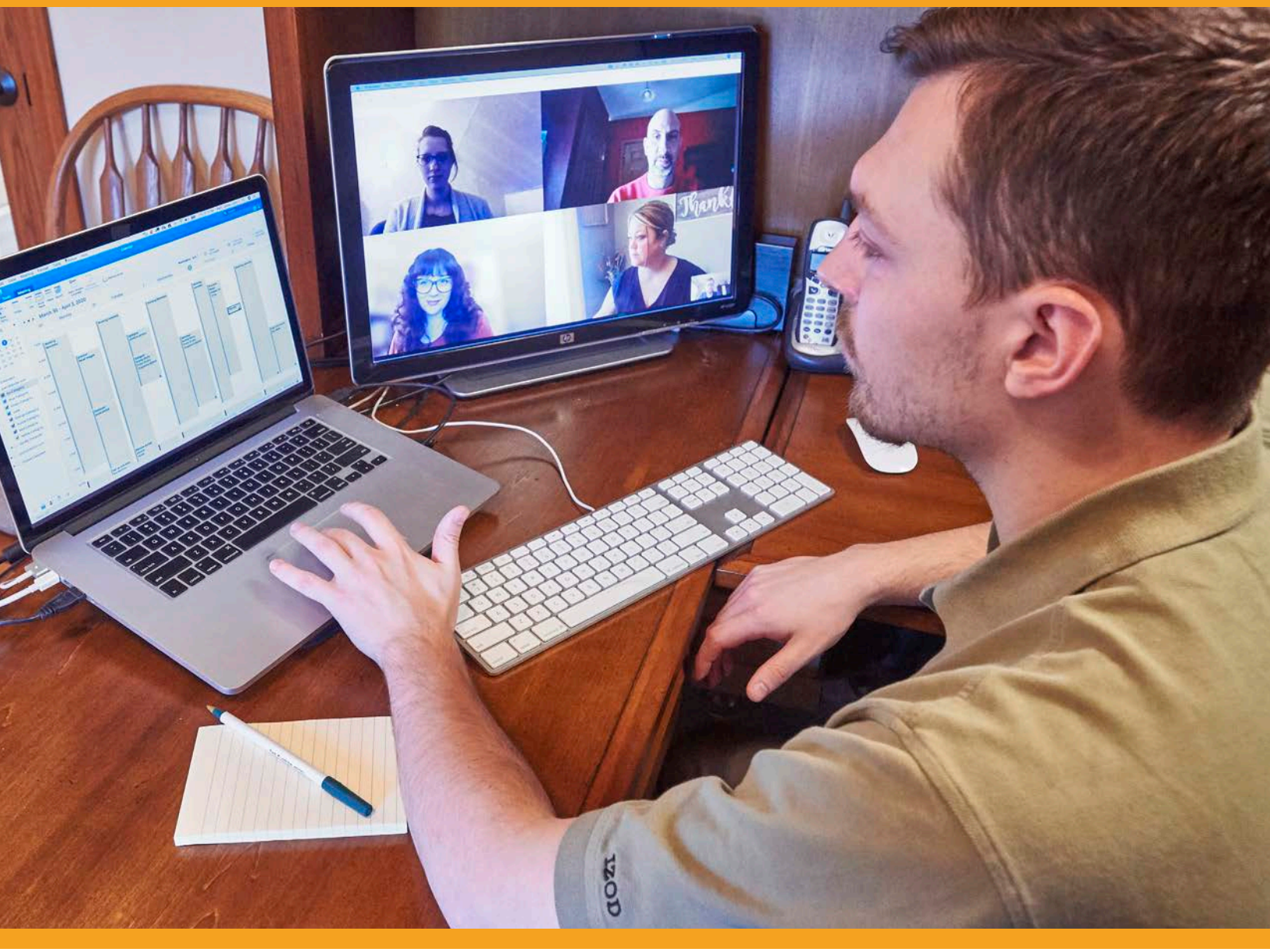
HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY MANAGE REMOTE EMPLOYEES



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HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY MANAGE REMOTE EMPLOYEES

The ranks of remote employees are growing. While working from home comes with a unique set of challenges, it is possible for remote employees to not only survive, but thrive, whether the arrangement is temporary or permanent.

Although many people had to adjust quickly to working remotely due to COVID-19, others have been working remotely for years. Whether you're managing a well-established remote staff or a group that is new to the remote working dynamic, it's important to fine tune your skills to best manage your team. Read on to learn how!

REASONS REMOTE WORK MAY BE NECESSARY

With a laptop computer and internet connection, many employees can work from almost anywhere at least some of the time. Employers and employees create work-from-home agreements for a variety of reasons. These might include:

- A company finds the best candidate for an open position in another state, and agrees to have the employee work remotely so the worker doesn't have to relocate.
- A current employee's spouse gets a job in another state, so the company provides for telework to retain the employee.
- A company needs sales staff in multiple states and hires remote workers who can quickly and easily visit customers in those areas.
- A natural disaster or major event (fire, hurricane, pandemic, etc.) temporarily closes the facility, and providing remote work allows the company to continue operations.
- An employee with a long commute works from home one or two days per week to reduce travel time and boost productivity.

Other reasons or needs may arise as well. The aftermath of this pandemic may lead companies to evaluate the costs of having employees onsite. Some may find it cost effective to have a larger percentage of workers working from home for the long term.

POSITIVES OF WORKING FROM HOME

Remote work arrangements have many positive effects. Some employees discover they prefer working from home to working in the office. Here are some reasons why:

- Working remotely eliminates distractions from the work environment, such as interruptions or background noise.
- Avoiding a daily commute reduces stress caused by traffic, and makes that saved time available to the employee for personal matters or for productive work.
- Working from home gives employees control over their schedules and flexibility in meeting obligations, and most believe they get more work done at home.
- In the event of a fire or other emergency, remote employees continue working without interruption.

Working from home gives employees control over their schedules and flexibility in meeting obligations.

While remote work has many positives, it also poses a unique set of challenges for employees, as well as managers and supervisors. The lines between work and home life can become blurry, and knowing how to encourage balance can be difficult. Whether your team is scattered across the country or mostly local, their success depends on good management. Let's take a closer look at how to meet these challenges.

TWO COMMON CHALLENGES OF REMOTE WORKING

Most challenges of managing a remote team include issues of communication. Learning to identify these challenges is the first step in overcoming them.

Each employee has their own set of needs. In order to succeed, you must identify which challenges and needs apply to which employees, and then figure out how to address them efficiently.

Here are two common challenges you are likely to face when managing remote employees:

1. **Lack of Face-to-Face Interaction**

One of the most common challenges of managing remote workers is the lack of face-to-face interaction that naturally occurs in office settings. Without the ability to get up and talk to individuals or groups of employees freely, you may begin to feel disconnected. Worse, employees may start to feel that you're out of touch or unsupportive of their needs.

2. **Employees Who Require Extra Attention**

Employees who demonstrate independence, trustworthiness, and good time-management skills often have an easier time adjusting to a work-from-home arrangement with less supervision. In fact, these types of employees might even flourish with less supervision and more freedom.

On the other hand, employees who struggle to stay on task or have a tendency to get distracted might need more attention. This does not mean employees with these attributes cannot be successful at working remotely; they may simply need more guidance and more regular manager interaction to succeed.

If your team has recently made the change from in-person work to working remotely, you might already have a good idea of which employees will thrive and which employees might struggle. If you're hiring new employees who will work remotely, it might be more difficult to identify how likely they are to succeed.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS FOR REMOTE WORKERS

There are things you can do to create a positive team dynamic and prevent common challenges among a remote team. One of the biggest benefits of remote work is flexibility, and embracing it could be your key to success.

Set expectations. Your expectations of remote workers may need to be different than those of employees working in the office for a remote work arrangement to succeed. Expecting remote workers to perform work exactly like they would in the office, or exactly the same way their in-office counterparts do, is a recipe for disaster.

If employees are required to work from home suddenly due to business disruptions or other unforeseen circumstances, they may be facing other challenges including:

- Childcare issues
- Other family members at home during the workday
- Inadequate or limited working space

FOUR THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN SETTING EXPECTATIONS FOR REMOTE EMPLOYEES:

1. **Focus on productivity, not activity**. If your employees are still meeting their deadlines and the company's needs, try not to focus on what else they might be doing during the day.
2. **Allow flexibility with hours.** Consider allowing employees to be a bit more flexible with their schedules, unless work needs to be performed within specific hours. Of course, all remote employees must report their hours correctly and honestly, and they must adhere to all company policies regarding scheduling. Whenever possible, however, allowing some extra flexibility in their hours will help employees feel valued and trusted, which will in turn build trust and loyalty.
3. **Ensure all deadlines are reasonable**. Have a good grasp of how long assignments should take to complete and understand what other projects your employees are responsible for completing. Overloading or underloading a remote worker can easily happen, particularly if trust doesn't run both ways.
4. **Try to be flexible with employee goals**. If your company sets regular objectives, understand that a change in employee circumstances may mean a change in goals. For a remote working situation to succeed, you must be willing to revisit employee objectives on a regular basis.

CONSISTENCY IS CRUCIAL

While expectations for remote workers may be different from those working in the office, some things must be handled consistently across all employees. When it comes to issues of discipline or accolades, think of your remote employees as any other employee.

First, to the extent that you can, ensure that remote employees are offered the same opportunities as their in-office counterparts when choosing who might be a good fit for special projects or teams.

The same goes for rewarding good work – be sure to celebrate the wins of remote employees. Try to do so in a visible way so their coworkers can see their contributions.

When it comes time for raises or reviews, be sure those who don't interact with your remote workers on a daily basis are aware of their contributions, too.

Unfortunately, there may be times when remote workers simply aren't living up to their end of the deal, no matter how understanding you try to be. Whether that comes in the form of low productivity, poor-quality work, or other problematic behavior, you must intervene. It can be tempting to take an "out of sight, out of mind" approach with underperforming or difficult remote employees, but there are simple steps you can take to manage the issue.

Conflict is another workplace issue that you may still need to deal with in a remote workforce. Remember, people still may

not always see eye-to-eye, even if they are not working across the hall from each other. If members of your team are experiencing conflict, you will need to address it head on before it escalates.

BEST PRACTICES FOR COMMUNICATING WITH REMOTE EMPLOYEES

Your company may determine which tools are available for connecting with remote workers, but it's up to you to make the most efficient use of them.

After assessing the technologies available to you, share some "rules of engagement" with employees so everyone is on the same page.

Below are some general guidelines to consider:

Instant messaging will be used for urgent needs or questions, as well as casual check-ins throughout the day. Employees should make every attempt to be available via instant message during all regular work hours, unless otherwise engaged in company business.

Video chat will be used for scheduled meetings only. When possible, employees should be visible on camera in order to establish and maintain good working relationships.

Email will be used to conduct regular business communications, and employees are expected to reply in a timely manner.

Phone calls will be used when necessary for communication but will be limited.

Good communication is the foundation of a successful remote work arrangement. Communication builds trust, which builds stronger relationships.

It's unrealistic to expect your relationships with remote workers to be the same as those with in-office employees, but there are many steps you can take to ensure your remote workers feel connected to you and their coworkers.

Ensure all deadlines are reasonable. Decide how often you need to have one-on-one conversations with your remote employees, and put them on the calendar. The frequency of these meetings might vary from employee to employee, as some may need more contact than others. Use this time to ask the employees how they feel the remote arrangement is working, and try to understand if they need anything from you.

Provide opportunities for social interaction. At the beginning or end of meetings with remote workers, plan for a few minutes of general conversation. It doesn't need to be formal, either. Simply asking employees to discuss their days can encourage engagement in a way that builds morale. For employees who are used to working in the same office as their coworkers, this can help create a sense of normalcy.

Understand which meetings really matter. There may be a need to reassess which meetings are really needed, especially for teams transitioning to remote work. Gatherings that previously took just a few minutes in person may end up being a bigger hassle than they're worth when employees are remote. Over time, you may find some meetings you thought were essential are better off as emails. Conversely, you may find

Try to seek feedback as often as possible. Make your intentions clear, and let your team know you're open to any suggestions they might have to encourage relationship building and good communication.

some meetings become even more important for keeping everyone on task. Be flexible and understand things will change when employees are working remotely.

Don't underestimate teambuilding activities. In person, some teambuilding can feel corny or forced; however, you might find that employees who were resistant to such activities in the office are more open to it when they're scattered. Simple activities, such as asking employees to share a win from the day or a photo of their home office setup, can help build relationships among employees who might otherwise feel isolated. Pre-planned activities such as a team lunch or coffee break via video chat can encourage a healthy rapport among team members.

Be sure to share information. If only part of your team is working remotely, it can be easy to forget they aren't there to hear the latest news or information. Leaving them out of the loop will not only contribute to feelings of isolation and resentment, it could also mean they don't have information crucial to doing their jobs. Any time a decision or announcement is made in the absence of remote workers, make it a priority to communicate the news to them as soon as you are able, preferably before other team members do.

KEEP REMOTE WORKERS HEALTHY AND ENGAGED

Two challenges cited frequently by work-from-home employees are the ever-present distractions of home and family, and the lure of the refrigerator and snack cabinet.

It's important to encourage remote employees to make choices that help them stay healthy and engaged.

Work-life balance

When the home is also the workplace, it's easy for the line between them to blur. Encourage employees to try to separate the two as much as possible in order to remain engaged while working and to be present for their families after work ends each day.

To create a healthy work-life balance, employees should:

- Do work-related tasks during working hours, and leave household chores for later. For example, don't stop working to unload the dishwasher.
- Try to have regular starting and stopping times for work each day, including a regular lunch break.
- When work is done for the day, shut down the computer, and stop checking emails, taking calls, and responding to work-related text messages.

Healthy habits

It can be easy to stray from a previously healthy routine if you're new to working remotely. This is true for both you and your employees. During stressful times especially, it's tempting to indulge in unhealthy foods and beverages more than typical. Remind employees to:

- Eat a healthy diet. Schedule regular meals and snacks rather than "grazing" all day.

- Take breaks. Stand up, stretch, and walk around a little at least once an hour.
- Keep to a regular schedule as much as possible, which includes getting the recommended 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night.
- Avoid using alcohol and/or drugs as coping mechanisms, especially if remote work is the result of an unexpected or stressful turn of events.

Encourage remote employees to seek out help if they experience mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, or depression. If your organization has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), remind remote workers they are still able to utilize it. If your organization does not have an EAP, your HR department may be able to recommend help in the community.

REMOTE WORKER RIGHTS

Employees working remotely are entitled to the same rights as employees working in the office. If your company is covered by laws like the Family and Medical Leave Act (or FMLA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (or ADA), or the Fair Labor Standards Act (or FLSA), remote employees are entitled to those protections.

Your responsibilities to remote workers are the same as your responsibilities to those in the office, so keep an eye out for the same red flags.

- If remote employees mention they may need leave for medical reasons, alert HR to begin the FMLA process.
- If a newly remote employee is struggling to adjust to working from home because of a visible or perceived disability, you should contact HR. They will determine whether to engage the employee in the interactive process for accommodations under the ADA.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects people from discrimination in the workplace based on characteristics like:

- Sex
- Race
- Religion
- National origin
- Age (over 40)

It generally applies to employers with 15 or more employees, and that includes remote employees.

It's easy to overlook problems that might arise when workers are remote, especially if the employees themselves don't raise the issue.

For example, imagine an older remote worker who occasionally struggles to make his video chat technology work. If his coworkers regularly make jokes about him being too old, and you don't step in to stop them, you could be at risk for a discrimination claim. The risk still exists even if the targeted worker doesn't complain about the jokes.

Be on the lookout for any potentially offensive behavior and put a stop to it immediately—just as you would in the office.

REMOTE WORKER SAFETY

You might assume remote employees are responsible for their own safety, and that is partially true. However, injuries that occur at home can still be considered work-related, depending on the circumstances.

For example, if an employee drops a box of work documents and injures his or her foot, the injury would be considered work-related. However, if an employee trips on the family dog while rushing to answer a work phone call and becomes injured, the case is not considered work-related.

Encourage your employees to maintain safe surroundings, including ergonomically correct workspaces, whenever possible. If you haven't already, provide them with resources and instructions on how to work from home safely in a way that minimizes any chance of injury.

ASK HR FOR HELP

Whether you're new to managing remote workers or just unsure how to handle a certain situation, it's always okay to ask for help.

Reach out to your company's HR department whenever it feels necessary. They can help you make tough decisions and provide feedback if you're ever uncertain of your next move.

CONCLUSION

Managing remote workers comes down to strong planning and communications. With the right tools and a positive approach, you'll be prepared to face even the most daunting challenge.

To be successful, you will need to identify how best to communicate with each individual worker, identify the appropriate technology to do so, and keep the lines of communication open. In addition, you must protect the rights and safety of remote employees just as you would for those working in the office.

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How to Manage a Remote Team covers the key pain points managers may face with guidance for keeping remote workers healthy, safe, and engaged

How to Address HR Challenges in a Dispersed Workforce helps HR professionals adapt to providing HR support from a remote office

How to Work From Home Effectively guides employees through the setup needed to work from home remotely, staying engaged and healthy, and the employment laws that apply to them

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Judy Kneiszel is an Associate Editor on the Human Resources Publishing Team at J. J. Keller & Associates, Inc. She conducts research and creates content on a variety of HR-related topics and contributes to a number of Human Resource products including Employee Relations Management Today newsletter and the Essentials of Employee Relations manual. Judy specializes in issues such as recruiting and hiring, onboarding and training, team building, employee retention, and labor relations. She is a member of the national chapter of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).

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