

4 Ways to Cultivate Productivity in a Remote Workforce



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Millions of people now work where they live. This is no longer a perk or a budding trend, but a ubiquitous, normal workforce model—and we're not going back to the old days any time soon. In fact, many enterprises and small businesses intend to continue operating remotely after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The transition to remote work hasn't been without its challenges. Most organizations have needed to go virtual by necessity; they haven't had the opportunity to really consider their options or optimize their remote work arrangements. As a result, many business owners have faced uncertainties and challenges around remote workforce management, engagement, and productivity.

How do you make sure people are doing their jobs when they work from home? How do you keep your team motivated?

1. FIND THE RIGHT PEOPLE TO FIT THE REMOTE PROFILE

Any working arrangement—remote, in-person, or a flexible mix of the two—succeeds when it empowers all people to do their best. The model you use needs to serve every member of your workforce, not the only way around.

People that work remotely assume a number of benefits - no commutes, more work-life balance, and a personalized workspace and routine. Many people become more efficient when they are able to leverage flexibility into their schedule. These workers are comfortably responsible for their own productivity, and will prove to be excellent assets in a remote workforce.

However, there is a profile of workers that thrive with in-office camaraderie. They aren't proficient time managers and they tend to perform better when their supervisor is nearby. Sending this profile of workers to work at home may require you to micro-manage, ensuring tasks are completed correctly and on time.

Identifying the profile that flourishes in a remote environment can be excellent news for your business. It means your advantage lies in your people, and not in an expensive virtual toolset. But it also means that you need to tailor your model to your people, and more fundamentally, that you have to have the right people—the right employees, contractors, or both—to begin with. In other words, the question of who's working matters more than where, when, or how they're working.

Consider which people in your company are best suited for remote work. Whenever possible, this evaluation should begin during the recruiting and hiring process.



FlexJobs¹ recommends asking candidates and new hires questions such as the following:

- Have you ever worked remotely before? How was the experience for you?
- Do you prefer to work independently or as part of a team?
- How important is face-to-face communication to you?
- How do you manage your time and deadlines?
- How comfortable are you using remote technology?
- What does your home office setup look like?
- What do you do to unwind from work?

In general, people who succeed at remote work share certain skills and personality traits. According to *Entrepreneur*², characteristics to look out for include self-motivation, self-discipline, strong communication skills, tech-savviness, a high degree of responsiveness, and prior remote work experience. Curiosity, adaptability, and entrepreneurship also are important, as they will need to keep an open mind and a positive attitude as they encounter changing circumstances.

Fortunately, these competencies can be taught and improved upon. The issue is that management too often assumes everyone has the same needs and comfort level.

2. FIND THE RIGHT BALANCE FOR YOUR BUSINESS AND WORKFORCE

Ideally, a workplace should be neither completely remote nor completely tethered to a single physical location. As JT McCormick recently wrote in CNN Business³, the optimal solution is a “dynamic work environment,” where “companies maintain an office space but allow people a mix of in-office and remote work.”

People should have the freedom to work in the way that’s most productive for them, to work remotely some days and collaborate in-person other days.

Of course, it isn’t always possible to adopt a flexible model. You may be stuck managing everyone and everything remotely due to, say, health and safety concerns during a pandemic. In that case, the key to success is to, again, build the model around the needs of your workforce.

As discussed above, identify the employees who are well-suited for remote work, and give them the tools and space they need. Then, recognize the people for whom remote work is a learning curve, and provide them with extra coaching and help. For both groups, communication is pivotal.

3. IMPLEMENT A ROBUST COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK

Effective remote workforce management hinges on a combination of the right tools and the right mindset. You can have an extraordinary, self-motivated team, but if you don’t set them up for success, they’ll feel lost and unsupported, and ultimately become disengaged.

¹ <https://www.flexjobs.com/employer-blog/interview-questions-ask-first-time-remote-worker>

² <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/289370>

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/27/perspectives/fully-remote-workplace/index.html>



This is the point at which it's time to consider your technology. You'll need to leverage virtual collaboration, project management, and communication software. You'll also need to ensure that every remote worker has access to a computer equipped with a webcam, high-speed internet, a high-quality headset, and any other hardware necessary to do their job.

Just as important is your communication strategy. You can't micromanage in a virtual model—another reason to find people who are disciplined and driven to begin with. It isn't feasible to check in with every team member multiple times per day.



Instead, you'll need to develop a recurring meeting format that balances visibility for managers with space for employees. There should be ample opportunity for group discussions and one-on-one conversations, but (depending on the size of your workforce) something more frequent than a weekly or twice-weekly call may be overkill. Be mindful of meeting fatigue⁴, which remote technology can exacerbate⁵. Rather than conducting all conversations over the phone or video, create a channel for ongoing, incidental work chat—tools like Slack and Khoros Communities are great for this.

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Remember that communication is about more than managing people and projects. For a dispersed team, it's also essential for maintaining morale and organizational culture. Consider how you'll celebrate achievements, recognize workers, and have fun remotely. Over the internet, these things don't happen automatically the way they do in a conventional office.

4. TIE WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT TO QUANTIFIABLE PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Remote work tends to have a “honeymoon period.” For the first couple weeks or months, workers feel energized and empowered by their newfound independence. Productivity stays the same or improves. Communication channels remain abuzz with both work- and non-work-related conversations.

And then things start to go quiet. People stop responding to emails and calls as quickly. Work slows down. Before you know it, engagement dips and attrition rates creep up.

To prevent this from occurring, you need to measure productivity and take proactive steps to encourage it. Success in a remote work environment needs to be clearly defined and results-driven. A manager and worker should be able to get on a call and look at an objective scorecard that ties individual efforts to key performance indicators (KPIs) for the business.

⁴ <https://hbr.org/2017/07/stop-the-meeting-madness>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200421-why-zoom-video-chats-are-so-exhausting>



KPIs should be relevant to the individual or department in question. For a call center agent, for example, a good KPI may be customer satisfaction (CSAT) scores, customer lifetime value (LTV), response time, or customer retention rate. For a marketing or sales person, perhaps it's customer acquisition or conversion rate. Other professionals will track things by deliverable, deadline, hours, cost, or profit.

In any case, the more quantifiable, the better. Productivity can't be a matter of guesswork. After all, remote managers can't walk around the office and read body language. They can't look at timesheets to determine

who is and isn't working hard. And remote workers can't always correctly gauge their own productivity. Left to their own devices, they may slide into lackluster performance or—as happens more often⁶—push themselves too hard and burn out.

Keep in mind that no matter how you measure and encourage productivity, there will always be some challenges in managing a remote workforce. Know your workforce. Establish trusting relationships with your employees. Realize that some people will need more support than others.

Many enterprises have found that a virtual flex model can supplement their brick-and-mortar or work-from-home teams to maintain business continuity during these unprecedented times. To learn more about the scalability of the virtual flex model and how it helps enterprises access better talent, when they need it, visit liveops.com.

⁶ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-employees-feeling-burnout-rises-top-stressor-list-justin-black/>

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