

The Challenges of Working Remotely For Employers



For many companies, working from home was a luxury before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now, with social distancing guidelines in place all over the world, working remotely remains the only option to keep things running smoothly.

Remote working provides flexible work arrangements for team members but also presents a set of challenges for employers.

Communication

Communication is an issue in many workplaces - it's not unique to remote employees. Schedule flexibility and differences in time zones create problems with workflow.

According to the State of Remote Work 2020, 20% of respondents say their biggest struggle with working remotely is collaboration and communication. That said, 32% of respondents say the ability to have a flexible schedule is the biggest benefit.

Employers have to work to provide leadership and structure to set the tone for communication between staff members.

There are a number of tools and processes out there to facilitate improved communication, but they are only as good as the people who use them.

That means taking time to evaluate people throughout the hiring process, looking closely at how they communicate.

Experiment with communication tools such as Slack and Skype to find the ones that work best for your company. Ask your remote workers to provide feedback and do the best you can to work within their preferences.

Overworked Employees and Managing Time Off

Eliminating the daily commute to and from the office removes the barrier between home and work. When the home is the workplace, it becomes hard for employees to “turn it off” after it’s time to clock out for the day.

Remote workers are often attached to their devices at the hip because of conference calls, emails, chats, and other notifications.

Those don’t necessarily stop at the end of the workday, especially if other team members work different hours across different time zones. To solve this issue, create your own version of the commute, even if you’re not visiting the local coffee shop for a change of scenery.

Spend time in the morning before work taking a shower, eating breakfast, and reading the news. Once you’re done for the day, shut down the computer, walk away from your desk, and take a few minutes to wind down before moving on to tasks like making dinner.

When it comes to time off, many remote workers don’t take vacation or sick days because they can make up missed work on their own time.

That’s why you should create a policy regarding sick leave and paid time off just like you would with a traditional work environment.

Your remote team should not be expected to make up any time off they've earned simply because they can do their work at any time. You should also factor in breaks just like you would in the traditional office.

Just because people aren't working together in a face-to-face environment doesn't mean their schedule shouldn't be structured as if they were. It's important to build a culture that values rest and time off to keep your staff happy and healthy.

Prioritizing and Project Management

Working from home provides schedule flexibility, but with that flexibility comes the possibility of workers struggling to prioritize work correctly.

For most telecommuters, there's always the temptation to watch an episode of a TV show, take a nap, or clean the house when procrastinating on work for one reason or another.

To ensure your employees get the most important work done, encourage the use of distraction-limiting tools such as browser plugins that will block social media websites during work hours.

Encourage them to manage their energy, rather than time. Let them work when they know they are the most productive, instead of trying to force it.

Help with prioritizing tasks by using a cloud-based project management tool, so your team can log in from anywhere there is an internet connection - from their computer, smartphone, or tablet.

Options include Basecamp, Trello, Podio, Asana, or Freedcamp. Invest in demos of these products until you find the one that makes the most sense for you and your team.

Technology

In the office, chances are you give your employees the computer and software subscriptions, along with any other tools required to do the job well.

That's often not the case for remote workers, who are often required to use their own devices.

This can create inconsistencies, cause issues when transferring information, and may even slow down production. Because of this, it's best to treat remote workers the same way you would if they were in the office and provide everything they need to get their job done.

Purchase laptops, laptop cases, and wireless mice. Before sending the items to your employees, load all the business software they will need, using cloud-based options when and where possible.

Cloud-based options are better because they update in real-time and there's no need to worry about upgrades.

If you have team members who want to use their own equipment, you will have some cost savings, but it's important to make sure everything they're using meets certain standards to prevent issues in the future.

Security

It can be difficult to keep information secure throughout your organization.

Regardless of where your remote workers are actually doing the work - traveling the globe or working from their basement - your team is responsible for keeping not only their personal information but corporate information, safe all the time.

You'll need to ensure that your organization's sensitive and confidential information remains safe regardless of where your team works or the device used.

This is where education and training can be helpful. Create security policies to set requirements for creating passwords, clicking links in emails, uploading and downloading files, and anti-malware software.

Help your team understand the risks and how to do their part to reduce them every day. Offer licenses or reimbursement for security software. Let your team know you don't want to spy on what they're doing but you want to keep their devices and company information safe.

Advancement

Remote staff is just as interested in moving up through the ranks as an in-office team member. But, when managing a remote team, it can be difficult to know which team members should be considered for a promotion.

To keep the best members of your team happy and engaged, you'll need to develop clear performance criteria and promotion guidelines so employees can get a sense of where they are and where they are heading.

You should hold any remote staff to the same standards as face-to-face staff. Use your current employee evaluation process to your remote team, making only small adjustments where necessary.

Focus attention on the quality and quantity of staff progress, rather than the amount of time they work every week or the length of time they've worked for you.

Communicate with all of your team members and reach out to coworkers and managers for feedback. When you're in regular contact with your team, it won't be hard to know who is going above and beyond.

Visibility

Many organizations like to see their staff getting things done so they can validate tasks. It's important to remember, however, that just because someone is physically present in the office does not mean they are productive.

Even though you aren't able to see your remote team, you can look at things like project status updates, timestamps, and communication threads to keep an eye on how things are moving along. In this way, tracking progress with an in-person team is no different than tracking a virtual team.

Using cloud applications means you'll have time tracking tools, along with audit trails that will let you see dates, changes made, authors, and other information to help you see who is doing what, and when.

If it's not reasonable to have a daily check-in call, aim for short weekly check-in meetings where everyone provides their status then asks and answers questions

as needed.

If you require weekly reports from all of your employees, ensure there is an efficient reporting system that doesn't require a significant time investment – from either you or your team.

Consistency

Consistency is important for any business, and it has nothing to do with where your staff is located. It's about how you onboard new team members, build your company culture and connect each employee's role to the business goals.

Your team is a walking advertisement for your business, so it's crucial they understand your mission, objectives, and brand. Consistency is easily the most difficult challenges of remote teams.

Build a solid employee onboarding and training program to ensure everyone is on the same page and knows how to communicate with everyone both inside and outside the company.

Include everyone in business objective discussions so that everyone understands where their job fits into the company and helps drive the strategy.

Add logos, style guides, letterheads, and any other templates the team may need to use to cloud-storage that all team members can easily access.

Retention

Though the freedom and flexibility of working from home seem like it would be enough to keep employees on board, for many, it can still be a challenge. Remote employees are susceptible to feeling isolated.

With that, sometimes comes a lack of connection with their fellow coworkers. Some may feel more pressure because they telecommute.

When it gets to be too much, some employees may feel the need to leave your company in favor of another that helps them feel more satisfied.

To avoid a high turnover rate, take action to ensure your team can maintain a

healthy work-life balance.

Keep them connected to one another and bonded through virtual conferences, virtual water coolers, awards, accolades, and congratulations, and more.

The more you make your remote workers feel appreciated, respected, and ultimately included, the more likely they will want to remain with your organization.

If you're just starting to work with a remote team, or you've had to adjust the way you do things because of the pandemic, it's not all bad. In fact, there are many benefits of remote working for employers, too.

Following remote working best practices can help ensure you see the benefits. Ultimately, you have to do what you think is best - which means arming yourself and your team with the tools they need to be successful.

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