Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

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.
- **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?

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- 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.
- **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 Assistance Program.