

MANAGEMENT

The must-haves for the must-succeed virtual office

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Most organizations today employ at least some individuals who work in a telecommuting or virtual capacity. The benefits for both companies and their employees can be powerful, as long as three important components are in place.

The Right People

When companies open up the possibility of a virtual work force, they expand their opportunity to attract and retain top talent. Many parents, for example, are willing to work to maintain and grow their professional skills and experience while they are raising young children. But many are unwilling to spend valuable time on a long commute.

Others who may have retired

from a daily in-and-out-of-the-city commute would welcome the opportunity to continue their careers in a different way.

While many positions require workers to be available during certain hours of the day, those with more flexibility offer the greatest options to be telecommuting or virtual. These positions allow businesses to employ individuals who may not be available during certain normal work hours or those who simply do their best work in the wee hours.

When employing a telecommuting or virtual work force, management must demonstrate trust and be willing to let go. Only those who understand that getting the job done well is more important than

the hours a worker is putting in, when and where, will be able to succeed in this model.

For the virtual worker, it is critical to understand what you are getting into before committing. Self-starters who can manage their time well are the best candidates. Because the situation can be isolating, it's important to create and sustain outlets for social interaction.

Good communicators on both sides are a must. Managers need to be clear about what they expect, and employees need to ask for what they need to do the job well. Regular, ongoing communication enhances success when people work virtually.

The Right Tools

While some virtual workers will choose to maintain a shared office space, many will opt to create a home office. Either way, companies need to clarify what equipment, i.e. computer, phone, fax, printer, copier, etc., the company will provide and what the employee will have to acquire.

Employees will need access to company data, and many options exist to facilitate this – folder share programs, in-house servers, web-based programs, collaborative software, for example. Phone lines can ring either to an in-house or virtual pbx system. E-mail, instant messaging, Skype and web conferencing tools like Go To Meeting keep the

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virtual communication lines open.

Knowing when and how to use which tools can enhance exchanges and build strong working relationships.

The Right Communication

If you have the right people and the right technology, you are on your way toward the third member of a productive, profitable virtual team - communication. Managers and employees must be excellent communicators to thrive in this business model.

Deciding on when and how communications will take place will prevent misunderstandings and promote productivity. Interactions can be in real time or asynchronous with today's technology, so options are endless.

Making time for the social interactions that occur naturally

in an office setting will also build morale and create a stronger team. Even a few minutes of chitchat during business calls or over IM creates rapport among team members.

Keep virtual workers in the loop about company happenings, especially if some of your team is a mix of in-house and virtual. And

don't ever neglect the value of face time - even if it has to be over a web camera.

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