

Work from Home Employee Engagement Ideas



As businesses around the world look to learn from the harsh lessons taught by the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, many find themselves forced to adapt to new paradigms and processes.

One of the most profound changes they're facing is the radical shift from a traditional, on-premises work model to one where most or even all of their staff are working from home (WFH).

The severity of their struggle is largely affected by company culture and the approach taken to managing remote workers prior to the pandemic.

However, even those firms with some prior experience with team members working part or all of the time from home are discovering the need for effective employee engagement in ensuring their virtual teams are focused, fulfilled, and ready to deliver real results.

Employee Engagement Matters Now More

Than Ever

Regardless of your company's market, products, or ambitions, you're much more likely to thrive if your employees are happy, fulfilled, and actively committed to helping you achieve the goals you've set for your organization.

Research shows employee engagement can have a significant impact on not just profitability and performance, but harder to define assets such as a positive company culture, a more innovative, creative, and collaborative approach to overcoming challenges, and better physical and mental health of everyone in your organization.

Prior to the pandemic, in 2018, a study conducted by Gallup found the number of actively engaged employees in the United States was at its highest level ever at around 34%.

More importantly, the number of actively disengaged employees was also at an historic low of 13%.

After COVID sent shockwaves through the global economy, however, organizations of all sizes and types went into triage mode.

Shifting to a remote working model meant exchanging face-to-face interactions for virtual meetings, video conferences, webinars, and group chats. It also meant finding quick and sustainable ways to give existing and new employees the same capabilities they would have in the office.

Team members needed equipment, training, and education. Management needed new approaches to successfully manage their remote teams.

To keep the wheels of industry turning and their organizations afloat, managers needed to revisit everything from scheduling to protocols and practices to interpersonal engagement and mentoring.

Beyond the operational adjustments needed to protect business continuity, companies needed to address the challenges that affected the lives of their team members. Just as organizations were struggling to find their footing, so, too were employees fighting to navigate life in lockdown.

Achieving work-life balance was only one of the priorities being juggled by employees who now found themselves working from home full-time.

In order to secure and maintain employee engagement, companies needed solutions that accommodated employee needs and desires while providing them the tools and leadership needed to instruct and inspire.

Achieving high rates of active employee engagement can be challenging even when everyone's working in the same location.

So it's easy to see how finding ways to connect and collaborate effectively is even more crucial for remote teams, whether they're scattered around town or spread across continents and time zones.

Fortunately, companies who meet the challenge head-on by following basic best practices for managing remote employees will have a much greater chance of success than those who don't.

By actively pursuing employee engagement ideas and considering the importance of the employee experience, companies can protect their profits, performance, and competitive advantage—along with the health, happiness, and dedication of their team members.

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Essential Work from Home Employee Engagement Ideas

In a 2021 survey conducted by Buffer, 97.6% of respondents indicated they'd like to work from home (or at least remotely) for at least some of the time for the rest of their careers.

97% said they would recommend joining the remote workforce to others, citing flexible schedules (32%), the ability to work from anywhere (25%), and not having

to commute (22%) as just some of the reasons to do so.

It's clear that, for many professionals, the workday will be at least partially virtual moving forward. In the new normal, the home office and, well, the home office may be the same thing.

In considering how to engage work from home employees most effectively, remember that no two businesses will have identical needs.

Organizations founded by digital natives, for example, will likely have a much less punishing learning curve than a traditional company that is only just beginning to leverage digital transformation.

However, two needs that *will* be consistent for nearly every business are:

- Technology, training, collaboration tools, and management techniques required to bring all employees together in shared purpose, ensure employees' work and performance are of high quality, and support the goals of the organization (including business continuity).
- Consideration for "the human element," i.e. investment in employee satisfaction, employee recognition for exceptional performance, and collaboration with HR professionals within the organization to promote employees' physical and mental health through strong support for work-life balance.

This second consideration is of particular importance for businesses who don't have a tradition supporting remote workers or even a formalized WFH management policy.

Understanding the work from home challenges individuals are facing as humans—not just employees—is essential to connecting your diverse and dispersed workforce to create a cohesive and cooperative whole.

Let's take a closer look at some of the most effective steps you can take to engage with remote employees.

1. Get Everyone on the Same Page with Remote

Work Policy

In order to reach their goals as individuals and as a remote team, your team members need a clear understanding of those goals.

They also need to know their roles and responsibilities in achieving those goals, and have a firm grip on the tools and practices they'll be using.

Ideally, your remote working policy will cover:

- When does the work day and week begin and end? Are there specific times employees should dedicate to specific tasks and/or remain available for video calls, conferences, webinars, etc.? For teams with members in different time zones, what protocols are in place to ensure scheduled tasks are completed and obligations are met via asynchronous communication?
- Specify the approved internal communication and collaboration tools your team will use. Clearly indicate the purpose(s) for each (e.g., Slack for private messages, Microsoft Meetings for small gatherings, Zoom for the entire team, etc.). Provide information on how team members using their own hardware (or new hires who are just joining the team) can obtain the necessary software and training to use each tool effectively.
- Specify which meetings are essential, who is expected to attend, and the interval at which each meeting will be held. For example, project teams might meet daily for updates, while department meetings may be weekly and organization-wide meetings monthly. Be sure to include information on available archives of video calls, webinars, and (if applicable) so those who cannot attend will be able to catch up in a timely fashion.
- **Support and Resources.** Provide information on where employees can go to get help with technical issues. For work-related issues, consider providing a tool that will allow team members to schedule one-on-one sessions where they can discuss questions and concerns face-to-face with their superiors, or report more serious concerns to senior management. In addition, if your company offers perks such as flex time, time off for wellness-related concerns, etc., consider offering a tool that will allow team members to submit requests online to make sure employees can get the rest and care they need while also providing adequate coverage for their work duties.

2. Connect and Communicate Regularly

Keeping in touch is about more than staying abreast of what's going on in each team member's day.

Consistent check-ins will help team members develop a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose, and help them build the relationships that can lead to innovation and creative problem solving as well as high productivity.

Team leaders should hold regular one-on-one meetings with their team members to review performance, build rapport, and address questions or concerns.

Beyond daily team meetings and weekly department check-ins, consider scheduling weekly cross-functional coordination meetings to give everyone a clear idea of how their contributions are working with each others' to support organizational goals.

Monthly company-wide meetings can be useful in introducing important policy changes, providing benchmark updates, etc.

Not every meeting needs to be a full-on, *Brady-Bunch*-style Zoom call, but it's important to make sure at least a few meetings each week are face-to-face via video conferencing software.

Being able to see one another provides important social reinforcement and body language information that can help teams connect and also minimize the risk of misunderstandings that can arise from audio and text alone.

In fact, your video meetings may be best reserved for significant discussions that require a little more focus.

A formal agenda and firm time limits will help keep everyone focused and on task. Rotating hosting/facilitating responsibilities will keep everyone engaged and proactive, too.

3. Practice Creative and Proactive Team Building

The transformation of a group of people from work associates assigned to the same project or department and trusted team members who work with the efficiency of a well-oiled machine doesn't happen overnight.

Interpersonal connections go a long way in helping your teams cohere, collaborate, and communicate. And not all of those connections will happen in formal or scheduled environments.

Team members—especially new hires whose recent onboarding may make it awkward for them to connect with their peers who already have well-established relationships within the team—need opportunities for casual conversation and fun.

You can provide these opportunities by including casual communication channels in your toolkit.

A Slack or Discord channel dedicated to “water cooler talk,” for example, can give your team a chance to blow off steam, share funny news stories and memes, or chat about anything other than work.

Daily .gif parties, meme contests, or video sharing can help encourage interactions and make sure everyone’s in on the fun.

Another informal team-building activity is to schedule daily “coffee breaks” into your workday. These casual social events don’t have to involve drinking coffee, of course.

They might be as simple as casual conversations where talking shop is not allowed and devices are switched off, or an opportunity to hang out in the “water cooler” channel and participate in the day’s contest or thread.

Once a month, you could even schedule a virtual “happy hour” where teams can have a hangout after work hours while enjoying refreshments in the comfort of their own home.

During the week, these coffee breaks can be as informal as you like, but they should have clear ground rules, start and end times, and participant limits (e.g., the entire department going on a coffee break at once might cause more trouble than team bonding can overcome).

Finally, you can of course incorporate more advanced team building activities into your schedule as well.

From karaoke nights to team trivia contests to playing tabletop or board games in

a virtual environment, coming together for fun activities can build a sense of belonging, forge strong office friendships, and help your team members feel rewarded for all their hard work.

4. Remote Teams Need Guidance—Not a Nanny

Staying up to date on what your team's doing is essential to your shared success. And even after more than a year of working in pandemic conditions, harmful stereotypes about working from home continue to color some organizations' approach to overseeing their remote teams.

But despite these fears—including employees napping the day away, or shirking their duties while dealing with family issues or watching TV—remote workers who are properly equipped, trained and supported consistently show high performance and efficacy.

In Buffer's 2021 survey, 45% of remote workers actually reported doing *more* work than they had before the pandemic, and 52% said they were spending more time in meetings than before.

So while workers are toiling to earn and keep their manager's trust, remote work can be an obstacle to doing so. Trust is a business-critical resource that becomes even more important when you're managing remote teams.

When your team is working virtually rather than face-to-face, it's *much* more difficult to build trust through environmental clues, body language, and casual conversations.

It's a hard line to walk because trust is a two-way street, with both team members and management expected to meet each other's needs and expectations through mutual respect, rather than keystroke capturing software or incessant DMs requesting or providing updates.

But the fear of lost productivity or inability to tackle unseen challenges can make it extremely tempting to take a heavy-handed approach to monitoring employee activities.

However, research conducted by the Harvard Business Review indicates intensive monitoring is deeply counterproductive. It also has a profoundly negative effect

on employee health, increasing anxiety levels, burnout rates, and employee dissatisfaction.

HBR found that a collaborative, communication-focused approach that emphasizes positive developments and recognizes employee needs and contributions is much more effective.

Engaging with team members as people, ensuring the lines of communication are open, and understanding the different ways in which people approach trust can help you provide your team with both guidance and the breathing room necessary to rise to your expectations—and help you meet theirs as well.

Connect and Collaborate with Your Remote Workforce to Inspire Engagement

Make sure your approach is collaborative and communicative. Practice transparency and trust. Prioritize not just employee performance, but employee health, happiness, and satisfaction.

Invest in the tools your managers and team members need to connect on all levels while getting the job done.

By taking a proactive approach to remote work, you can make sure your work from home employees feel seen and respected—and ensure they're ready to do their part in making your business a success.

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