

5 Tips for Managing Your Virtual Workforce

By Lee Polevoi

The number of virtual workers in the U.S. has grown by 800% in the past five years, according to the research-advisory firm Nemertes Research. This dramatic shift in the workforce presents challenges and opportunities for managers. Here are five tips for effectively managing out-of-office team members:

1. Give them the right tools. Be ready to allocate funds for equipment upgrades so home-based technology meets your in-office standards.
2. Set working hours and functions. Determine if you'd like to have access to virtual workers during normal work hours or if it's OK for them to work on their own schedule. Should they be available for customer calls? Are they required to submit timesheets?
3. Manage priorities and deadlines. At the outset of a project, make sure your expectations are clear. If you assign more than one project, indicate which have top priority. Evan Duxbury, a former marketing officer at Hire the World, suggests prioritizing by deadline. Set a deadline of one or two business days for smaller projects. Larger projects can be broken down into smaller sections, so you can also set 24- to 48-hour deadlines. "This ensures your tasks aren't overwhelmingly large and provides timely completion of deliverables," Duxbury says.
4. Communicate often but sensibly. A frequent concern among managers is the "out of sight, out of mind" syndrome. Virtual team members need your input as much as the employee outside your office. Schedule regular times for check-in calls or email updates. Online calendar-sharing programs enable you to set up meetings with the team member and his or her colleagues.
5. Don't micromanage. It's assumed that telecommuters or contractors are mature, responsible and dedicated to completing their work. If so, there's no need to constantly interrupt with your thoughts and suggestions. Virtual team members will be more productive if allowed to do their jobs without interruptions. It will also be a lot easier on you.