

Tips on Managing Your (Newly) Remote Workers

In response to the uncertainties presented by Covid-19, many companies and universities have asked their employees to work remotely. This leaves many employees and their managers working out of the office and separated from each other for the first time.

Although it is always preferable to establish clear remote-work policies and training in advance, in times of crisis or other rapidly changing circumstances, this level of preparation may not be feasible. Fortunately, there are specific, research-based steps that managers can take without great effort to improve the engagement and productivity of remote employees, even when there is little time to prepare.

Common Challenges of Remote Work

To start, managers need to understand factors that can make remote work especially demanding. Otherwise high-performing employees may experience declines in job performance and engagement when they begin working remotely, especially in the absence of preparation and training. Challenges inherent in remote work include:

Lack of face-to-face supervision: Both managers and their employees often express concerns about the lack of face-to-face interaction. Supervisors worry that employees will not work as hard or as efficiently (though many studies indicate otherwise, at least for some types of jobs). Many employees, on the other hand, struggle with reduced access to managerial support and communication. In some cases, employees feel that remote managers are out of touch with their needs, and thereby are neither supportive nor helpful in getting their work done.

Lack of access to information: Newly remote workers are often surprised by the added time and effort needed to locate information from co-workers. Even getting answers to what seem like simple questions can feel like a large obstacle to a worker based at home.

In the office environment, if you know that your officemate is having a rough day, you will view a brusque email from them as a natural product of their stress. However, if you receive this email from a remote co-worker, with no understanding of their current circumstances, you are more likely to take offense, or at a minimum to think poorly of your co-worker's professionalism.

Social isolation: Loneliness is one of the most common complaints about remote work, with employees missing the informal social interaction of an office setting. It is thought that extraverts may suffer from isolation more in the short run, particularly if they do not have opportunities to connect with others in their remote-work environment. However, over a longer period of time, isolation can cause any employee to feel less "belonging" to their organisation, and can even result in increased intention to leave the company.

Distractions at home: Home workers should have a dedicated workspace and, where required, adequate child care. However, in the case of a sudden transition to working from home, there is much greater chance that there won't be sufficient time to set this up and managers should expect these distractions to be greater during this unplanned work-from-home transition.

How Managers Can Support Remote Employees

As much as remote work can be fraught with challenges, there are also relatively quick and inexpensive things that managers can do to ease the transition. Actions that you can take today include:

Establish structured daily check-ins: Many successful remote managers establish a daily call with their remote employees. This could take the form of a series of one-on-one calls, if your employees work more independently from each other, or a team call, if their work is highly collaborative. The important thing is that the calls are regular, and that they are a forum in which employees know that they can consult with you, and that their concerns and questions will be heard.

Provide several different communication technology options: Email alone is insufficient. Remote workers benefit from using a variety of platforms, such as video conferencing, that gives participants many of the visual cues that they would have if they were face-to-face.

Establish “rules of engagement”: Remote work becomes more efficient and satisfying when managers set expectations for the frequency, means, and ideal timing of communication for their teams. Also, if you can, let your employees know the best way and time to reach you during the workday. Finally, keep an eye on communication among team members, to ensure that they are sharing information as needed.

Provide opportunities for remote social interaction: One of the most essential steps a manager can take is to structure ways for employees to interact socially (that is, have informal conversations about non-work topics) while working remotely. This is true for all remote workers, but particularly so for workers who have been abruptly transitioned out of the office.

The easiest way to establish some basic social interaction is to leave some time at the beginning of team calls just for non-work items (e.g., “We’re going to spend the first few minutes just catching up with each other. How was your weekend?”).

Offer encouragement and emotional support: Especially in the context of an abrupt shift to remote work, it is important for managers to acknowledge stress, listen to employees’ anxieties and concerns, and empathize with their struggles. If a newly remote employee is clearly struggling but not communicating stress or anxiety, ask them how they’re doing. Even a general question such as “How is this home working situation working out for you so far?” can elicit important information that you might not otherwise hear. Once you ask the question, be sure to listen carefully to the response, and briefly restate it back to the employee, to ensure that you understood correctly. Let the employee’s stress or concerns (rather than your own) be the focus of this conversation.

Research on emotional intelligence and emotional contagion tells us that employees look to their managers for cues about how to react to sudden changes or crisis situations. If a manager communicates stress and helplessness, this will have a “trickle-down” effect on employees. Effective leaders take a two-pronged approach, both acknowledging the stress and anxiety that employees may be feeling in difficult circumstances, but also providing affirmation of their confidence in their teams. With this support, employees are more likely to take up the challenge with a sense of purpose and focus.