HOW TO MANAGE REMOTE EMPLOYEES

a leadership guide
to supporting your
distributed team

OWL Labs   TINYpulse®

CHAPTER **1**

THE WORKING WORLD IS GOING REMOTE

The increase in remote work is startling. Research shows that in 2016, 43% of full-time employees worked remotely at least part of the time, up from 39% in 2012. With an increase in the workforce from 2012 to 2016 of almost 9 million people, there are now over 50 million people working remotely, full or part-time.

It's for good reason, too. Remote work research shows benefits for both employee and employer, including hiring, retention, and employee engagement. Technology by nature is giving the workforce flexibility to work from anywhere. Millennials have come to expect the ability to work from home – in fact, the 2015 AfterCollege Career Insight Survey found that a whopping 68% of job seeking Millennials were more interested in companies that offered remote or flexible work options.

What does this mean for managers?

It means that the workforce is expecting flexibility, and companies who want to stay competitive as employers need to adapt.

The following statistics are from the 2017 State of Remote Work Report that Owl Labs and TINYPulse created as a guide for companies looking to attract and retain the best remote talent. Let's take a deeper look. -

- 52% percent of employees work remotely at least once per week.

- 51% of people who work remotely choose to do so in order to have better flexibility and work/life balance.

- Remote work decreases employee turnover. Companies who support remote work have 25% lower employee turnover than companies that don't.

- Working remote doesn't negatively impact employee's investment in their work.

- Fully-distributed companies take 25% less time to hire than other companies.

There you have it – the number of people who work remotely is steadily increasing, and supporting remote work benefits both employees and employers. Let's dig a little deeper into those benefits, shall we?

"a whopping **68%** of job seeking Millennials were more interested in companies with remote work options**"**

CHAPTER **2**

CAN WE JUSTIFY WORKING REMOTELY?

While it's easy to see why employees would enjoy or even prefer working remotely, managers need to be thoughtful about how to move forward.

For example, could allowing remote work put the organization at risk? Could it decrease team productivity or disrupt company culture? As a manager, will I be able to lead effectively with a team that's partially onsite and partially remote?

This guide will help you address these concerns and more, and first let's dig into the organizational benefits of making a shift to allowing a flexible work culture.

Lower stress drives employee happiness

Less stressed employees equal more productive employees. For example, an employee who sits in traffic for 45 minutes a day, or perhaps is struggling to balance her personal and professional life, isn't going to be as happy with her job. If a person isn't happy with her job, she won't be able to work at her full potential.

Shorter (or nonexistent) commutes and flexible work hours leads to a decrease in stress, less time wasted, more productive work hours, and increased happiness among employees. A study by economists at the University of Warwick found that happy employees showed a 12% increase in productivity. One of the researchers, Dr. Sgroi, says that "the driving force seems to be that happier workers use the time they have more effectively, increasing the pace at which they can work without sacrificing quality."

Supporting remote work expands your candidate pool

Removing geographical limitations instantly expands your hiring pool. For every great candidate in a manager's local city, there are

hundreds more around the world that could do the job just as well -- if not better and more efficiently. There's more choices to choose from, more unique skillsets, and more opportunity for growth.

Remote work strengthens trust between manager and employee

How might we be able to correlate remote work and employee retention? Turns out supporting flexible work can improve trust within the employee-manager relationship.

Take a study done at MIT as an example. Dr. Peter Hirst, MBE and Associate Dean at MIT Sloan's Executive Education department, was inspired by the MIT 2012 Quality of Life Survey that found if an employee has a supervisor who is open to flexible work, that employee is more likely to stay at the company.

Dr. Hirst took these findings and created an experiment to pilot a flexible work program for his department. The goal of the pilot was to transform remote work from a rare privilege for select people to a common opportunity for every employee. The pilot had tremendous positive impact on his team, including:

- 90% of the team said that their family and personal life improved

- 85 percent agreed that their stress was reduced

- 80 percent said that morale and engagement improved

- 93 percent believed that collaboration was better than before

The most unexpected result that Dr. Hirst discovered was that more than half (62 percent) of his employees reported feeling more trusted and respected by the end of the experiment.

He attributed that improvement to a fundamental change by managers during the pilot in order to effectively support their remote employees, specifically in regards to evaluating their employees' effectiveness.

For example, previously a manager could monitor whether an employee was working effectively using visual cues -- is the person at her desk, is she typing away at her computer, etc. A manager can't rely on these visual cues when she's not in the office.

So what do you do? Dr. Hirst believes that managers should step away from needing this kind of visual confirmation and instead -- simply trust them. Set clear goals and expectations and trust the person to do the work from wherever he or she is.

Your employees will rise to the occasion. Trust is a strong motivator that drives employee engagement.

Further research echoes this idea. A recent Harvard Business Review study shows that employees who feel trusted perform better, exert extra effort, and go above and beyond expectations.

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CHAPTER **3**

LEADING THE MOST SUCCESSFUL REMOTE TEAMS

Now that you've seen the data, hopefully that initial concern has dissipated - we can justify remote and flexible work due to its mutual benefits on the company and the employee.

Once you've made the choice to allow remote work, the next step is to understand how to support it. So how do you effectively lead a distributed team with on-site, flexible and potentially full-time remote employees?

The secret? Your goal as a leader is to ensure there is absolutely no division between your remote and in-office teammates. Let's dive in.

Show all employees that they're trusted

As we previously discussed, when employees feel trusted, they produce better work. Managers can cultivate strong trust by doing the following:

Set clear goals, expectations, and performance metrics. It's your job to be crystal clear. Communicate when assignments are due and explain the impact that each assignment will have. Give guidelines on what success looks like. A great way to communicate these expectations is through a project management software, such as Asana or Trello. Set high, medium, and low priorities, assign them to team members with a due date, and watch tasks get accomplished. See which tasks have not been started, which are in progress, and all completed projects. Using a software such as Asana, eliminates the need for managers to constantly check-in with employees, which communicates trust.

It also helps to use the SMART method when creating goals: **s**pecific, **m**easureable, **a**ttainable, **r**ealistic (and relevant), and that a **t**imeline is set. People in general work better and more efficiently with clear, attainable goals.

Avoid micromanaging. Managers who micromanages are demonstrating that they do not trust their employees. Most employees don't work well under scrutiny and would prefer to do without a boss watching their every move. That behavior doesn't strengthen your relationship - it tears it down. If you create a clear system, set strong goals, and trust that you hired the right person for the job, you eliminate the need to micromanage.

Set up your distributed employees to work as a cohesive team.

Geography can't impact your team's ability to work together effectively. Managers of distributed teams should encourage relationship building and frequent communication across all team members.

Use a messaging app such as Slack. The 2017 State of Remote Work report found that people miss casual conversations most when working remotely. Using a messaging app, such as Slack, mimics those drive-by conversations people enjoy in the office. Team members can stay in communication throughout the day for quick and efficient collaboration, as well as chat simply to keep in touch. When your team is dispersed, you can't rely on chance to have these kinds of hang outs. Proactively reach out to your remote employees to ask them how they're doing. Tell your team to do the same, and it will help build stronger relationships across your team.

Use meeting time as a chance to connect "in-person." How? Use video. In fact, if you only use audio today, you're putting your remote employees at an extreme disadvantage during group meeting time. Why? Because the people on the call are getting only half of the message.

Research by Albert Mehrabian showed just how much of human communication is more than words.

Take a look at his research's breakdown of the components of communication:

- 55% comes from facial expressions and body language

- 38% comes from vocal inflection and tone of voice

- 7% from words themselves.

The bottom line? Make sure you're using video technology that prominently shows the faces, emotions and body language of the people in the room. Tools like the Meeting Owl video conferencing camera show a 360 degree panorama of the full room and can automatically focus on whoever is speaking at any time. That type of remote experience is key for effective communication.

Build a culture of transparency. Encourage in-office and remote employees to share status updates, work progress, and relevant results. This type of culture encourages discussion and collaboration, gives teammates the context necessary for making smart, independent decisions, and helps prevent any feelings of isolation.

Ensure that the company culture reaches remote employees.
Many managers take the time to properly onboard in-office employees by going through necessary documents, giving office tours, and introducing the person to other members of the team. Put a similar system in place for remote employees.

Communicate the culture early on. Host a one-on-one video meeting to discuss the company mission, values, and work guidelines. Managers might even find value in reviewing the company handbook with new employees, so questions can be addressed face-to-face (on video) early on. Introduce the new hire to the team via email, or invite them to a group video hangout so the new person can meet the other members of the team.

Show remote employees how much you value them. Everything provided to in-office employees should be extended to remote employees in one way or another. Make sure remote employees have a comfortable place to work, the equipment they need (desk, computer, phone, etc.), and a sufficient wireless connection. It's also important that remote employees have access to important documents should they need them. Is your team getting a special Holiday gift this year? Make sure you mail it to your remote employees! Employees want to feel valued, and valued employees are productive employees.

Plan a yearly retreat. A retreat is the perfect opportunity for all team members to be in the same place at the same time and finally meet face-to-face. Use the time to review the past year and strategize about the upcoming year. Make sure to schedule in group social time - employees will get to know each other better which will drive stronger group performance long term.

Make working remotely a cultural norm. Unfortunately, it's not uncommon for a person to judge a fellow employee for utilizing the company's remote or flexible work options. Make sure the team shows support when someone chooses to work from home or leaves early for their son's soccer game. When a company fully

embraces flexible work, it doesn't matter when or where a person is working. The only thing that matters is the person's results. In fact, going into the office does not always drive productive work. The Wall Street Journal found that office workers are interrupted (or self-interrupted) every three minutes.

Encourage all team members to work remotely. The best way to drive team-wide acceptance of remote work is to build empathy. Once employees try working remotely for themselves, they'll feel empowered and understand how much can get done in the environment of their choice. (Or, they might realize how lonely it can be, and become more supportive of their full-time remote teammates.)

As an idea, encourage the entire team to work from home for a full week, so everyone can get the full experience.

Lead by example. Managers can show employees that they support remote work by doing it themselves. Tell your team that you need to step out for an important family event. Employ work-from-home Wednesdays for yourself. If the boss is working remotely and all is well, that's a solid sign.

"office workers are interrupted – or self-interrupted – roughly every three minutes."

Build career paths for your remote employees.

The State of Remote Work Report found that remote employees report having 25% fewer growth conversation than the average employee. To combat this statistic and ensure that your remote and in-office employees receive equal career support, make sure you consider all employees regardless of location for growth opportunities as they arise.

Prepare for these decisions by discussing individual goals with all employees to better understand how they hope to grow. Encourage new, relevant opportunities to remote employees to help them thrive.

Proactively schedule one-on-one time.

When you're working in an office with someone and see them every day, it's pretty easy to gauge how the person is doing without a formal check-in. It's a bit harder to know how an employee really feels when they work remote and you don't see them face-to-face. To combat this, managers should schedule one-on-one meetings with each of their remote employees: two 15-minute check-ins once a week, an hour check-in every two weeks, and monthly career conversations. By taking the time to talk with each employee individually, managers will have the opportunity to gauge employee happiness, discuss goals and opportunities, and resolve issues when needed. And remember, use video!

Share big picture information and be transparent.

It's the manager's responsibility to know how each person's work builds toward the company's goals. Share this exciting big picture information with the remote employee to emphasize that person's value and tie back his efforts to the other work happening at the office.

Example: Tell Bill that the copy he is writing is for a landing page that has a goal of 1,000 downloads. Explain that of those 1,000 downloads, 29% are expected to become new customers. Those 290 customers would equal hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenue for the business. This helps employees visualize the meaning of their work, and how they as an individual directly affect the goals of the company.

Eliminate hierarchy between team members.

Most teams demand creativity, problem-solving, high levels of motivation, and fast and efficient work. Everyone works together on different pieces of the puzzle that all come together in the end. If hierarchy exists between team members, frustrations arise, along with feelings of isolation. Studies show that employees are better motivated when a hierarchy doesn't exist. This is especially true for remote employees, as they can already feel a sense of isolation.

Eliminate the sense of hierarchy by grouping employees into distributed teams. Team one works on one piece of the project, team two on another, and so on. Be transparent with all employees by showing them how the pieces of the puzzle fit together. Each and every person's work is needed to launch a product or reach a goal, so there really is no need for hierarchy.

The bottom line is that there shouldn't be a division between remote and onsite employees. To run the most effective distributed teams, there is a need for managers to embrace new techniques and adapt their style to create new, more efficient systems. Supporting and enabling employees produces happy teammates, and as we know, happy teammates = productive employees.

The benefits of working remotely are strong for employees. **But could the benefits for managers and companies be even stronger?** Possibly.

PRINTABLE CHEAT SHEET

WHY WE CAN JUSTIFY WORKING REMOTELY

- Lower stress drives employee happiness
- Supporting remote work expands your candidate pool
- Remote work strengthens trust between manager and employee

HOW TO LEAD THE MOST SUCCESSFUL REMOTE TEAMS

- **Show all employees that they're trusted**

    Set clear goals, expectations, and performance metrics.

    Avoid micromanaging

- **Set up your distributed employees to work as a cohesive team**

    Geography can't impact your team's ability to work together effectively.

    - Use a messaging app such as Slack
    - Use meeting time as a chance to connect "in person"
    - Build a culture of transparency

    Ensure that the company culture reaches remote employees

    - Communicate the culture early on
    - Show remote employees how much you value them
    - Plan a yearly retreat

    Make working remotely a cultural norm

    - Encourage all team members to work remotely
    - Lead by example

- **Build career paths for your remote employees**
- **Proactively schedule one-on-one time**
- **Share big picture information and be transparent**
- **Eliminate hierarchy between team members**

ABOUT **OWL LABS**

Mark Schnittman and Max Makeev wanted a solution to video conferencing for remote employees, as they felt that every solution out there was incredibly painful to endure.

So, they created the Meeting Owl. An intelligent 360° all-in-one video conferencing device that centers virtual conferencing around remote participants. Their mission was to create the inclusive meeting experience remote employees deserve. It is one of the first IoT devices for the company conference room.

The Meeting Owl helps your remote team members see, hear, and participate in meetings more effectively.

GET A LIVE DEMO

Interested in a free remote work strategy session?
Sign up for a free 30-minute session to discuss the issues your team may be facing around remote or flexible work.

We'll dig into your concerns and challenges, and then make customized recommendations for what tools and strategies will work best for your team.

GET A FREE CONSULT

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