

Keeping your staff engaged during social distancing

The coronavirus outbreak probably has you thinking about how work would get done if a substantial part of your workforce had to telecommute. “Social distancing” required to stem contagion may force millions of white-collar employees to work from home.

Four tactics make it easier for managers of teleworkers to promote productivity in a stressful environment:

Instill a sense of purpose

People tend to perform better when they know their work matters and that others depend on their efforts. Be sure teleworkers realize the value of what they do.

“We’ve found that our remote workers are far more productive and motivated when they have a good idea of why their work is important,” says Sam McIntire, founder of Deskbright. “We always try to explain how the work that they’re doing fits into the larger project. Like in-house employees, remote workers are often mission-driven, and selling them on the mission and vision of your company as you would your in-office staff is critical to enabling their success.”

Open lines of communication

Modern technology offers various ways to keep in touch. Figure out which ones work best for you and your teleworkers, and use them.

“We hold weekly team calls (and impromptu ones when the situation demands), which are of course standard among any business these days, but we privilege the video chat aspect of it,” says John Lavey, communications director at Community Builders. “It’s one thing to hear a disembodied voice over a phone and entirely different to see a face smiling back at you. A huge percent of communication is nonverbal, so those video calls are great.”

Besides including teleworkers in formal back-and-forth such as brainstorming sessions or modification of a shared document, look for ways to replicate the “watercooler” conversations that build bonds and often produce great ideas.

Tools such as Basecamp, Google Hangouts, Slack and Zoom allow virtual workers to ask questions and talk casually in a way similar to tapping someone on the shoulder in the office.

Provide individual attention

Help workers to stay on task and feel more confident about their performance by offering regular feedback. Daily or weekly personal check-ins, even when there are no updates or issues to discuss, convey a sense that management is consistently interested in what telecommuters are doing.

Such one-on-ones also give teleworkers a forum in which to ask questions or present concerns without “bothering” their manager.

Take time during these sessions to learn a bit about the individual employee. Find out about his spouse, kids, hobbies and passions. Then, comment on those topics in future conversations. Your remote worker will appreciate your interest and feel a stronger connection to the company.

Recognize accomplishments

Finally, remember that all employees, regardless of location, thrive on recognition for a job well done. A kind email, a mention in the company newsletter or a surprise gift certificate for exceeding a benchmark can motivate them to achieve even more.

“Say thank you,” McIntire urges. “Oftentimes, remote workers can feel a lack of appreciation due to the fact that they’re not face-to-face with their managers as frequently. Be sure to take the time to acknowledge their hard work and thank them for what they’re doing for your company.”