

COVID-19: Managing a Remote Team: Best Practices and Tips



In the days before the Internet and the growing importance of digital transformation to competitive success in the global marketplace, working from home, or even outside the office, was a rarity for many professionals.

After all, the resources, equipment, and staff needed to accomplish the day's tasks were at the office, not at home or in a hotel, and productivity was tied to doing business face-to-face.

Over time, however, as technology made it easier to communicate, create, and collaborate regardless of distance, location, or time zone, remote employees (and entire remote teams) became both more practical and more common.

Local workers could enjoy more flexible and productive schedules; remote workers could be called upon from across the globe, creating exciting possibilities for greater creativity, collaboration, and productivity.

Beyond convenience, though, the potential fallout from natural disasters, political conflicts, and epidemics such as the current COVID-19 pandemic have also made remote work more sensible, and safe, than ever before.

With team members working from home in disparate locations, many of them sheltering in place or practicing self-isolation, effective team management is critical.

In both good times and bad, you need a solid plan for managing remote employees in order to get maximum performance from your far-flung teams in this brave new world, as well as the collaboration tools necessary to bring your distributed team together as one.

Managing a Remote Team: A Growing

Trend

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, few trends can boast of the same enviable growth as remote work. A 2020 analysis by Flexjobs found that remote work grew by nearly 160% in the years between 2005 and 2017.

A variety of factors have driven this explosive growth. Many workers, for example, report both higher productivity (78%) and job satisfaction (73%) when working remotely.

For employers, offering their teams the option to work remotely—or, in many cases, building virtual teams from scratch using remote workers who rarely or never visit the main office—creates opportunities to connect the best and brightest workers for maximum performance without undue concern for location or different time zones.

Expanding your talent pool from your city or state to the global market can give your company a serious boost to creative power, intellectual and innovative development, and competitive strength.

The changing face of the global workforce—now brimming with Millennials and Gen Zers long accustomed to living large parts of their lives, including their workdays, online rather than face-to-face—is another factor in the growing prevalence of remote work.

This younger workforce is much more focused on flexible talent development, versatile schedules that support work-life balance, and strategic use of freelancing than their predecessors.

Add in a growing sense of corporate and governmental environmental responsibility and the need to establish and protect both workers and commerce in the wake of disasters and pandemics, and it's no surprise to find that nearly three-quarters of *all* teams are expected to have remote workers by 2028.

As the coronavirus pandemic has so clearly shown, remote working is poised to become the “new normal” for millions of workers around the world.

The challenge, then, for both new and existing companies and other organizations is to find effective ways to manage remote teams, both to ensure organizational

goals are met and to hire, retain, and develop positive relationships with a diverse and distributed talent base.

Once you understand the challenges faced by remote team members (and the management challenges you'll face in bringing them together), you can begin to develop a formal plan for minimizing confusion and miscommunication while maximizing collaboration, clarity, and performance.

Benefits and Challenges of Managing Remote Teams

The opportunities for collaborative innovation and growth that come with remote teams are definitely enticing.

But navigating the landscape of remote work to ensure everyone is communicating and connecting effectively can be a serious challenge for both remote team members—who have their own challenges to face inside and outside the team—and the managers tasked with helping them achieve shared success.

When you're developing a plan for remote team management, it's important to keep in mind both the potential benefits and challenges you'll likely face together when you're apart.

Benefits of Managing Remote Teams

Virtual teams bring a lot to the table for any business, and managing remote employees can make life easier for team leaders in many ways, including:

Lower Costs

Barring the need for special equipment, freelancers and remote employees come with their own office space, furniture, and computers/peripherals.

You're not on the hook for their utilities, snacks, or supplies, either.

Environmental Friendliness

Remote workers can take a serious chunk out of your company's environmental

footprint. Aside from using far less paper, plastic, and other resources than typical office workers, remote workers also use far less gasoline and consume less energy, slashing average daily gasoline consumption by 30 million gallons and annual carbon emissions by 74 million tons in the U.S. alone.

Greater Loyalty

The high rate of job satisfaction and productivity many workers report feeds their loyalty as well; the 2020 analysis from FlexJobs found that nearly 80% of workers would offer greater loyalty in the long run to an employer offering flexible and remote work schedules.

Diversified Talent

The global talent pool makes it easier for managers to find the most skilled team members and bring them together to collaborate across countries and cultures.

Tenacious Teams

Remote workers know a good thing when they see it. A 2020 report from FYI found that 42% of remote workers surveyed had been at it for five years or more, and nearly 30% had been at it for between two and five years.

That kind of stability matters when the team is held together by shared endeavor rather than the same office building.

Greater Flexibility

Teams that don't have to meet face-to-face or in the same time zones have the opportunity to connect and collaborate outside the standard 8 AM to 5 PM paradigm.

Flexible schedules makes it easier for managers to separate duties across the entire 24-hour day to achieve greater productivity than would be possible if everyone was toiling away in the same time zone.

In addition, remote teams can more readily, and safely, work together when facing serious and disruptive events such as the Coronavirus pandemic.

Happier, Healthier Team Members

Higher loyalty, performance, and satisfaction, along with the flexibility and greater work-life balance that come with remote work, makes for happy staff.

In fact, a 2018 report from Indeed.com found that remote workers reported much less stress, fewer sick days, and overall better morale than those who commuted to the office.

Economic Protections During Times of Crisis

Having access to remote working tools helps ensure your team can keep working even when disasters like COVID-19 disrupt the economy.

Your business can continue to operate, your staff can continue to pay their bills, and their overall mental, emotional, physical, and financial health is better protected when it matters most.

Challenges of Managing Remote Teams

While not needing to have everyone in the same room (or even the same country) to work together has its advantages, virtual team members and their managers both face a few significant potential roadblocks on the path to productivity.

Communication Problems

Managing remote employees, setting up team meetings, and onboarding new team members are processes often more complicated and potentially more difficult to accomplish when you're juggling different time zones, languages, cultures, and equipment setups.

Technological Dependence

From arranging video calls to handling payroll to accessing shared files for a crucial project, remote team management is only ever as effective as the technology you use.

One person losing their Internet for an afternoon is an inconvenience; a dead server that leaves your team unable to access their project management files with a deadline looming is a disaster.

In the same vein, relying on several different systems that may or may not work well together can set your team up for disaster if critical files, communications, or updates don't make the leap between devices, operating systems, or applications.

Insufficient Structure

Knowing where you fit into the team, and the organization in general, is an important part of any position. Remote team members may feel disconnected from the corporate culture and hierarchy, and their productivity may suffer without clearly defined expectations and roles.

Devilish Distractions

Dedication and loyalty aside, a comfy couch, a charming coffee shop, or even the quiet isolation of a distant hotel room all offer a host of potential distractions that simply aren't there to tempt folks in the office.

Interpersonal and Personnel Issues

Finding ways to address general human resources issues (cultural differences, different holiday calendars for different locations and faiths, etc.) *and* performance-related or disciplinary matters can be tough if the person you're managing is on the other side of the planet.

Best Practices for Managing a Remote Team

Once you understand the challenges faced by remote team members (and the management challenges you'll face in bringing them together), you can begin to develop a formal plan for minimizing confusion and miscommunication while maximizing collaboration, clarity, and performance.

Following a few best practices while hammering out your remote team management plan will speed the process and help ensure your team meshes well.

1. Target Remote-Ready Workers Who Fit Your

Organization

As with local employees, freelancers and remote workers who join your team need to have the right mix of personality, skill, and commitment to become an asset to your organization, as well as compatibility with your corporate culture.

In addition, they need to be proactive, self-motivated, and willing to work independently while still having the capacity to collaborate and communicate with other team members.

Regardless of industry, *every* remote team benefits from strong self-starters with top-notch communication skills.

Be prepared to search for the best talent not just on traditional sites like LinkedIn and Indeed or freelance sites like Fiverr or Upwork, but on social media, too.

Dedicated groups and pages may have thousands or even millions of potential hires you may not otherwise encounter.

If you're managing an existing traditional team that's "gone remote" because of an economic disruption like COVID-19, consider "deputising" any workers on your team who already have substantial remote working experience to help bring the others up to speed.

This will make it easier to transform the "newbies" into remote workers who can apply their skills as effectively from home as they did in the office.

2. Team Building is a Virtue

Whether they're involved in project management, developing new products for your company, or creating your latest marketing plan, staff working on remote teams need to trust and support one another.

But because they're often far apart and may rarely, if ever, interact face-to-face, achieving the kind of team bonding that comes easily to in-person teams takes extra effort for remote team members.

Video calls and weekly meetings, as well as informal chat channels and messaging can help take the place of the water cooler, conference room, and cubicles that normally facilitate interpersonal connections.

From a managerial standpoint, you can also encourage strong team connections and build trust with clear expectations, constant communication, and a commitment to keeping everyone focused on how their individual contributions are important to your shared productivity and goals.

Be aware of how time zones, cultures, or language issues may make it difficult for different team members to connect with one another, and develop plans to bridge those gaps.

Be ready to make accommodations for those adapting to a new paradigm in the wake of COVID-19, and be sure to check in with all members of your team to see if there's any resources or additional tools (e.g., computer hardware or software, translation tools, time management software, etc.) they need to fully participate.

Collaborate with your team members to get their thoughts on the issues they may be experiencing, and use their feedback to create mutually satisfactory solutions.

Prioritize communication from the onboarding process forward; both existing and new employees should be comfortable speaking their minds and communicating with others at any time.

3. Invest in the Best Available Collaboration Tools

Spanning countries, continents, and hemispheres, virtual team members need tools that will help them all stay on the same page regardless of their physical distance from one another.

Investing in shared communication and collaboration tools reduces the risk of crucial tasks slipping through the cracks or essential files vanishing into the ether.

Communication tools such as Google Hangouts, Slack, Skype, and Discord all allow for easy video conferences and chatting throughout the day.

For project management, apps such as Asana, Trello, and Jira can provide your team with a cloud-based, location-agnostic solution for easy task tracking and access to the overall calendar for existing and upcoming projects.

If your team is performing more advanced tasks, such as business process management, procurement, or deep data analysis for strategic decision-making and planning, a cloud-based procurement solution such as PLANERGY can work wonders.

Advanced artificial intelligence, powerful analytical tools, and mobile-friendly, collaboration-focused data access and management give teams the tools they need to gather insights, optimize performance across your organization, or enhance your supply chain management with ease.

4. Track and Supervise with Care

Obviously, no manager wants their team members squandering their best hours on non-work related tasks.

But on the other hand, few remote workers—many of whom are drawn to the greater freedom and performance-focused nature of virtual teams—find the idea of Big Brother looming over their shoulders to be appealing or necessary.

For some workers, knowing they'll be monitored is not just a productivity drag, but a trust-killer and deal-breaker; some of your best talent may slip away if they feel the leash chafing (so to speak).

Making the choice to use tracking software to monitor employee behavior and work is not to be taken lightly.

There's no "right" answer, but the best option may be to get to know your team and their work styles, and then introduce tracking, time sheets, or other methods of monitoring performance and productivity as needed, rather than as a prerequisite on day one.

This is especially important in a pandemic or other disaster, when schedules will be unpredictable, illness can strike without warning, and local resource limitations can disrupt your team's ability to complete their duties for reasons beyond their control.

Work More Effectively Together, No Matter How Far Apart

A distributed team is a powerful tool for any business looking to compete successfully in today's technology-driven market.

It's crucial, however, to manage your virtual teams with real-world wisdom and a practical approach to work-life balance, diversity of language and culture, and the sometimes labyrinthine particulars of doing business across wildly different schedules.

During economic disruptions, applying these skills can ensure the continuity of your business and help you keep your staff healthy and happy for whatever new challenges await when the situation improves.

By taking the time to understand the challenges that come with remote team management and utilizing strategies, tech tools, and best practices to address them, you can more easily and effectively reap the benefits to create and manage a winning team that transcends borders, disasters, and disconnects.

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