

## Managing From a Distance

With technology, high gas prices, and the need to do business in varied geographic locations, it is rare to find an organization that doesn't have at least one employee working remotely. In many cases, managers find managing remote employees much more challenging than managing other employees. While different issues come into play, managing remote employees shouldn't be something feared and avoided. In fact, most of the same principles of good management apply whether your employees are across the hall or across the country.

One of the keys to successfully managing remote employees is to build mutually trusting relationships. This often happens casually over time when you see employees face-to-face on a daily basis—they get to know you and you get to know them.

With remote employees, development of these relationships can't be left to chance. To achieve success your approach needs to be deliberate, and communication is the key. You need to develop methods of individual communication as well as a team approach.

Whether you are new at managing remote employees or the employee is new to working remotely, it is necessary to have an initial conversation to share both your and your employee's preferred style, method, content, and timing of communication. This discussion will ensure the right balance is established between keeping each other updated and becoming a communication burden. For example, some individuals prefer quick, direct e-mails that they can answer during nonwork hours, while others prefer to connect via telephone during the workday and have some personal conversation before getting to business issues. By taking the time to do this with your remote employees you not only let the employees know you value regular communication, they know it's expected to ensure success.

The many options for remote group communication today are conducive to maintaining a sense of teamwork and collaboration between remote employees and between remote and traditional employees. Electronic message boards and audio and video conferences are a few ways to allow remote employees the opportunity to stay involved by brainstorming new ideas, discussing pressing business issues, and contributing to the long-term success of the organization. Podcasts are a great way to convey educational and organizational information that everyone needs to know, and are more personal than group e-mails.

One of the most common questions managers of remote employees ask is "How do I measure performance when I don't see them?" The general answer is "Results." This, of course, is when all of the hard work you put into building a trusting relationship with your remote employees comes into play. You are trusting they are doing what they're supposed to be doing. While traditional workers may need to accomplish their objectives during a set schedule of hours and often in a specific way under your guidance, the details of the work of remote employees are usually not managed on a daily basis. Typically, the manager of remote employees jumps into management mode only when the result is achieved, or isn't.

To avoid problems it's critical to first mutually determine a well-defined and specific list of objectives that the remote employee needs to accomplish and in what timeframe. Then, when the result is presented it is important to take the time to provide concrete feedback and evaluation—were all the objectives met in the appropriate timeframe? If they weren't, take as much as time as needed to discuss how to avoid problems in the future and redefine expectations. If results were as expected or better, be sure to acknowledge success.

Nothing can take the place of face-to-face meetings. Be sure your remote employees know that you want to be notified ahead of time if they are coming into the office so you can plan to see them. It may also be worthwhile to plan a face-to-face meeting periodically to continue to build mutual trust and make remote employees realize they are important to the business.

Working remotely isn't right for every person or every position, but if it is appropriate, it can be successfully managed.