

Tip Sheet: Managing Remote Workers

Working remotely can provide employees with greater flexibility and employers with increased productivity, knowledge of technology and diversity while also allowing businesses to save on physical office expenditures. Remote working has been increasing over the years and is being adopted by many organizations. However, this non-traditional style of working does come with a unique set of challenges. Below are a set of tips to help you best manage your remote workers.

1. Choose employees and job functions which are well-suited to working remotely

Employees who do well working remotely are self-motivated and task oriented (Haden). Those who need a great deal of guidance in day-to-day projects or who have a great deal of interaction with clients or customers are not well-suited for remote work.

2. Communication is key

As a manager, be accessible to all of your team members, especially remote employees. Video conferences are a wonderful way to keep remote employees from feeling isolated. There are a multitude of programs for facilitating video conferences. Additionally, most have been heavily reviewed for proficiency. Making an effort to have face-to-face conversations in place of emails ensures a more communicative remote team. Virtual meetings can be as productive as face time if used effectively.

3. Build trust

Trust is a key component in successful remote working. It is important to provide communication venues where remote employees can talk about more than work so they personally get to know their teams and develop both task-based and interpersonal trust in one another. This connectivity bolsters trust and leads to better collaboration.

4. Focus on results

When evaluating productivity and performance, managers need to create a system that is focused on objective results to help ensure a realistic and effective assessment tool. Managers should be able to assess remote workers in the same manner that they would assess a traditional employee in the office.

5. Provide clear expectations

Don't leave remote workers trying to read your mind. Distance amplifies uncertainty, and it is the role of the remote manager to provide a sense of structure through clear roles and responsibilities, precise objectives, and performance measures. Create ways by which remote workers can monitor their own performance and not always have to wait for your feedback.

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6. Create a culture of inclusion

Because remote employees can't access the "hallway" communications of an office space, frequent and immediate communication channels help them to feel included in organizational announcements and changes, ensures that the remote worker does not feel isolated, and helps remote workers to access developmental and promotional opportunities.

7. Provide regular feedback and inspiration

Remote workers should be recognized and rewarded for their successes, individually and publicly. Let remote workers know how their work is important to the bigger picture - how it contributes to the success of the unit, the division, the organization, to the wider community. Make an effort to normalize and celebrate virtual teams.

8. Encourage work-life integration strategies

Remote workers can have a lot of difficulty balancing their personal and professional lives because for many of them, the office is in the home (Mulki, et al.). Encouraging remote workers to try to keep to a routine and establish a space that is work-specific can help with this. Additionally, team leaders should be aware of workload and sure that the distribution of tasks prevents overworking.

9. Train your remote workers

Remote employees should be offered the same training and professional development opportunities as in-office employees and additional training to help them be successful in a remote work environment. Trainings can vary widely and be project-specific or related to the remote working experience, such as a work shop on work-life balance.

10. If feasible, have remote employees meet with their team regularly

While many global, virtual, and remote teams are too spread out to meet in person, having remote workers meet, even a portion, allows for the bonding and trust development necessary for successful teamwork. Partnering remote workers with in-office workers is helpful (Mulki et al. 2009). Additionally, remote employees in the same geography, may enjoy getting together socially to share remote work and organizational experiences.

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11. Choose effective team leaders

One of the most important aspects of a successful virtual team is the leader. The leader sets a precedent on how the remote team will work. There are numerous resources on what makes an effective remote team leader. The skills necessary for a remote employee become even more important for a leader.

12. Expect and prepare to technological difficulties

Technological issues are common for remote teams. Making sure that there is a way to deal with issues and a support staff available to contact helps prevent this. Additionally, make sure that there are multiple ways to get in contact with one another so that technological issues don't prevent communication.

13. Prevent feelings of isolation

Due to the nature of their jobs, remote employees face the unique challenge of isolation. Research on social bonding in the workplace has found that it increases productivity (Korkki 2012). Since remote workers don't have access to break rooms where such socializing occurs, it is important to create other venues for connectivity. Taking these steps towards connectivity will prevent feelings of isolation.

14. Provide opportunities to career advancement

A recent survey found that the majority of executives interviewed believed that remote working stagnated employees' careers (Salemi 2013). The careers of remote workers should have the same structured approach to job advancement that in-office employees enjoy. To prevent attrition, provide remote employees with career development opportunities that reflect their achievements (Bloom et al. 2013).