

How HR Can Rapidly Enable Productive Remote Working

HR BRIEF

Companies are suddenly undergoing a crash course in operating virtually as they move people with jobs that can be performed remotely from offices to home locations. This situation presents unique challenges for employees and managers. The good news is that remote work isn't new for many people. Online tools exist to facilitate collaboration and productivity, and the relationships established in the workplace can be sustained virtually with a bit of effort.

However, leaders accustomed to managing their teams in the same location will struggle with overseeing a dispersed team. Employees will also find it difficult to stay focused and productive in potentially makeshift working environments shared with families or roommates. And, all must deal with the uncertainty and stress of Covid-19. HR can play a pivotal role in helping employees and managers to navigate these challenges as effectively as possible.

5 Challenges of Teams Working From Home

For HR to pinpoint the areas where it can be most helpful, it's important to understand what changes and what doesn't change when employees move from office to home environments. Among the important things that are not likely to change are the work itself, good working habits, individual and team goals, and the measures on which performance is judged.

There are a variety of logistical, physical and psychological challenges for employees and their managers as all who must suddenly adjust to remote working:



New workspace/environment:

Abruptly changing one's working locale and conditions has practical and emotional consequences. At the most basic level is having access to the right equipment and tools. Having a place at home that is well-suited to work is not a given. Many will have to adjust psychologically to working in a different environment. The rapid shift to full-time work from home may leave many feeling unsettled. Some will be able to make do but others will have trouble maintaining satisfactory levels of work quality and productivity.



No in-person interactions:

Shifting from in-person to virtual interactions will present challenges for teams used to a lot of "face time." This will be especially difficult for those most dependent on face-to-face communications, particularly managers not comfortable with giving their subordinates autonomy.



New kinds of distractions:

In an office setting, the typical distractions are noise, interruptions, irritating behaviors, uncomfortable temperature settings, food smells, etc. At home, there are distractions, too, just different kinds. Many will need time to learn how to ignore or work around these new sources of disruption.



Blurring of boundaries between home and work:

One major adjustment to working remotely is knowing when to shut down and how to make the transition from "work mode" to "home mode." This leads to increased worker stress, possibly even burnout. Another problem reported by many who work from home full-time is feeling isolated or lonely. On the positive side, some workers will find it refreshing to work at the times they feel they are most productive, which may not be 9:00 to 5:00.



Coping with uncertainty and stress:

The incessant stream of bad news from round-the-clock news outlets may create feelings of anxiety, powerlessness and mental fatigue, even among workers whose jobs aren't directly affected. These may be intensified by a sense of isolation as people adjust to working remotely and miss familiar routines. Physical activity levels will likely be reduced, exacerbating the effects of stress. Unaddressed, psychological distress and diminished physical activity will inevitably have a negative impact on employees' overall well-being as well as their job performance.

How HR Can Help

Where HR is uniquely positioned to make the most positive difference is in leading the charge to ensure that employee productivity, engagement and well-being are kept up during the working-from-home period. Supporting the needs of remote workers will likely not be new, but the speed, scale and specific circumstances of the present shift require that HR enhance several existing practices as well as introduce new ones.

Managers may struggle the most. Managing virtually may be unnatural to many. Giving direction, setting and tracking goals, communicating, monitoring progress, providing feedback, dealing with employee problems – these are all likely to require a different blend of techniques with more formal, documented communication and less serendipitous, in-the-moment actions.

Listed below are steps that HR organizations can take directly or support to help maintain the productivity, engagement and well-being of newly remote workers:



Maintaining Employee Productivity

1 Reinforce team structures

Make sure work processes and decision-making protocols are clearly understood and appropriately adapted to virtual working. Provide clarity on what decisions to escalate and which ones can be made at the team level.

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2 Rely on routine

Designate consistent cross-team working hours during part of the day to help people stay in a routine. Recognize that personal circumstances such as childcare may prevent some people from working during regular office hours. They may need more flexibility at the beginning and end of the workday.

2

3 Provide multiple work/collaboration tools and resources

This is obvious, but organizations lacking the kind of infrastructure needed for set up of virtual working have to move quickly to equip what may be a large number of employees with the tools they need to be fully functional and productive working from home. Provide new/refresher training on how to use virtual working aids such as videoconferencing, instant messaging and collaborative tools.

3

4 Conduct daily standup calls

Encourage teams to have daily huddle meetings (15-30 mins.), both in morning (to share what everyone plans to work on) and at the end of the day (to wrap up the day and give a sense that it is okay to sign off until the next workday).

4

5 Increase the frequency of check-ins

Managers should schedule regular check-ins with staff as well as proactively pursue impromptu interactions. Take advantage of feedback apps and features of performance management systems. Individuals should do the same with their key team members. Also, recognition becomes essential when employees are working differently under stressful circumstances. Review recognition programs to ensure appreciation and acknowledgement of teams and individuals is frequently expressed.

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6 Assign virtual manager mentors

Leverage the expertise that exists among leadership ranks by pairing up managers experienced in overseeing virtual teams with those new to this role.

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7 Provide work from home guides/tutorials

Offer guidelines, training, tips and techniques tailored to employees and managers. These might include working norms such as standard business hours, protocols for addressing work issues, and training on remote technology security procedures. Provide clear guidelines to managers and training on overseeing remote workers.

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8 Offer work-from-home readiness assessments

These will help staff quickly identify and develop strategies for overcoming the obstacles they are most likely to encounter.

8

9 Consider tracking/monitoring tools/software

These tools can help employees and teams manage their own productivity. But handle them with care so they don't undermine trust.

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10 Assign remote work "buddies"

Rely on employees who work from home regularly to mentor others who are new to the practice and to help them adjust.

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Maintaining Employee Engagement and Well-being

1 Increase transparency

Employ workflow and collaboration tools that provide visibility to individual activities and access to team members and supervisors. This will help teammates know when their counterparts are available for an impromptu chat, in a meeting or do not wish to be disturbed.

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2 Try always-on video

Running a continuous video (if bandwidth allows) enables team members to connect spontaneously and can roughly simulate working together in the same room. Try this for part of the day to see how it's used and whether employees find it worthwhile.

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3 Communicate frequently

In a period of great uncertainty, when news changes quickly and entire workforces are isolated from one another, effective communication is paramount. Communication needs to be stepped up at every level, up, down and across the organization, from one-to-many to one-to-one. This is best accomplished through thoughtful leveraging of an omnichannel communication strategy. "Management by walking around" will need to continue in new ways, like random IM chats and phone calls, and managers will need to be coached to adopt these new behaviors.

3

4 Conduct virtual town halls

Promote greater openness and better listening among leaders and as an organization. Managers need to make sure teams and individuals are up to date on developments affecting the business, operations and jobs. It is especially important for senior leaders of the organization and HR to be visible and tuned in to how employees are feeling and what issues they are most concerned about.

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5 Dynamically track engagement

Employ tools to monitor communications and social media traffic such as sentiment tracking or pulse surveys to identify shifts in workforce focus and mood. This can provide a real-time picture of how the organization is coping and flag early indicators of problems, allowing quick interventions before they spread.

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6 Establish HR hotlines/webpages/apps for employee well-being support

Provide the latest information, tools and support via multiple, easy-to-access channels.

6

7 Offer enhanced employee assistance programs

The emotional strain of living through a pandemic and the disruptions to normal life are sure to test coping skills. Review and enhance employee assistance programs and encourage staff to use them if needed.

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8 Conduct remote team social events

It will be impossible to recreate the pleasures of in-person socializing among employees, and isolation from colleagues and the loss of opportunities to interact will be difficult for many. Encourage leaders and teams to institute regular opportunities for informal socializing. For example, organize virtual happy hours, coffee breaks and funniest pet/kid video contests to add some fun/breaks into the workday.

8

9 Offer enhanced family/parental support

Working from home poses an especially big challenge when schools and child-care facilities shut down. Staff must be parents and employees simultaneously. To help, publicize and consider enhancing any backup care programs, childcare subsidies and other dependent-care benefits.

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Future Implications

Some have already likened the Covid-19 pandemic as a generation-defining event like the fall of the Berlin Wall or 9/11. Although it is still early, today's near-global experiment in virtual work at scale is about to be tested in ways that will provide lessons for future policymaking. We see the following developments as potential drivers of permanent changes in the future.



For employees

A new appreciation of the importance of employee wellness and flexible working will be gained. More employees will have experience working virtually from home, which may intensify pressure for expanding this option to a wider number of workers.



For managers

More managers will gain experience managing virtually (good and bad). This will provide new insights about which people-management skills are critical and decrease tolerance for leaders who lack them or are resistant to virtual working arrangements. Established leadership competencies will evolve to include new modes of collaboration, engagement and accountability. Manager adaptability and agility will be key.



For HR

HR organizations will use the lessons learned from this experience to address or redesign policies for flexible working as well as employee benefits. It is likely there will be greater commitment of resources to workforce wellness and engagement, stepped-up training in people-management skills for leaders and a greater understanding of where virtual working is a viable option.

Interested in learning more?

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