

Introduction

In the modern workplace, remote work is increasingly becoming the rule more than the exception. It is also increasingly becoming a priority among job seekers. According to LinkedIn, nearly a third of members report that “flexible work arrangements are very important when considering a job.”¹ The data shows that industries are oftentimes able to satisfy the demand for flexible work arrangements decently well. While there are certain fields and occupations that will most likely never be able to effectively implement remote working, many companies have experienced positive outcomes from allowing employees to work from home. According to LinkedIn, the current industries that report the highest rate of flexible working arrangements are Software and IT, Finance, Corporate Services, Healthcare and Manufacturing.² The tech industry is also leading the way with nearly three-quarters of talent professionals reporting that their company allows employees to work remotely.³

“Just within the past five years, flexible workplace options have increased by 40%.”

This large increase in remote work within recent years has shown that flexible working has proven benefits for both employers and employees alike. Just within the past five years, flexible workplace options have increased by 40%, according to Global Workplace Analytics.⁴ Although at the moment the prevalence is highest within the tech industry, it is most likely expected to increase in other industries as well. With the increase in demand from job seekers, as well as the clear benefits experienced by companies, it appears remote work is here to stay.

While this transitioning world of work may strike feelings of unease or confusion in talent professionals and managers, there is an array of tools and techniques to effectively transition employees and teams to working remotely. In fact, even if your company does not yet have a remote working policy in place, it is most likely the case that employees have engaged in some type of remote work.

In the digital age that we're currently in, people are accessible through various means of communication, which is having profound effects on how we work. Through forms of communication such as email and instant messaging apps, to portable equipment, such as laptops, staying connected to the office while being away has never been easier. While some may argue these developments have negative consequences for work-life balance and employees not being able to mentally "check-out," there are also clear benefits, which we will look at in Chapter One. But first, let's examine what exactly "remote work" is.

Prior to the new millennium, remote working was almost exclusively referred to as telecommuting, and was relatively uncommon. However, with the advancement of various forms of telecommunications and the changing type of work, it has skyrocketed in the past two decades. According to a study from Global Workplace Analytics, remote working has grown 173% since 2005.⁵ Another development is that it has also become increasingly less common to refer to this type of working arrangement as telecommuting, and is typically referred to by various buzzwords, such as remote working or working from home (WFH). While the aforementioned terms are relatively synonymous, there are various other terms around remote working that convey different meanings. Below is a brief overview of the main types of remote working arrangements.

Telecommuting

The most traditional type of flexible working arrangement is known as telecommuting. While there are many overlaps between employees who telecommute and employees who work remotely, there are also some key differences that should be made clear when rolling out a new policy or advertising a vacancy. While remote working can typically be performed from any geographic location, telecommunicating generally means employees must reside locally or at least in a particular region of the country. Telecommunicating also implies that the employee will spend at least some of the time in the office.

It will depend on the particular company policy, whether the employee will be stipulated to come in to the office more regularly, such as on a weekly basis, or more seldom, such as annually for all-hands meetings.

Remote Working

Although the terms telecommuting and remote working are oftentimes used interchangeably, there is a key difference between the two. Remote working implies that the employee is not required to ever come onsite. As onsite visits are not a requirement, these arrangements are also typically not bound by geographic location. Remote working arrangements can also be both permanent or temporary and span any length of time. This type of setup also means that employees may never meet their supervisor or colleagues face-to-face. While having an employee work completely remote does pose some unique challenges, there are ways to replicate face-to-face interactions, which we will look at later in this guide. Typically, if a company decides to have an employee work completely remote, it is due to the benefits outweighing the drawbacks.

It should however be noted that while remote working and telecommuting have different connotations on vacancy advertisements, they are oftentimes used interchangeably in everyday speech. As the ways we work evolve, the language and terminology used also evolves. While remote working traditionally meant employees were in no way tethered to a central office, it is being increasingly used to refer to employees working from home, even partially.

Distributed Teams

One of the more recent terms to refer to the practice of working remotely is known as “distributed teams.” Distributed teams differ from the terms telecommuting and remote working in that the term typically refers to companies with no central office. While distributed teams are still relatively less common overall than other types of remote working arrangements, they are more prevalent in certain sectors. Startups, SMBs and tech companies will be more likely to utilize

this type of work for various reasons. Startups and SMBs may choose to have distributed teams to avoid the overhead costs of having a head office. Technology companies may view distributed teams as innovative and already feel comfortable with the various types of technologies that are required for this type of work. Some examples of companies whose workforce consists of entirely distributed teams are Zapier, Automattic and Buffer. Although many companies may not yet be ready to do away with the head office, there are many lessons to be learned from successful companies with entirely distributed teams.

Flexible Working

Flexible working is a relatively broad term that refers to a non-traditional working arrangement. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, flexible working is defined as, “giving flexibility over where, when and the hours people work.”⁶ It is an umbrella term that encompasses both telecommuting and remote working, and may look different for each company. For example, a company may decide against having employees work completely from home, but give them the option to work from home one day a week. Some companies may not have a work from home policy in place at all, but allow employees some degree of flexibility in their working hours.

While there are various styles of flexible working arrangements, each company must decide individually which setup works best for their business needs and employees’ situations. There is no one-size-fits-all arrangement when it comes to flexible working and your company may decide to do trial-runs with certain teams before implementing company-wide policies. For whichever flexible working arrangement your company decides to implement, it is important to transition employees smoothly and provide appropriate support. Having employees work from home leads to many companies having to make substantial adjustments to processes and operations.

However, it is an adjustment for the individual employees as well. They must adapt to reduced workplace interactions, learn new tools and

technologies and develop a new routine. Therefore, it is crucial for the success of any company to ensure proper employee support is in place.

A factor that is paramount when employees are working from home is that they are equipped with appropriate communication and collaboration tools. There is fortunately an array of tools to simulate almost any type of workplace function or interaction. While the seemingly endless amount of options can be overwhelming, deciding which tools are suitable for your company and within budget should be carefully decided. Having employees equipped with the tools to effectively communicate is a key aspect of successfully working from home.

Following the initial transition to a flexible working arrangement, there are further aspects that companies must address to sustain long-term success. If your company has a strong workplace culture, it is important to have a strategy in place to preserve this culture despite the lack of face-to-face interactions. While it perhaps requires more planning and creativity to develop a culture among remote teams, it is not impossible and there are many companies that have successfully achieved a strong company culture while not sharing a physical workspace.

For some companies, remote working may also even begin before the employee is hired. While remotely recruiting talent and onboarding new-hires is becoming increasingly more common, there are some key elements that must be considered and processes that must be firmly in place. This guide will share with you best practices for remote hiring as well as the benefits companies have experienced by adopting flexible working arrangements. It will also provide tips and best practices for how to get your employees setup for success, build a company culture and decide on the best tools and techniques.

TYPES OF REMOTE WORK

- TELECOMMUTING
- REMOTE WORKING
- DISTRIBUTED TEAMS
- FLEXIBLE WORKING

Chapter 1: Benefits of Remote Working

Each company has its own individual reasons for adopting more flexible working arrangements. For certain organizations, such as startups, remote work may have been a constant since the establishment of the company. However, for more traditional companies or large corporations, implementing flexible work arrangements may have been triggered by labor demand, economic conditions, health risks or a general desire to be more innovative and keep up with the times. Each organization that has chosen to implement flexible working arrangements has maintained this policy due to the perceived benefits outweighing the drawbacks. While each company will experience various benefits to a certain degree, most will report that the main advantages of flexible working arrangements are a reduction in overhead costs, increased employee wellbeing, higher productivity, a larger talent pool and a reduction in employee turnover.

“PRODUCTIVITY INCREASED BY 13% WHEN EMPLOYEES WERE PERMITTED TO WORK FROM HOME.”

Cost Reduction

One of the most direct benefits that companies will experience from implementing flexible working arrangements is a reduction in both real estate and overhead costs. While there are initial investment costs associated with setting employees up to work from home, over time, the decision will oftentimes pay off. According to an estimate by Global Workplace Analytics, for each employee that telecommutes 2.5 days a week, a company can save an average of \$11,000 per year.⁷ The estimate is measured using determinants of productivity, operation continuity, retention, real estate costs, transit subsidies and costs associated with absenteeism.⁸

However, the employer is not the only benefactor of savings associated with remote working. Having employees work from home is a great way to contribute to corporate social responsibility and lower costs that the community incurs from commuters.

With less drivers on the road, CO2 emissions are lowered along with a reduction in traffic accidents. Requiring less travel also allows employees to save on costs associated with gas and public transportation expenses.

Employee Well-Being

It is already well known that happy and healthy employees are statistically more productive. Due to this knowledge, companies have in recent years begun to invest more heavily in programs that seek to increase employee well-being. While there are many different ways to implement an employee wellness program, many include perks such as gym subsidies, exercise challenges and encouraging healthy food choices. While many of these programs are designed to improve physical health, employee wellness is actually composed of five interconnected elements. Gallup conducted a study in 150 countries, which identified the five essential elements of wellness. The study found that in order for people to thrive, they must be fulfilled career-wise, socially, financially, physically, and in their community.⁹ While employers do not have the ability to influence all factors of an employee's well-being, they can influence quite a bit.

Two obvious elements that employers have direct control over are career satisfaction and finances. Ensuring employees enjoy their work and are being paid a competitive salary that matches their worth are two factors that employers have direct control over. However, to some degree, companies also have the ability to wield influence over the other factors, particularly through offering flexible working arrangements. Studies have shown that offering employees the option to work from home has a positive influence on their overall levels of happiness.

A survey conducted by Owl Labs showed that 83% of respondents reported that having the option to work from home would increase their happiness.¹⁰ This boost in happiness stems from various factors, however, one of the most direct benefits employees experience from working from home is more time during the week.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average American worker has a 26-minute commute, which adds up to over four hours a week.¹¹ With these extra hours throughout the week, employees are able to spend more time doing things they enjoy, such as playing with their children, reading, exercising or cooking.

Productivity

Allowing employees to work remotely essentially means that they are being granted a higher level of autonomy and freedom than if they were working on-site. It is a natural fear that employers be concerned that this could negatively affect productivity. Without being in view, it is a commonly held notion that there is no way for team leads to monitor that employees are in fact staying focused and completing their tasks. However, research has shown that this is far from the truth. According to a study conducted by Ctrip, a NASDAQ-listed Chinese travel agency, productivity increased by 13% when employees were permitted to work from home.¹² The company, which has 16,000 employees, gathered the data from an experiment where half of their call-center employees were sent to work at home for nine months. The result was that employees worked more hours with less breaks and sick days and also were able to take more calls. The experiment was so successfully that immediately following, the company decided to implement remote working for the entire company.¹³

The success that Ctrip experienced with flexible working arrangements is not a unique phenomenon, but is often reported by companies with flexible working arrangements. However, it is difficult to determine whether the increased productivity is attributed to the home environment or to general employee satisfaction.

Satisfied employees are typically more productive and better performers and trust is an important aspect of employee engagement. Therefore, building trust by allowing employees to work from home has the ability to foster more productive and effective employees.

Wider Talent Pool

Recruiting top talent and filling key positions are pain points that nearly all talent professionals have reported at one time or another. There are certain in-demand skills that are difficult to find in any location, much less if the pool is limited geographically. While companies located in metropolitan areas have the advantage of a larger local talent pool, companies in more rural or suburban areas would particularly benefit from hiring remote workers. For SMBs that would prefer to stay in their home town, to corporations that would like to keep their real-estate costs low, there are various reasons for companies to have their headquarters located in less-populated areas. However, allowing employees to work remotely means that these company don't have to miss out on top talent.

However, this widening of the talent pool works vice-versa and there are benefits for companies located in metropolitan areas as well, such as in tech hubs. Through hiring remote workers, employers are able to tap into talent located in rural areas, and attract candidates, who may be reluctant to move to a large city. In doing so, these companies are not only attracting top talent, but contributing to corporate social responsibility by supporting economic development in rural communities.

Retention

A further benefit that many employers experience when adopting flexible working arrangements is a lower rate of employee turnover. Allowing employees to work from home makes them feel trusted and more satisfied, which both lead to higher retention.

According to a survey conducted by Owl Labs, 74% of respondents stated that they would be more likely to stay with their current employer if they were given the option to work remotely.¹⁴ However it is not only the aspect of job satisfaction that contributes to the higher rates of retention among remote workers. Employees oftentimes leave a job for geographical reasons. They may resign due to a spouse accepting a position in a different location, or because they simply decided the commute wasn't worth it anymore. Allowing employees the option to work from home, would eliminate the loss of a valuable employee for geographical reasons.

Although there are various other benefits companies have experienced when adopting flexible working arrangements, annual savings, employee well-being, productivity, a larger talent pool and reduced employee turnover are typically the highest reported benefits. While there are so many positive aspects of flexible working, it is imperative that companies carefully deliberate how these arrangements can best suit their business needs. It is also important to have a policy and plan in place to ensure efficient communication and a smooth transition. In the next chapters, we will look at how to successfully set up employees to thrive while working from home.

BENEFITS OF REMOTE WORKING

- COST REDUCTION
- EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING
- PRODUCTIVITY
- WIDER TALENT POOL
- RETAINMENT

Chapter 2: Successfully Transitioning to Remote Working

After companies have made the initial decision to implement more flexible working arrangements, next comes the planning and preparation phase. It is important to keep in mind that while employees may be enthusiastic about the opportunity to work from home, it is nevertheless a huge adjustment. It is also important to recognize that not all employees will adapt as quickly as others. While some may easily be able to retain their level of productivity and performance immediately after the transition, it may take others longer. Therefore, management should not make assumptions that all employees will immediately thrive in their home working environments.

The first step in managing this change is understanding the stages employees will go through. In Sarah Cook's book, *Making a Success of Managing and Working Remotely*, she recommends using Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's transition curve theory.¹⁵ The theory asserts that humans essentially go through seven stages when confronting change. As transitioning to working from home is also for many a huge adjustment, employees will likely all go through each stage to some degree. The curve begins with the first three stages of shock, denial and then self-doubt. During these stages, it is particularly important to listen to employees' anxieties around working from home and provide the necessary supports.

The next stages involve acceptance and experimenting. According to Cook, employees will accept the current situation and then begin experimenting with ways to cope with the transition. The penultimate stage is when employees may become reflective and internalize the change. The final stage of integration is when employees or teams return to peak performance. At this stage, employees have not only accepted their new reality, but found methods to work not only effectively from home, but even better than on-site.

While this final stage of change management is effectively the goal, companies should keep in mind that it will not happen instantaneously and there are methods that companies can employ to assist their employees with the transition.

Clear and effective communication is key when transitioning employees to remote working. Since communication is a two-way street, it is important to not only provide them with the information they need, but that the company receives feedback as well. It is also crucial that supports are in place for the employees, who may need it. Employee support may also look different for each company. For example, a tech company with a younger workforce may not experience the need to provide extensive training for new tools. However, their employees may struggle to adapt to the reduced amount of social interactions.

Communication is Key

One of the key elements for any successful employer-employee relationship is trust. It is also the building block of any successful business. The research institute, Great Place to Work, advised that “strategy-minded leaders, who care deeply about the financial wellbeing of their business, should make building a high-trust culture a top priority.”¹⁶ Although trust is integral to the success of any business, trust is difficult, if not impossible to build without effective communication. Trust and communication go hand in hand, and are even more crucial to the success of companies with remote teams. Therefore, it is important to not overlook the role that communication plays in successfully transitioning employees to working from home.

“STRATEGY-MINDED LEADERS, WHO CARE DEEPLY ABOUT THE FINANCIAL WELLBEING OF THEIR BUSINESS, SHOULD MAKE BUILDING A HIGH-TRUST CULTURE A TOP PRIORITY.”

One of the most important first steps in transitioning employees to working remotely is to clearly communicate what will be expected from them. Prior to their first day of remote working, the company should provide employees with the remote working policy. The policy should clearly delineate all expectations and regulations. Employees should also be made aware if they will still be expected to work their standard hours and if they must be available during these times. In the case that their role includes video conferences with clients, a dress-code may also still be stipulated. It is advised that companies carefully analyze the functions within each team to assess which particularly protocols must be in place according to the business needs.

Having all regulations communicated in the beginning of the flexible working arrangement will eliminate any ambiguities and set the foundation for continued success.

Since communication always works both ways, it is important to also request feedback from the employees. A great way to gather feedback from all employees is to send around a survey prior to the first day of remote work or during their first few weeks working from home. The purpose of the survey should be to assess if there are any tools or techniques that employees require to do their job effectively. For example, it might have been overlooked that one team frequently uses an agile board and believes this to be an important way of keeping track of tasks. In this case, the company may decide to invest in a tool that supports this type of collaboration. In addition to being able to assess needs, surveys provide employees with a chance to express their opinions and feel still connected to the company, even from afar.

Workplace Setup

With the average employee spending approximately half of their waking life working, it is essential that they have a workplace that is peaceful, comfortable and enables maximum productivity. This holds true for onsite employees, as well as those working from home. However, it should not be assumed that all employees have the same working style and thrive in the same environment.

While some employees may require a designated room in their apartment or house to work, some employees may prefer to work on their balcony or in a coffee shop. The equipment will also determine where they are able to work, as a PC is not portable, such as a laptop. If confidential files or data is part of the job, it may also not be permitted that employees work from outside their home. Therefore, it is important to provide employees with guidelines on where they are permitted to work, as well as tips to set up their own working area.

Although not all employees will already have a home office in their homes, there should be an area of their residence that is designated for working. Given that distractions are minimized, most would consider a desk in the living room or bedroom a perfectly adequate working environment. It is important that the office environment is replicated as much as possible. The television should not be on during the workday and childcare arrangements should also be made in advance. It may also be beneficial to provide employers with noise-canceling headphones in the case that they live in an urban area, where there may be frequent background noise, or if their partner also works from home.

Tips for Healthy Employees

While some employees may quickly adapt to working from home, it may take others longer to figure out this new way of working. The home, a space that is typically used for relaxing and unwinding must now be converted to a professional space that supports productivity. Some may find it more difficult to get into the work-mindset without the typical office environment, to which they are accustomed. There are, however, some useful tips that can help your employees ease into working remotely.

Although working from home can prove beneficial for employee well-being, for some, it can also be detrimental for physical health - at least in the beginning. It can oftentimes be more challenging to stay physically active and keep a healthy diet when working from home as opposed to in an office.

Although office work is also by nature, sedentary, physically traveling to the office provides more opportunities for movement. It is required to walk to the car or bus, sometimes to take the stairs and to walk to meetings or to the office kitchen during the day. However, when working from home, physical movement is oftentimes optional rather than necessary.

Due to the link between productivity and healthier employees, over half of all companies report having some type of wellness program.¹⁷ While it is not advised to roll out a wellness program while transitioning employees to remote working, companies can still provide tips on how to stay healthy. Three main ways employees can stay healthy while working from home are to keep a routine, get physical activity and to maintain a healthy diet.

One recommendation that many companies advise is to keep a structured routine and schedule. Encourage employees to wake up at the same time everyday and get dressed and ready for work as they would if they were going to the office. Employees should also be encouraged to take the structure a step further by using a zero-based calendar. Cathryn Lavery, the CEO of BestSelf Co recommends using a zero-based calendar to ensure every hour of the day is accounted for.¹⁸ By using a calendar with no gaps, employees are able to easily keep structure and manage their time in any working environment.

With over half of companies having some type of wellness program, physical health is no longer regarded a personal or private area. In fact, many job seekers have actually come to expect that companies will play some role in their health. Therefore, it is important for companies to encourage employees to get physical exercise, even when they are remote. One way for employees to engage in regular exercise is to make it convenient for themselves. Joanne Markow, the founder of the E-learning company, GreenMason suggests keeping exercise equipment close to your desk at home.¹⁹ Whenever there is 15 minutes to spare between meetings or during breaks, the hand weights and exercise mat are within easy reach and employees are more likely to get in some reps during the day.

Another way companies can support employees' physical health is to encourage them to eat healthy diets. While companies do have more influence on office-based employees' eating habits, such as through serving only nutritious options in the canteen or providing fresh fruit, there are tips that remote workers can be imparted with as well. Elisette Carlson, the founder of the PR agency, SMACK! Media recommends that employees practice meal-prepping.²⁰ Having healthy options, such as fresh fruit or a pre-made salad already stocked in the fridge will reduce the temptation for remote workers to order takeout or reach for an unhealthy option. As employees stock their own kitchens, they also have the ability to reduce temptations in a way that they don't have in the office.

SUCCESSFULLY TRANSITIONING TO REMOTE WORKING

- COMMUNICATION
- WORKPLACE SETUP
- HEALTHY EMPLOYEES

Chapter 3: Effectively Managing Remote Employees

The initial transition to having teams work from home is only the first step in building successful remote teams. It would be erroneous to believe that once employees are set up at home, they will all autonomously thrive and return immediately to their pre-transition level of productivity. However, it is possible to reach this level of productivity, or even a greater level if processes and management styles are adapted accordingly. Successful remote teams don't only have the most effective tools, but they are also managed in a way that promotes effective communication and collaboration while distributed. Remote workers must still feel valued by the company and connected to their team to sustain employee engagement. Management styles that may have been effective in an office environment may no longer function while working remotely.

Maintaining success with distributed teams is a process that does not happen overnight. Matt Mullenweg, the founder of the tech company, Automattic, asserts that there are five levels of remote work and that companies should aspire to reach the highest level.²¹ As the head of a company that works entirely remote and does not even have a brick and mortar office, Mullenweg has a unique level of expertise. While many companies have no plans to completely do away with a physical office, there are still lessons to be taken from Automattic's success.

In Mullenweg's five levels of remote working, he believes most companies fall at about a level two, which according to his classification, means companies are simply attempting to recreate the office at home. At this stage, employees are typically still working 9-5, replicating meetings with video conferencing, and replicating quick chats with instant messaging. However, the goal of remote teams should not be to create an ersatz office. Companies should instead focus on the positive aspects of remote working that are not available in a traditional office.

While most companies may have a distance to go before they reach the “nirvana” level of working, there are three key aspects management can focus on to reach this level - setting clear expectations, creating communication strategies and enabling effective collaboration.

Clear Expectations

One of the most important ways to start a remote working relationship off on the right foot is to set clear expectations from the beginning. For many, working from home may be an entirely new frontier and if expectations aren't set from the beginning regarding what is required of them, it could lead to issues at a later stage. If employees are still expected to be available from 9-5, this should be outlined from the start. Some companies may even expect their employees to take their lunch break at the same time everyday. However, if the company promotes asynchronous communication and does not require employees to be available every second of the day, this should also be made clear.

For companies, such as Automattic that place more emphasis on results as opposed to hours worked, there are many benefits to allowing employees to decide their own working hours. While a Results Only Work Environment or ROWE, may not work for all companies, there are clear benefits from utilizing this type of management strategy. While there are variations to the ROWE strategy, it generally implies that companies no longer track hours worked or in some cases, vacation days. According to the remote work job site, FlexJobs, companies that employ the ROWE strategy have reported more productive, efficient and engaged employees.²² However, should a company choose to use this strategy, it is critical to set clear goals and deadlines to ensure results.

Communication Strategies

In addition to setting clear expectations around goals, expectations should also be set around frequency and modes of communication. In distributed teams, effective communication is the key to success and communication strategies should be determined in the beginning of a

working relationship. An effective communication strategy should address expectations regarding responsiveness, as well as the frequency of both check-ins and team meetings. Strategies may even go a step further and stipulate the length of meetings and how various modes, such as email, messenger and video conferencing should appropriately be utilized.

Depending on the company, either synchronous or asynchronous communication may be favored and work best. If all employees are expected to work core hours, they are typically all expected to be available and responsive during this time. However, for companies that allow employees to create their own hours in line with the ROWE strategy, employees may not all have the same working hours. If the latter is the case, companies should stipulate appropriate lengths of time in which an employee is expected to respond to an email or message. It is also a good idea to discuss this with the team to address any responsiveness concerns in advance. As chasing colleagues or subordinates down to get an answer is never a pleasant experience, expectations around reasonable response times should be embedded in the strategy.

An effective communication strategy will also outline how often check-ins and team meetings will take place. While a monthly check-in meeting may have sufficed with onsite employees, without the direct line of communication that an office enables, check-ins with remote employees should be more frequent. A weekly or biweekly meeting with each member of the team is a great way to address any concerns and to keep lines of communication open. In addition to the individual check-ins, weekly team meetings are also a great way to ensure the team is working cohesively. In order to optimize team meetings, a structured agenda should be sent around in advance, so that expectations are made clear and the meeting stays focused.

Collaboration

In addition to managing the individual remote employees, effective management also involves ensuring teams are collaborating well with each other. Teams should not only be encouraged to collaborate but also be given the tools to effectively do so. It is important to also understand that barriers to effective communication oftentimes have to do with more aspects than simply physical distance. Erica Dhawan from the Harvard Business Review asserts that there are actually three types of distance in remote collaboration: “physical (place and time), operational (team size, bandwidth and skill levels) and affinity (values, trust, and interdependency).”²³ If management is only addressing the aspect of physical distance, they are missing two important factors that a team requires to effectively collaborate. Since the physical distance is relatively unchangeable, management should focus on minimizing operational and affinity distances.

Establishing values and trust within teams to improve collaboration is largely achieved through social connection and company culture, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. However, minimizing operational distance to improve collaboration within teams involves encouraging employees to create communication norms and adapt communication styles. Dhawan believes that communication norms are important in establishing “predictability and certainty.”²⁴ Communication norms are vital for collaboration by providing unwritten guidelines in terms of which mode of communication and level of formality to use. Beat Buhlmann, the EMEA General Manager at the knowledge management tool, Evernote, has also emphasized the value in remote teams establishing communication norms. He wrote: “It is important to establish communication rules in a joint team-code-conduct manner that includes teams and their wishes directly in the creation. When do we use chats? Why do we write emails? At what point do we pick up the phone? These answers should be a joint effort and one that is reflective of the team’s efforts versus that of one person.”²⁵ Buhlmann believes these communication ground rules are the key to effective communication and collaboration.

However, irrelevant of the communication norms, it is crucial that employees avoid ambiguity as much as possible. Distributed teams do not have the option to quickly pop over to a coworker's desk for further clarification. Therefore, in written communication, it is critical for collaboration that the context be as clear as possible. Employees should be encouraged to avoid ambiguity in both the information being delivered as well as in the tone. As the tones in written communication are more open to interpretation than with face-to-face communication, team members should practice writing courteously. A higher word count in emails is often worth the extra time rather than running the risk that an email be construed as curt or rude.

“65% OF PROFESSIONALS WOULD ACCEPT A LOWER SALARY TO WORK FOR A COMPANY WITH A POSITIVE CULTURE”

Setting clear expectations, creating a communication strategy and enabling effective team collaboration are three important facets of successfully managing a remote team. Although implementing policies and managing change requires effort and adaptation in the early stages, it will have huge payoffs in the long run. Team members being physically distanced does not mean that operational and social closeness must be sacrificed. Clarity in both setting expectations and in communication styles will ensure team members are engaged, able to effectively collaborate and are set up for success.

EFFECTIVELY MANAGING REMOTE EMPLOYEES

- CLEAR EXPECTATIONS
- COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES
- COLLABORATION

Chapter 4: Building Company Culture

Today's workforce is no longer simply looking to work for a company that can provide them with a competitive salary, good benefits and job security. Job seekers are also increasingly looking to work for companies, whose values align with their own and who foster a positive company culture. Workplace environment and culture are so important to today's workforce that according to a LinkedIn survey, 65% of professionals would accept a lower salary to work for a company that had a positive culture.²⁶ Workplace culture is not something that happens organically and companies must continually work at maintaining a positive culture.

"THE BEST CULTURES DERIVE FROM ACTIONS PEOPLE ACTUALLY TAKE."

It is also a misconception that employees must have physical proximity to each other to foster this. The authors of *Remote: Office Not Required*, Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson argue that building a positive company culture is just as possible with a remote workforce as with an onsite workforce. They write, "You don't need everyone physically together to create a strong culture. The best cultures derive from actions people actually take."²⁷ There, building a positive remote company culture should include encouraging and reinforcing actions that are aligned with the company culture and values. While there are unique challenges companies with remote teams face when building a company culture, there are various methods to overcome these challenges. Three key elements of building a company culture are establishing a set of core values, fostering social connections, creating a sense of belonging and providing employees with benefits that reflect the culture.

Company Core Values

Core values are essentially the identity of the company. They are the primary way of establishing a positive reputation with customers and with the general public.

Core values also assist with making decisions by ensuring decisions are in line with these values and the overall vision and goals of the organization. However, core values are also the cornerstone of any strong workplace culture and a way to attract and retain top talent. Marissa Levin, the founder and CEO of the Management Consultancy Firm, Successful Culture, asserts that a company's values, mission, and vision "define what a company believes, stands for & values more than profits, where the company is going, and why the company exists."²⁸ Therefore, these values should be carefully decided and engrained into all aspects of the company.

Deciding on core values is also a decision that should not be taken lightly in the early stages of the formation of the organization. As employees at all levels from C-level executives to interns will be expected to live out these values daily, they should not be chosen arbitrarily. In small companies, it may be possible to include all employees in deciding on the values. However, larger companies may appoint a small group of selected employees to define these. Whether one of the values is "Warrior Spirit," such as at Southwest Airlines, or a more common value, such as integrity or transparency, they should uphold the company's vision.

However, simply naming the core values will not build the company culture if these values are not lived out every day in employees. Core values should be reinforced in all business functions from hiring to customer engagement to internal communication. Companies should also seek talent who share the core values and ensure that they are communicated early on in the hiring process. Part of onboarding new employees should also include elaboration on the values and training on specifically what each one means and how it aligns with the vision.

Companies should also include the core values in performance reviews. Performance should not only be evaluated on productivity, but also on contributions to the company culture through living out the core values.

Social Connections

Humans are social creatures that require strong relationships with others to feel a sense of belonging and wellbeing. Given that the majority of employees spend 40 hours a week working, work relationships can have a huge impact on overall happiness. Positive social connections at work lead to not only happier, healthier and more productive employees, but also a stronger company culture. When employees trust one another, they are more likely to be engaged and feel a sense of loyalty towards the company. This trust among employees creates a positive company culture that fosters creativity and collaboration.

It is also important that remote teams feel a sense of cohesion and trust one another. While building social connections in teams without the advantage of close proximity presents challenges, there are various ways these can be overcome. It is important to recognize that social connections primarily happen when employees get to know each other on a more personal level. Employees should be encouraged to have opportunities to socialize with each other outside of team meetings and about non-work related topics. One way to encourage employees to do this is to organize virtual lunches, coffee chats or quiz nights. Virtual events are one way to replicate the organic office conversations that happen in the lunch room or around the water cooler.

Companies can also encourage employees to form social connections outside of their teams by creating interest-specific groups. Book clubs, wellness competitions or parenting groups are a great way to connect employees with similar interests.

However, in addition to enabling social connections, companies should also show employees they care about them and celebrate them as individual. Although special occasions such as birthdays and work anniversaries cannot be celebrated in the office, sending a card or a gift basket is a small gesture that goes a long way.

While social connections can to a certain degree be initiated and maintained from a distance, there are indeed benefits to periodic in-person interactions. Quarterly or annual in-person team or all-hand meetings provide employees the opportunity to meet and bond face-to-face. Some companies even take this a step further by hosting company retreats with the main objective of team-building. While hosting periodic meet-ups or retreats can be a large initial expense, the benefits of having more cohesive teams and a more positive company culture are oftentimes worth the initial investment.

Employee Benefits

A further way companies can foster a positive culture is through showing employees that they are valued. Although there are various ways companies can show employee appreciation, a comprehensive benefits package is one of the most effective ways. While most companies already provide basic benefits such as health, vision and dental care, some are going a step further to provide benefits that reflect their culture and values.

If one of the core values revolves around lifelong learning, companies can promote this value by investing in employees' personal development and learning. Establishing an education reimbursement program for employees to take courses is one way to encourage them to develop themselves professionally. Companies may also decide to invest in their own training programs of which employees can avail.

Another way companies can build culture through benefits is by initiating ad hoc recognition programs. Recognizing and showing appreciation for those that go above and beyond in their roles boosts morale and increases engagement.

Companies can show employees that their efforts are noticed through various types of recognition programs. They can be rewarded monetarily, with tangible gifts or through verbal recognition. The recognition may also be peer-to-peer or top-down.

However the company decides to design the program, it is important to keep in mind that it should be strongly aligned with the company values. Recognition programs that are aligned with company values will encourage employees to reflect these values in their work and will lead to a stronger company culture.

A further way to build a positive company culture is by establishing an employee wellness program. However, it is important to keep in mind that while a wellness program can improve company culture, it will struggle to be utilized if a “culture of wellness” is not already in place.²⁹ For example, employees will most likely not feel comfortable taking company-sponsored yoga classes on their lunch break if they have previously been indirectly encouraged to work through lunch. If a wellness program is to be successful, the company must already prioritize employees’ health and wellbeing. Doing so will not only benefit the company culture, but will also lead to more productive employees. With the link between health, happiness and productivity, having a culture that promotes wellness will lead to incremental albeit substantial benefits for the company.³⁰

BUILDING COMPANY CULTURE

- COMPANY VALUES
- SOCIAL CONNECTIONS
- EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

Chapter 5: Essential Tools for Remote Teams

Without the array of various tools and technologies that are now available in the digital age, it is safe to say that many companies would not be able to sustain a remote workforce. Digital tools allow remote teams to be able to communicate, collaborate, stay organized and be able to do their best work. Therefore, companies must ensure that each team is adequately equipped with the tools for success. There is no silver bullet when it comes to choosing tools and each team will have its own specific needs. It is important to keep in mind that while some teams may require extra tools, there should be company-wide tools that all employees have access to and are trained to use.

Digital tools for remote working should ideally be as intuitive as possible and user friendly. Companies should also try to minimize the amount of tools as much as possible and eliminate any that have the same function. Employees should also be given training sessions to learn not only about the technical aspects of the tools but also appropriate communication. For employees that are new to remote working, they may not have an understanding yet of when it is appropriate to use the various different tools.

Although the amount of remote working platforms can be overwhelming, a good place to start is with ensuring employees can effectively communicate and collaborate with each other. Below we will look at various tools for these purposes and also extra tools on the market that you may find beneficial for your business needs.

Internal Communication

A breakdown in communication is one of the primary reasons teams cease to properly function. Lack of communication within teams can lead to misunderstandings, reduced trust and general disengagement.

Therefore, when deciding on which tools are best for your company, the ability to communicate effectively should be at the forefront of decision making. Communication between remote employees should as much as possible replicate communication that would take place in an office environment. Employees should be able to have synchronous as well as asynchronous communication. As non-verbal aspects such as body language and tone of voice account for the majority of communication, employees should be able to frequently communicate via video meetings. As a rule of thumb, companies should at the very least equip teams with a video conference platform and an instant messaging platform.

Some of the most common video conferencing platforms currently on the market are Skype, Zoom and Google Meet. When deciding on which tool to implement into your business, it is important to do a cost and feature comparison to ensure it is within budget and will allow employees to effectively communicate. At the very least, the software should be user friendly so that employees with varying levels of technical experience are able to quickly log in and join or initiate a meeting. However, in addition to being user friendly, companies may find that they require software with additional features. Muting attendees, initiating breakout rooms, replacing background images or screen sharing are some features that companies may find beneficial.

In addition to a video conferencing tool, it is also important for remote teams to be equipped with an instant messaging platform. Slack, Google Hangouts and Cisco Spark are three of the most commonly used instant messaging platforms for business at the moment. Although Slack is viewed as the premier business instant messaging platform and has an undeniably great interface, it may not be right for all companies.

While Slack has some useful features such as mentions, channels and notifications, some companies may find the app to be too distracting, out of budget or equipped with more features than necessary. Therefore, it is important that companies decide what they would like to get out of a messaging app in order to make an informed decision.

Project Management

In addition to communication tools, remote teams should also be equipped with project management tools. While video conferencing and instant messaging software can also of course be used to collaborate, successful teams should have access to software that also allows them to share files and collectively work on documents and projects. The goal of project management software should be to minimize communication silos by allowing all members of a team or project to be updated on progress, track tasks and have access to necessary information. Three of the most popular current project management tools are Asana, monday.com and Trello.

These three project management tools all allow teams to effectively collaborate on projects by organizing and managing tasks. With these tools, teams are able to maintain an overview of tasks, deadlines, resource allocation and budgets. They also allow for documents and information pertaining to the project to be stored in one location for easy access. For teams whose work is primarily project-based and requires extensive collaboration, a project management tool is essential. However, with the various features and interfaces, companies should do research prior to choosing one. As with deciding on communication software, it is important to make a decision based on the organization's individual budget and requirements. Not all project management tools contain all features. For example, if file storage is important, you may consider choosing Asana over monday.com. However, if you prefer a clear interface, then monday.com may be the best choice.

Fortunately in terms of decision-making, these tools typically have a free trial period. Companies should try designating one team as the test-team to try out each of the tools in order to make an informed decision about which one is best long term.

Extra Tools

While communication and collaboration tools are the foundation of all successful remote teams, there are various other tools of which companies can incorporate to optimize efficiency and streamline processes. These tools may not be necessary for remote teams to function, however they can enable better working. Further online tools of which companies may decide to avail have the capability to improve company culture, organize content and share knowledge company-wide. Below we will look at some tools that may not be a requirement for everyday processes, but will be the proverbial cherry on top for remote teams.

If companies have prioritized their company culture and ensured that they are hiring talent that will sustain the values of the organization, they will most likely have a healthy company culture. However, company culture is something that isn't easy to analyze quantitatively. However, fortunately there are tools that allow companies to now do this. Tools such as Culture Amp, TINYpulse and Lattice allow companies to manage employee performance and track levels of engagement.

. Each of these tools uses employee surveys to collect data on the employee experience. The data can then be used to identify areas of improvement in the company culture. For example, if a large percentage of employees state they do not feel recognized for their work, the company may decide to initiate an employee recognition program. Tools that track employee engagement and company culture are a great way for companies to identify and act on areas where their culture can be improved.

Some companies may want to take internal communication a step further with a knowledge sharing platform, such as an internal wiki. Internal wikis are a type of business tool that allow employees to collaborate, document and share information. Wikis can be used for a variety of knowledge sharing, including topics such as internal processes, individual roles, company events, and basically anything imaginable.

While this type of tool is useful for any company, they are especially beneficial for remote teams, which could be more prone to communication silos. Three of the most popular wikis on the market right now are Confluence by Atlassian, Tettra and Notion. While they each serve the purpose of allowing employees to more easily access and share information, as with other tools, they vary in cost, features and interfaces. Companies should explore various knowledge sharing tools before making a decision to ensure it meets their individual business needs.

ESSENTIAL TOOLS FOR REMOTE TEAMS

- INTERNAL COMMUNICATION TOOLS
- PROJECT MANAGEMENT TOOLS
- EXTRA TOOLS

Chapter 6: Acquiring and Onboarding Remote Talent

One of the major benefits of having a remote workforce is that talent is no longer constrained geographically. Recruiters are not limited to a talent pool within commutable distance to the office, or having to persuade candidates with desirable relocation benefits. In terms of sourcing talent, the world is more or less open. However, while there are benefits, sourcing and recruiting remote talent does come with its own challenges. While recruiters will no longer have to persuade candidates to relocate, they will have to persuade the remote working arrangement. Although some candidates may be delighted at this opportunity, others may be sceptical, particularly if they have little experience with non-traditional working arrangements.

With remote recruiting, it is also important to test certain soft skills that are crucial for remote employees to have. These soft skills include the ability to work independently, reliability, self-accountability and excellent communication. Although employees can develop certain soft skills over time, it is a win for the company if employees are ready to hit the ground running from day one and already thrive in a remote working environment. Therefore, it is critical that recruiters are able to source talent with these skills and that they have a means to test them during the application process. While attracting, recruiting, hiring and onboarding the right new talent are essential elements of all companies, these processes must be adapted for remote employees. Below we will look at ways to optimize these processes to attract and retain top remote talent.

Attracting Remote Talent

As with the acquisition of on-site talent, acquiring remote talent is a process that includes talent attraction, recruitment and hiring. The foundation of any successful talent acquisition strategy begins with attracting talent through employer branding.

Employer branding is essentially a way to market the idea of working for your company to potential candidates. Companies that have developed a reputation as a desirable place to work ensure a steady source of top talent. However, for both partially-remote and fully-remote companies, effective employer branding is even more critical for attracting top talent. Two ways companies can improve their employer branding is by showing potential talent that they have a positive culture and are reputable and trustworthy.

When sourcing talent remotely, it is also important to consider where the jobs are being advertised. If the company is open to candidates in all timezones, but the job is advertised with the city where the central office is located, it will not have a wide reach. Unless job seekers are specifically looking for a remote role, they will most likely only search for jobs in postcodes where they are willing to live or to relocate

However, there are certain online job boards that are tailored specifically to remote roles. Advertising open roles on job boards such as FlexJobs, RemoteOK and We work remotely is a great way to ensure you are attracting talent that is enthusiastic about working remotely.

Remote Recruiting

Even for companies that are not yet remote, they most likely have at least some stages of the application process that could be readily used for remote talent. It is very rarely the case that a company would decide to meet a candidate in person directly after reviewing their application. Doing so would not only be a poor use of resources but would also be nearly impossible. Therefore, recruiters will begin the process by narrowing down the pool of applicants oftentimes many stages prior to an in-person interview. If the applicant looks like they may be suitable for the role from their application, the next step is typically a phone screening or asynchronous video interview. This may then be followed by a virtual interview or a skills assessment. It is typically not until the applicant is quite far along in the recruitment process when they will be invited to an in-person office to meet the team.

Due to the fact that many current recruitment practices are already for the most part suitable for remote talent as well, many talent professionals must not completely adapt their hiring processes. However, while many stages of the remote hiring processes may not differ from candidates for on-site roles, omitting an in-person interview may be met with trepidation. For many companies, it is a standard practice to invite the candidate to visit the office and get accustomed to each other. For the candidate, it is an opportunity to experience what the culture and workplace is like. For the interviewers, it is an opportunity to see how the candidate behaves socially and whether they will be a good company and role fit. Although humans are social creatures and there are benefits to meeting face-to-face, for some companies, in-person interviews are neither an option or a necessity.

Buffer is one example of a company that has mastered the art of remote interviewing. As a company with an entirely distributed workforce, their entire interview process takes place remotely.³¹ Buffer's hiring process consists of three virtual interviews, which each focus on a specific element. The first interview is based around culture and values, the second around experience and the third is tailored around any areas that may need further attention. According to Buffer, this three-step virtual interview process has eliminated the need to meet candidates in person.

Remote Onboarding

Having remote teams does not mean companies must sacrifice quality onboarding. Strategic onboarding has been shown to increase retention rates, increase employee engagement and decrease the amount of time before new hires are productive. Therefore, this practice is critical for on-site and remote teams alike. However, according to surveys from the Human Capital Institute, most companies have room to improve when it comes to onboarding. The HCI survey showed that over half of organizations have an onboarding program that is focused on processes and paperwork. In addition, nearly a third claim that their program is "informal, inconsistent, or reactive."³²

Whether new hires are onsite or remote, it is imperative that they feel welcome and set up for success from day one. Below we will look at some techniques to successfully onboard new remote hires.

When onboarding a new hire, one technique that has proven to be successful particularly for remote teams is the use of a buddy program. Assigning new hires with a buddy is a great method to improve the employee experience and ensure new hires a successful start. Effective buddy programs should have both a social and operational purpose. For example, if the new hire has questions about who to contact for IT issues, they could ask their assigned buddy. However, the buddy is not only there to minimize the confusion when starting a new role, but also to make them feel welcome and included in the company.

The 100% remote company Buffer has taken their buddy system to the next level by assigning new hires with two buddies. At Buffer, each new hire is assigned a “Role Buddy” as well as a “Culture Buddy.” The Role Buddy is someone in the new hire’s team who is familiar with the role and will help with any questions related to the specific job. Due to the huge emphasis placed on culture at Buffer, each new hire is also assigned a Culture Buddy for their first six weeks, who trains them on company norms and core values. Having two buddies ensures that employees are set up to thrive not only in their specific roles, but in the company culture as well.

In addition to implementing a buddy program, there are other ways companies can ease the transition for new hires and improve the remote employee onboarding experience. As remote employees are more susceptible to feeling isolated and disconnected, it is important to minimize these feelings throughout the entire employee journey, but particularly so in the beginning. New hires should be set up with equipment, connectivity and passwords from day one so they can get into the work flows as soon as possible. It is also important that new hires have an opportunity to get to know other employees.

Depending on the size of the company, it may not be possible for new hires to meet all employees, but they should ideally have the chance to get to know their team and department. Arranging virtual coffee breaks or lunches for new hires to meet fellow employees is a great way to increase inclusivity and make new hires feel welcome.

The importance of a positive onboarding experience is a stage in the employee life cycle that should not be overlooked. With the average employer spending over \$4000 to hire each new employee, it is crucial that these new hires successfully transition and stay with the company.³³ Negative onboarding experiences are detrimental to not only expedited productivity, but also to retainment. Surveys have even shown that employees are twice as likely to leave a company following a negative onboarding experience.³⁴ Having a strategic onboarding program in place that focuses on the person and not only the paperwork is key to creating an engaged workforce and increasing employee retention.

RECRUITING AND ONBOARDING REMOTE TEAMS

- ATTRACTING REMOTE TALENT
- REMOTE RECRUITING
- REMOTE ONBOARDING

Conclusion

Since the turn of the century, there has been a paradigm shift in the way people work. Employees are expected to be more agile, connected, and team-oriented than ever before. However, companies on the other hand are expected to provide flexibility and a healthy work-life balance. Due to this trend, the demand for flexible working arrangements has skyrocketed in recent years. However, it is not only employees that are demanding these arrangements, but also governments. The public health requirements in light of the COVID-19 crisis showed that remote working is not only desirable, but also sometimes a necessity. However, companies must not approach remote working as a government-mandated burden. While not all work can be performed outside an office environment, an increasing amount of roles can easily be adapted to be performed remotely. There are also a myriad of benefits that companies will experience from allowing employees to work from home, even during times when it is not required.

Companies that allow employees to work from home experience reductions in overhead costs, higher rates of employee wellbeing, and higher productivity among employees. In terms of talent recruitment and retainment, these companies also have the benefit of a wider pool of talent and less employee turnover. However, the caveat is that remote work must be done correctly. Simply having employees work from home without first setting them up for success will not yield positive results. Therefore, it is important that companies inform themselves of the best practices to ensure effective and engaged remote workers. As discussed in Chapter 2, there are three important aspects to keep in mind when transitioning employees to working remotely. Companies must ensure employees are well-connected, have a workplace setup for success and are knowledgeable about ways to stay healthy while working from home.

While a smooth and supportive transition is key for change management, companies must also adapt how remote employees are managed following the transition. The three key methods to ensure effective remote team management are setting clear expectations, creating communication strategies and encouraging collaboration. Although these methods are also vital for on-site team management, as we outlined in Chapter 3, they are even more critical when managing remote teams. Companies will also find that in order to effectively collaborate and communicate, employees must be equipped with the appropriate tools. In Chapter 5, we looked at the two most common types of tools - internal communication software and project management software. We also discussed extra tools on the market that your company may find beneficial. When it comes to tools for remote teams, there is unfortunately no panacea.

In addition to ensuring employees are properly set up and management is equipped with the tools to effectively lead remote teams, it is also imperative that companies are able to foster a positive culture and successfully recruit and onboard new talent. As we saw in Chapter 4, many companies have successfully created positive work cultures among remote employees. However, building a positive company culture with distributed teams does present different challenges than with on-site teams. It is crucial that as a first step, companies define their values, since these serve as the cornerstone of any company culture. Once the core values are defined, companies should then focus on enabling social connections among employees, as well as showing appreciation through employee benefits. Building a positive company culture will not only increase retention, but also play an important role in attracting new talent.

While a good company culture that includes remote working options will be a valuable asset for employer branding, there are still challenges associated with acquiring and onboarding remote talent. In Chapter 6, we looked at ways remote talent professionals can overcome these challenges and successfully attract, recruit and onboard remote talent.

As these stages make up the first part of the employee journey and are essentially the first impression the employee has of the company, they should not be overlooked. Acquiring new talent and effectively onboarding may look slightly different in remote companies, but they nonetheless vital to the success of any organization.

Now that you have an overview of what remote working is and how to effectively operate remotely, you're well on your way to managing successful distributed teams. However, this e-book is intended to only scratch the surface of this style of work and is no way all-inclusive. Every organization will have differing functions and cultures that require variations in how they work remotely. Whether seamlessly transitioning to remote teams, fixing information silos, scaling your business while staying remote, or choosing suitable software, we can work together to improve how your company works remotely. To discuss your individual business needs, I encourage you to contact me to book a consultation.

Source

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