



Managing remote employees

The way we work is changing radically. An increasingly global marketplace, shrinking operational budgets, technological advances and demographic shifts mean more and more remote or virtual business teams. It's projected that within a few years more than 1.3 billion people worldwide will work remotely.

Virtual work has advantages for both employers and employees. Organizations can hire top talent across the country or world without having to pay for office space, relocation or frequent travel. Employees also save on expenses, have access to national and international job opportunities, live where they choose and if they work from home, can adjust their work schedule to enjoy a better work-life balance.

Challenges of managing remote teams

While virtual teams offer tremendous business advantages, they can also present challenges to managers. Some of the most common challenges are:

- **Physical distance.** Remote employees are not part of daily, casual office conversations and activities – the birthday celebrations, corporate events and learning opportunities. This lack of face-to-face contact and involvement can make remote employees feel isolated and disengaged. For managers, distance makes tracking work, identifying potential issues and building employee rapport more difficult.
- **Time zone differences:** There seems nothing unusual about calling a 3:00 p.m. meeting – except if some members of the team are in different time zones. Three o'clock in the afternoon in New York or Toronto is 8:00 p.m. in London and 3:00 a.m. in Mumbai! Time differences can cause frustrations and roadblocks for everyone.
- **Cultural differences.** Whether at home or abroad, teams will be made up of people from different backgrounds and cultures, each with their own customs, values, ways of communicating and work habits. These differences can be exacerbated by distance, increasing the chances of misunderstandings.

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- **Communication.** Ninety-three percent of all communication is non-verbal. While emails, texts and instant messaging are valuable business tools, the lack of visual cues can also cause confusion and frustrations.

Making the most of remote teams

Leading virtual and/or dispersed teams does present challenges for managers but there are some techniques and tips to help ensure productivity, unity and engagement. For example:

1. Set expectations

To ensure virtual employees are completing their work on target, managers need to:

- Give clear directions, specifying requirements, deadlines and milestones.
- Be clear in advance about how the employee is to account for his or her time. Are hours to be tracked or are only results important?
- Make sure the employee has access to technical and if applicable, operational support.

2. Communicate, communicate, communicate

Lack of communication, especially among remote teams, can not only amplify problems but completely derail projects. Try to:

- **Schedule regular team and one-on-one meetings.** During one-on-one updates, make time for small talk. It's easy to just talk about what needs to get done. Building relationships are part of motivating and engaging team members – whether they're working outside your door or across the world.
- **Use video as much as you can.** Body language and subtle facial expressions can reveal a great deal about how an employee is feeling and doing – a frustrated look, a raised eyebrow or a slight shrug can alert a manager to someone who may need support or a problem that may need fixing.
- **Be available.** If you're out of the office, respond as soon as possible.

Building strong virtual teams

Team building initiatives are important in building rapport, improving communication, promoting creativity, breaking down barriers to productivity and enhancing morale and engagement. Sixty-five percent of remote employees report that they have never had a team building session.

While it's often impossible when some, or most, of your team are in different locations that doesn't mean everyone is unable to participate in team building activities. Just as technology made virtual teams possible, so it can be used to create a fun, inclusive and collaborative work environment. For example:

- **A virtual water cooler or team room** where people can take a break and chat to colleagues. Consider setting specific times for team members to spend time socializing online.

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- **Video coffee meetings** during which every team member will get a chance to share a few personal updates.
- **Team intranets** are a great way to provide business and personal information and news – especially for larger groups. Include photos, short bios and contact information of each member of the team. An intranet also allows employees to create communities, play games, participate in contests, receive recognition and select rewards.
- **Online forums** where team members can ask each other questions, exchange ideas and offer advice and support.
- **Online competitions and games** get people playing or participating together and help create rapport that will be useful when the pressures on or there are difficult problems to resolve.

A little creativity makes managing and motivating virtual teams less of a challenge and makes be part of virtual teams for enjoyable. For more information and great ideas about working remotely, contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program.

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Rethinking team engagement

Every organization understands that an engaged workforce is more innovative, creative, efficient and productive. Research suggests that organizations with high levels of engagement post higher shareholder returns even in turbulent times. For example, in 2010, companies with high engagement posted total shareholder returns that were 22 percent higher than average. On the other hand, companies with low engagement levels had total shareholder returns that were 28 percent *lower* than the average.

Creating a high performing organization is becoming more challenging. Today's culturally and generationally diverse workplace where more and more people work remotely means traditional, one-size fits all approaches are less effective. As a result, organizations around the world are rethinking their engagement strategies.

Satisfaction versus engagement

Employee satisfaction is different from employee engagement. People who are satisfied are not necessarily working hard on behalf of the organization. Those who are engaged do. They care about their work and willingly go the extra mile to help an organization reach its goals.

Traditional employee engagement strategies involve several factors including:

- Effective communications that inform employees of corporate mission, values, strategies and goals.
- Attractive salaries and benefits.
- Opportunities for professional development.
- Rewards and recognition programs.
- Inclusive, safe and fair workplaces.

These elements still apply, but with a new generation now beginning to dominate the workforce and new technologies transforming the way we work and communicate, creative employee strategies are required.

A new millennium

The biggest change to the global workforce is the enormous Millennial generation (those born between 1980 and 1999) that will make up 50 percent of the global workforce by 2020 and 75 percent by 2025. They not only have a different way of communicating and attitude about work, they have different demands for employers. They look for:

- Companies they'd feel proud to work for.
- Transformative leaders who demonstrate integrity and empathy.
- Corporate social responsibility. This is a generation that wants to change the world for the better and they expect businesses to do the same.
- An inclusive, fair corporate culture in which they can enjoy their work and co-workers.
- Managers who provide constant feedback, recognition and mentorship. Millennials tend to disengage quickly if they feel they're unappreciated or going nowhere.

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- Work-life balance. Family, community, faith and personal pursuits are important and flexibility about how work is done has become an engagement necessity.

New trends in employee engagement

Engaging employees in many locations and from different generations, cultures and backgrounds, all with their own individual needs, wants and preferences sounds daunting but it is possible. As more and more organizations change their focus, new engagement trends are emerging. Some of these are:

1. **Pulse surveys.** A rapidly changing global workforce means that annual surveys are not enough. Pulse surveys are short and conducted frequently, providing snapshots of how employees are feeling and changes to engagement levels.
2. **Employee “sensing” applications.** These allow employees to indicate how they’re feeling in real time and help manager’s flag potential problems.
3. **Intranets and social networks.** They are an effective way to communicate and gather information but also great tools to help employees collaborate, socialize and support each other. However, organizations need to keep up with new social platforms and trends.
4. **Flattening structures.** Millennials thrive in a more casual and flat work environment and organizations in many countries agree. A Deloitte study found that 92 percent of companies don’t think that they’re organized correctly. Hierarchy and bureaucracy are being replaced by flexible and responsive teams.

Evaluating your current engagement strategy

Adjusting or recreating engagement strategies can be complex processes but the first step is to evaluate if your company’s strategies are working. That involves asking a few key questions that include:

1. Has your employee demographic changed? Has our workforce become younger? More culturally diverse? How many employees work in remote locations or virtually?
2. What is our turnover rate? Absenteeism rate?
3. Has our productivity increased or decreased?
4. Are our customers satisfied with our products and services?
5. Are we asking the right questions in our engagement surveys? Gallup, a global performance-management consulting firm uses the following survey questions:
 - I know what is expected of me at work.
 - At work, my opinions seem to count.
 - I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.
 - The mission or purpose of my company makes me that feel my job is important.
 - At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
 - My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.
 - In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
 - I have a best friend at work.

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- My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
- In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
- There is someone at work who encourages my development.
- This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.

6. Are we using technology effectively?

For more information on evaluating, developing and maintaining an employee engagement strategy that reaches your company's unique workforce, contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program.

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