

How to Manage Remote Teams Effectively

By Arlene S. Hirsch

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Remote work has its advantages—flexibility, low or no overhead costs, and a greater pipeline of applicants from which to hire. And it has its disadvantages—less interaction, managers worried about how to tell if their employees are staying on task and communication challenges. How can companies maximize the advantages and minimize the disadvantages? Here are tips from supervisors and workplace experts who are getting great results from their remote teams.

Some workforces are hybrids of in-office and distributed (another word for remote) workers, and some workforces comprise only remote team members. These dispersed employees may work in different cities, states, countries and time zones, and all rely heavily on technology to communicate. Determining the best strategy to manage remote teams depends on a variety of factors: the company's business model, culture and values and the employees' needs and attributes

Managing remote teams is in Felicia Kohlenberger's professional DNA. Throughout her HR career, she has worked for multiple remote-friendly companies, including Cellular One, PwC Consulting, CNA Insurance, PepsiCo and McDonald's. Her experience dovetails with research cited by the Remote Leadership Institute showing that 70 percent of managers at *Fortune* 100 companies have at least one remote team member.

Kohlenberger is now senior HR director, North America, for Glanbia Performance Network, a sports nutrition company in Downers Grove, Ill. When the company made a strategic decision to fuel its growth through mergers and acquisitions, senior leadership knew that there would be new employees working in the field or in satellite offices. Kohlenberger represents the parent company to these new employees. She frequently travels to other cities to meet new team members and make sure that everyone is operating from the same playbook.

"We need to get everyone involved and make them feel like they are part of the larger organization. We can't afford to forget about the people working in the field," Kohlenberger said.

Before making the decision to have his software company become fully distributed, Alex Turnbull, founder and CEO of GrooveHQ, described his office as "Headphone City." His employees were always using headphones on the job, working well together but primarily working independently. He said he didn't see why they needed to be in the same room all the time.

Relinquishing a physical corporate office and allowing all employees to work from home eliminated costly real estate expenses, improved work/life balance and expanded the company's capacity to recruit top talent more quickly. But the company's culture suffered until the staff figured out ways to maintain a sense of community and connectedness through virtual and in-person meetings and get-togethers.

The Value of Starting and Keeping up Communication

A well-designed onboarding process is an effective way to familiarize new remote employees with the people, processes and tools that they need to succeed. Videoconferencing technology can help. For example, managers can give new employees a virtual tour of the office and introduce them to new co-workers.

Kevin Eikenberry, founder of The Kevin Eikenberry Group and co-founder of the Remote Leadership Institute in Indianapolis, said it's important for organization leaders to use technology and make sure everyone knows how to use it, too.

"From the ubiquitous e-mail to how to have meetings, everything is mediated through technology," he said. "We have to figure out how we're going to work together and what we can expect from each other."

Eikenberry asks new virtual team members to initiate 15- to 30-minute get-to-know-you phone conversations with each existing team member (who has been notified to expect that call). The calls foster collaboration and take some of the pressure off the manager to be the primary contact person.

Continue that collaboration by setting up regularly scheduled team meetings to keep remote workers from feeling alienated and disconnected from the group.

GrooveHQ has regular Monday morning "kickoff" meetings that are a combination of chit-chat about the weekend and discussions about plans and priorities for the upcoming week. The team ends the workweek on Fridays with a 30-minute virtual meeting to recap the week's happenings and share customer feedback.

How to See the Unseen

Remote employees and their managers both struggle with feeling invisible. While managers may want some proof (or reassurance) that employees are actually working, virtual employees worry that "out of sight is out of mind."

"Some leaders worry about being effective in a virtual environment, because if they can't physically oversee what is happening, how will they know that work is being done?" said Giselle Kovary, co-founder of Toronto-based n-gen People Performance. "You need someone with a progressive leadership style who is not a micromanager."

Kovary recommends setting up performance management processes with SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant, Timely) and clearly defined competencies that make it possible for leaders to accurately assess the performance of various team members.

Managers can then evaluate employees by their accomplishments, rather than the number of hours they spend in the office.

Laura Hambley is an organizational psychologist and founder of Work EvOHlution, a company in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, that develops psychometric assessment tools to support distributed employees, teams and leaders. According to their research, managers with remote team members need to be more intentional, more organized and work harder to establish trust than traditional managers.

"You can't get away with lazy leadership," Hambley said. "You must proactively reach out to people regularly to create a sense of teamwork and community."

Regardless of where they're located, all team members should be treated consistently.

"Everyone needs to have the same opportunities," Kovary said. "We want to recognize and reward everyone equally."

She recommends providing support tools to virtual team members through:

- Just-in-time training.
- Accessible and responsive leadership.
- Appropriate use of technology.

Mark Murphy, founder of Leadership IQ, a leadership training and consulting company in Marietta, Ga., encourages managers to conduct monthly professional conversations with each remote employee to discuss highlights and low points from the previous month's work, areas for improvement and plans to improve performance.

Kohlenberger emphasizes the need for "cascading communication"—when managers make sure every team member stays in the information loop.

"There may be times when remote employees are not included in office meetings where decisions are made which impact them. An effective manager will recognize the need to communicate that information to every member of the team," she says.

In the absence of the kind of watercooler conversations that routinely take place in a traditional workplace, teams can find ways to replicate that experience virtually. Zapier, a distributed software company, fosters connectedness with weekly virtual "hangouts" where team members get together just to talk. They also have a "Pair Buddies" program which randomly pairs teammates for a 10- to 15-minute phone call that enhances a sense of community and connectedness.

Recruit the Right Traits

It takes a unique temperament and skillset to work remotely with aplomb. When GrooveHQ first began hiring new remote employees, the company targeted people with previous startup experience. After some early hires didn't work out, it expanded its requirements to include people—such as freelancers—with prior remote experience.

"Most people don't have the organization, focus and motivation to be productive working remotely," Turnbull said. "Successfully working from home is a skill. It takes time and commitment."

Kohlenberger finds that the best remote team members are "self-starters who are able to adapt to change and work independently."

Writing for Remotejobs.com, author Angela Crist identified a number of skills and traits to look for in remote employees:

- Ability to prioritize.
- Adaptable.
- Collaborative.
- Communication.
- Independent.
- Organized.
- Reliable.
- Results-oriented.
- Self-motivated.
- Strong work ethic.

Hambley adds "tech savvy" to that list. As technologies continue to evolve, it is important for remote team members to be adept at using technology to communicate, or at least open to learning new solutions.

Neil Patel, co-founder of Crazy Egg, a Seattle-based analytics company, encourages recruiters to tweak their recruiting strategies and criteria when searching for the best remote employees. He recommends asking specific behavioral questions to gain insight into how the candidate approaches remote work.

"It's particularly important to understand why they work remote and how they work remote," Patel said.

He suggests conducting virtual interviews using multiple technologies, like e-mail, phone and Skype.

"Differing approaches can highlight different skillsets. An e-mail showcases the worker's ability to respond in a timely way and to write coherent content. The phone call demonstrates verbal ability. The video interview can help transmit the candidate's personality and cultural fit."

Mix Up the Generations

Many virtual teams are made up of multiple generations. TeamSnap, a distributed Colorado company that develops apps for team sports, promotes itself as a fun place to work where everyone is respected and treated with dignity. The company gives its employees lots of flexibility to get their work done on their own time, as long as they are available when needed.

Not surprisingly, the culture appeals to younger employees. It is also a haven for working parents who, according to Chief Creative Officer Andrew Berkowitz, are valued and highly productive members of their remote team. Both groups prize the autonomy, flexibility and work/life balance that is considered a hallmark of the TeamSnap culture.

Kovary, a generational expert, encourages managers to recognize generational differences in three key areas: performance, leadership and communication.

A Baby Boomer leader can benefit from understanding that Millennial employees expect on-going dialogue and feedback. Managers can accommodate that expectation by using short text and video messages to provide positive immediate feedback and recognition.

"Leaders who manage virtual teams must spend more time being accessible, creating a fun and casual environment, and providing timely feedback," Kovary said.

Take the time to help different generations get comfortable with certain technologies. Kohlenberger worked with a remote employee in his 60s who needed some extra help with videoconferencing technology.

"We had to press pause in order to get him up to speed," she said.

Experiment with the Possibilities

As you help your leadership team think through their remote options, you will find that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Decisions may be based on an amalgam of considerations. Remote employment can enable companies to recruit from a wider talent pool, reduce overhead expenses, and deliver more timely customer service. It can also increase employee productivity and engagement as well as reduce attrition.

As Turnbull notes: "It's a journey."

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