

How to Manage A Virtual Workforce (Jul 06)

Working remotely can be a dream for professionals. It offers freedom and independence from the daily grind of commuting to work and sitting in a bland cubicle. That may explain why 22.2 million Americans worked from home or another out-of-office location at least one day per week in 2005. That's a 30% increase from 2004, according to the Telework Coalition.

But as the virtual workforce grows, so do the managerial headaches. Many employees who work virtually say they frequently feel isolated and don't know if they're valued by their companies. Others say they don't feel like they're part of a team.

How do you manage employees that you don't see on a regular basis? Here are five ways to manage a virtual workforce:

Trust: It's the key to any relationship, but it's particularly important when managing employees you don't see daily. Don't assume your staff is taking a day at the beach if they don't answer the phone or don't instantly reply to an e-mail.

Just like in an office, if an employee isn't at his or her desk when you pop by, it doesn't mean the person is goofing around. Remember, they are entitled to lunch breaks, trips to the restroom and a lap or two around the block to stretch their legs.

Just because someone is in the office doesn't mean they're being productive. There are lots of distractions at work--surfing the Web, e-mailing friends and visiting colleague's cubicles. It's an issue Debra Dinnocenzo, president of VirtualWork!, a firm that specializes in training companies in virtual management, tries to raise when meeting with managers. "How do you know they're working when they're in the office?" asks Dinnocenzo.

Andrea Jackson, manager of work life, flexibility and mobility for IBM asks her fellow managers the same question. She tells managers to remind themselves that employees were hired to perform a specific job and that the results are more important than where they work.

Communication: One of the most common complaints of virtual employees is a lack of interaction with the boss or their team. Regular contact is integral to maintaining a happy staff. It's easy to compliment someone when you work in the same space since you can stop by their office to say "good job."

Try to do that virtually. Many of us feel we get too many messages these days, so it's important for managers to communicate meaningfully. Dinnocenzo suggests sending an e-mail saying, "I'm thinking about you and the high-quality work you've done lately," or "I saw the proposal you sent, and it's a great job."

"A basic tenet of effective leadership is managing by wandering around, being visible," she says. "I challenge leaders to think about how they can wander virtually with technology."

With new employees, it's important to have regular check-ins scheduled to discuss their work and progress being made. It's also lets the new hire know that you're accessible.

"As you build confidence with each other, the distance between milestones increases," says Jack Nilles, author of several books on telecommuting including *Making Telecommuting Happen: A Guide for Telemanagers and Telecommuters* and *Managing Telework: Strategies for Managing the Virtual Workforce*.

Jackson urges virtual managers at IBM to schedule formal conference calls with employees that take place weekly or biweekly at the same time and day.

"This helps the manager understand if the expected results are on target, and, if necessary, make additional suggestions," Jackson says.

Make The Best Use Of Technology: Working virtually means more than just utilizing your laptop. Technology can help a staff feel cohesive and solve problems collectively. Webinars, Internet-based seminars, workshops or lectures enable the presenter to use PowerPoint and other presentation tools. One feature allows participants to go into "meeting rooms" to break out into smaller groups. Webex, Raindance, GoToMeeting and Adobe Breeze are examples of Webinar software that enable participants to share thoughts as well as documents in real time. "A lot of organizations have this capability and often don't use it," says Dinnocenzo.

Face time, even if it's virtual, is important, too. Find a way to implement a video conference call. It's ideal for staff meetings instead of using an audio conference call. When you're on that type of call, initiate chit-chat until every participant signs on. It may sound hokey, but it enables co-workers to get a better sense of each other.

Hire Independents: While it's important to support your employees with regular contact, it's also important to hire staffers who are self-motivated. "Your best virtual worker is an Eagle Scout," says Nilles, only half joking. "Once you give them a task, they know what to do. You want people who will act as their own internal manager so you don't have to. You can't be the cop if you're not there."

Invest In Information Technology: Inevitably someone's computer will crash and sometimes even burn. That's why having an IT department capable of clearly talking virtual employees through any tech crisis is essential. Companies should also have a plan for evaluating an employee's computer, quickly recovering important files and overnighting new equipment.