



Managing Virtual Teams

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By Bill Leonard

Offering virtual work options can be a way for organizations to retain valuable employees and, in some cases, to boost employee productivity.

Christine Barney, chief executive officer and managing partner for rbb Public Relations in Coral Gables, Fla., says her company has offered telecommuting and virtual work options to its 36 employees for more than eight years. Evolving technology and improved access to Internet broadband connections has resulted in “organic growth” of flexible work options, Barney says. This is true at her company as well as at many other employers.

However, as virtual and flexible work options continue to evolve, more employers are attempting to formalize their virtual work policies and get a better grasp on how to manage virtual workforces. Barney began writing her company’s flexible work policy about three years ago. She says that the policy works well, but it needs to be tweaked and adjusted as technology evolves and as employee and client demands change. Currently, the company reviews the policy at least once a year, and Barney says doing so every six months would be even better.

Who’s Cut Out for Virtual Work?

HR professionals throughout the world are grappling with developing and adjusting policies and procedures for virtual work. The “nuts and bolts” of this task, according to Aon Hewitt’s Chad Thompson, senior consultant with the talent and rewards practice in Southfield, Mich., is making sure employees have the tools they need to work remotely, such as personal digital devices, high-speed Internet connections and laptop computers with virtual private network connectivity.

Providing tools is easy, Thompson says. The tough strategic questions that HR leaders must answer are: How do we pick the right people for the jobs? How do we ensure that virtual workers feel they are part of the team?

“Some people are well-suited to work virtually, but there are also skills that have to be nurtured and developed to become an effective telecommuter or virtual worker,” says T.H. Ong, vice president, Americas and Asia Pacific, for Global Integration Inc., an international management consulting group in San Francisco.

Thompson recently completed research for a client that wanted to identify the traits of successful virtual workers and telecommuters. One conclusion: The best virtual workers tend to be those who thrive in interdependent work relationships.

“Virtual work teams, by their very nature, are interdependent work relationships,” Thompson says. Interdependent work teams share common goals and responsibilities; at the same time, the team members are self-reliant and self-motivated.

Personal work style represents another trait that can help identify those suited for virtual work. Employees who don’t mind or who like ambiguity in their job responsibilities tend to do the best in virtual work environments, Thompson says. People who like regimented schedules and concrete instructions on how to do their jobs won’t perform as well in virtual work settings. Virtual work

requires independent thought and a willingness to take initiative. Those who tend to struggle in virtual team situations are people who wait for instructions and want to be told what to do.

A third key trait relates to job skills. As demonstrated above, the skills that tend to make people self-reliant and willing to take initiative are important and closely tied to the other key traits. But, according to Thompson, strong communication skills may be most important for virtual workers. Employees must write well to draft easy-to-understand and to-the-point communications.

Ambiguity can be a detriment because the way virtual workers write and comprehend written communications can alter meaning and generate unneeded tension among team members and managers, Thompson says.

Surprisingly, a person who has the reputation of being a “lone wolf” tends not to perform very well in a virtual team. It’s an incorrect assumption that a lone wolf will excel as a virtual worker, according to Ong, because most lone wolf types have poor communication skills.

“Lone wolves get that reputation because they tend to keep things to themselves and aren’t very adept at collaboration,” he says.

Avoid Isolation

Once members of virtual work teams are identified, the risk of those employees disappearing or fading into the background grows. Some call it the “out-of-sight, out-of-mind syndrome.” Virtual team members can easily feel disconnected and that they are not part of an organization.

According to sources interviewed for this article, keeping virtual workers engaged and promoting a sense of belonging are possibly the toughest challenges that managers of virtual work teams face.

“One of the fundamental motivators we have in our lives and in work is the desire to be part of something and to feel that we belong and are contributing to an organization,” Ong says. Effective “managers know how to instill those feelings of engagement into their staffs. With virtual work teams, it just takes a little more effort to reach out and engage someone whom you don’t run into in the hall or by the coffee machine. It’s a much different work dynamic, which requires more overt gestures of communication.”

Ong recommends that managers focus on “community before activity.” To build rapport, meetings should begin with informal chats about what members are doing outside of work. These talks will help to build a sense of community and help members feel connected, according to Ong and others.

“There is definitely a social face or aspect behind the success of teams that perform and work well together,” says Mike Ryan, vice president of marketing and client strategy for Madison Performance Group, a performance management consulting group in New York City. “Teams have shared context in how they perform their jobs and shared experiences.”

Stay Connected

Ryan and Ong recommend that employers with virtual teams create or provide space on the information technology system specifically for those teams—a section or bulletin board on an intranet would serve the purpose. While this space naturally should focus on sharing information about projects, such a platform also should have a social network type of function that allows team members to share personal experiences along with family news or photos, for example.

“Within an office setting, co-workers swap stories, talk about their family and share vacation photos. It’s part of being part of an organization and feeling connected to the people you work with,” says Eduardo Salas, Pegasus Professor of Psychology at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, Fla., and program director of the human-systems integration research department for the Institute for Simulation and Training. “With virtual teams, employers need to provide a way for team members to interact and encourage them to build that sense of community and friendship.”

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Ryan says employers should resist any temptation to police the social and interpersonal interactions on virtual team intranets or bulletin boards. He contends that a “police presence will inhibit and even undermine interaction. People will be less willing to share information and maybe even resort to creating independent websites or bulletin boards.

“Most, if not all, employees who work virtually understand the implications of posting inappropriate comments or content,” Ryan continues. “Most employees who work virtually tend to be very professional and don’t want to jeopardize their jobs or work arrangements. The bottom line is that employers have to trust their employees and allow them to interact without the feeling that Big Brother is watching.”

Effective Appraisals

Feedback helps virtual workers feel connected to an organization. Salas says feedback should be provided early and often. In an office setting, feedback can come in many different and unstructured forms, such as congratulations or comments on a job well done when passing in the hall, or questions and guidance on a project during quick impromptu meetings.

Tips for Managing Virtual Teams

Eduardo Salas, a psychology professor at the University of Central Florida, and several colleagues have researched and identified effective practices for managing virtual teams. While these strategies could apply to practically every team, the challenge managers face is how to implement them effectively in a virtual work environment. Salas says leaders of virtual teams must possess strong written and oral communication skills. They also must understand that managing such teams requires conscious and concentrated effort.

Salas recommends that managers:

- Establish team operating procedures, set expectations and objectives, and define team members' roles and responsibilities during an initial meeting.
- Foster a team mentality and set goals that require teamwork. Specific, challenging and attainable goals will motivate virtual team members to work together and build strong and productive relationships.
- Communicate often and encourage team members to communicate with each other. Leaders must provide regular work updates and require the same from the team.
- Develop communication and information exchange protocols. Communication must be structured and professional. For example, a protocol may include the following: Avoid haphazard communications by proofreading messages and double-checking recipient lists.
- Set an example for all team members by following communication guidelines and striving to support the team's goals and objectives. Leaders of top-performing teams usually lead by example and exhibit behaviors that they want and expect from team members.
- Track progress and productivity. Even though leaders have limited opportunities to directly observe the work behaviors of team members, improved software tools and virtual private networks give leaders effective and accurate ways to track information and to gauge team performance and individual contributions.

- Provide constructive team and individual feedback early and often.
- Balance challenges and duties—such as off-hours meetings or business travel—equally among team members.
- Review team communications regularly for interpersonal conflicts and performance concerns; intervene early.
- Recognize and reward positive individual and team performance. Rewards offered to virtual teams must be tied to individual and team goals and should be awarded often.

“With virtual teams, the leaders have to make the extra effort to reach out and pass along comments on work projects,” Salas says. “It takes a more conscious and concentrated effort than it does when an employee is in the cubicle next to you.”

The Rise Virtual Teams

In this new era of work, telework and work performed by virtual teams is rapidly becoming the norm, as evidenced by the results of Aon Consulting’s 2009 Benefits and Talent Survey.

Researchers found that 97 percent of the respondents reported that their organizations either planned to increase virtual work and telework options or to keep them at the same level.

Supervisors face the challenge of managing these virtual workers and work teams.

Even with such high interest among employers, many top-level managers are still asking: “Why should we offer virtual work options?” Recent research conducted by Chad Thompson, senior consultant with the talent and rewards practice for Aon Hewitt, reveals one reason: The productivity of virtual work teams tends to increase from 10 percent to 43 percent, depending on the industry and organization. Thompson discovered that in several cases the net increase in productivity was equal to or more than the organization’s savings on real estate costs. These types of returns tend to grab the attention of chief executives and chief financial officers.

Additionally, surveys conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management, Aon Hewitt and WorldatWork have found that virtual and flexible work options have a moderate to strong positive effect on employee retention.

Christine Barney, chief executive officer and managing partner for rbb Public Relations, offers anecdotal evidence: “Because we offer telework or virtual work options, our company was able to retain two very valued and skilled employees.”

Her organization has 36 employees, eight of whom telecommute or work virtually on a regular basis. Virtual and flexible work options are available to all her employees, so the idea of working virtually is well-accepted.

“Of course there are some jobs that it just won’t work with, like the receptionist’s job,” Barney says. “But our employees understand their roles and how working off-site or from home fits into what we do.”

Executives in businesses with clients scattered over a wide geographic area have learned quickly that virtual teams have become a necessity. Barney says the nature of her organization’s business led to the creation of the virtual teams.

“The way we work on projects, even within the same office, is essentially through e-mails and shared computer files,” she says. “It really doesn’t matter where a person is located—either in the office or working from home—the interaction and communication tools are essentially the same.”

Another challenge in the feedback and job appraisal process is making sure that virtual team members receive proper credit and recognition for their work performance. According to Barney with rbb Public Relations, a system of 360-degree feedback has worked well for her virtual workforce.

“Everyone understands their job roles and how they support each other, and we’ve found that feedback and performance evaluations from other team members are very effective,” she says. “It also motivates people to do their best, because they understand that poor performance reflects badly on the whole team. When you understand how poor performance affects your co-workers and friends, then most people will want to try harder.”

Succession planning and promotions involving virtual team members can be excellent indicators that they are receiving recognition and credit. HR professionals in organizations

with virtual teams need to make sure that those team members are considered for promotions and career development, according to Barney and Ryan. If they're not being considered, "you need to examine and reassess how virtual team members are perceived," Ryan advises.

A clear understanding of job roles and performance measures is essential to the appraisal process. Performance metrics should be concrete and objective measurements that apply equitably to all team members. Managers usually don't intend to use subjective criteria when evaluating performance, but often personal preferences, relationship perceptions and even appearances can have an impact on appraisals. Therefore, employees who aren't in the office can be treated or assessed differently.

Employers must take care not to vary the performance standards and metrics for virtual workers who have job duties that are similar to those of office-based counterparts. Disparate or unequal treatment has the potential to become a massive legal headache.

"Objective metrics that clearly measure job performance and work product such as call volume, customer satisfaction ratings, work orders completed and projects completed on deadline are good to use when assessing the performance of virtual teams," suggests Paul Lopez, a director with the law firm Trip Scott in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. "Employers will get into trouble when managers don't follow set procedures or standards and end up treating employees differently."

The same standard applies when disciplining employees, according to Lopez. "If there's a perception that employees who telecommute or work virtually are treated more favorably than employees who are in the office or vice versa, then that can spell trouble for an employer," he says. "It can be a delicate balancing act."

The author is a senior writer for HR Magazine.