

## Managing Remote Teams

It is becoming more and more usual for us to work remotely. This might mean working at different offices, working in the field at client sites, or working from home. Whilst modern technology provides adequate support for remote working to take place, it is often the case that a manager is not so well equipped for managing a team that they rarely see together. Remote workers can feel forgotten and under-appreciated or under-developed, whilst remote managers can feel a lack of control or awareness in what's happening with their team.

As a manager of remote workers, working with or in a remote team produces a number of challenges – not knowing who does what, lack of communication, unproductive meetings – are just some of the list of difficulties that you may face.

This guide will help you by giving you some ideas on how to avoid these challenges.

### Lack of social interaction

This can be a problematic area for remote teams, and can lead to lack of trust amongst team members, or lack of cohesion amongst the team. Colleagues often know very little about the other people on their team and thus don't turn to one another, using expertise that may be spread across the team.

Poor performance can often be linked to lack of information, and isolation.

Meetings amongst remote teams are often dispersed and lead to people being overlooked or overloaded – such meetings tend to be very task focused.

Ideas to help build trust and team cohesion:

- Run team meetings that are focused on both business and social outcomes. Whilst these can be done remotely, face to face is much more effective.
- Share experiences to build mutual knowledge
- Identify individuals' contexts – some people may work in an office for a couple of days each week, this means that they may find it easier to access technical support than those who work purely remotely.
- Share social and career history for team members and identify and share areas of expertise
- Aim to build a shared identity for the team

### Over-reliance on Email

How many emails did you get yesterday? We all seem to be bombarded with messages, there are many benefits to email, remote workers and remote managers can have a tendency to over-rely on it.

Dangers of overuse:

- Miscommunication is very possible

- Emails are often sent without being carefully checked, or are sent when tempers are frayed
- Feedback can be delayed
- Too many people are copied in
- There is no ability to read voice tone and emotion, therefore a message can often be misconstrued

Using the most appropriate Communication methods:

- Use the telephone, (or wherever possible, face to face), whenever emotions are likely to be involved – e.g. giving bad news. Your conversation can always be followed up in writing if necessary
- Find out which medium of communication team members prefer
- Use simple methods (e.g. email) for conveying information
- Provide supplementary material where appropriate at team meetings

### Providing opportunities

It is often the case that remote workers feel overlooked when it comes to information on office or wider business changes, they have less opportunity to meet with and get to know those in higher management positions, and they miss out on the day to day information that is part of working in an office based team.

Furthermore, a remote worker can feel that they have less opportunity in terms of learning, growth and development; they have less face to face time with managers and rarely the first to know about development opportunities.

Development ideas for remote workers

- Start with a plan. Work with the individual to get a great development plan put together. This should cover short and long term goals and should include a variety of ways of developing skills (e.g. training, forums, new tasks, reading, self-learning etc).
- Make sure that the development plan includes clear timescales and set dates for reviewing with you/their manager. This encourages commitment on both sides.
- Maximise opportunities to build networks. If there are key dates in the office calendar e.g. visits and presentations by board directors, update meetings, staff events, try to ensure that wherever possible your remote workers are invited. If your organisation has several offices, try to make sure that you are up to date with all activities, so that you can encourage your remote workers to attend events at their nearest office.
- If your organisation has several offices, you could try to organise a regular (maybe monthly) team meeting and rotate the location, so that your remote team get to know different offices and their staff.
- Make sure that you set aside adequate time for one to one meetings with your team members, you should be checking their progress, getting updates on their work and

discussing their development. This doesn't have to happen face to face, but it must be a priority for you as manager.

- Make sure that you keep your team up to date with developments – perhaps a weekly roundup will suffice in most circumstances, but if opportunities to attend training, presentations or get involved with other projects arise, make sure that your team get the same opportunity to apply as other, office based staff.

### Building Trust and good working practices

Trust can be an issue for managers and teams working remotely. We cannot see our colleague physically sitting at their desk, so we may doubt how hard they are working. To put these thoughts aside can be difficult, particularly if a manager does not know their team very well, but an effective manager will know that a team member's productivity and output will be evidence enough that they are working. It's also important that a team member trusts in their manager, they know that they are supported, that their manager trusts them and that their team does a great job.

Here are some tips for good working practices for remote teams:

- If your team is new, it's a great opportunity to get them to build a team charter – what expectations do they think should be set for the team as a whole? What are the internal service level agreements that they think will help the team to run smoothly?
- Set some expectations around regular updates – some teams will send a weekly update on a Friday afternoon, stating everything that they have achieved during the week, and what they expect to achieve in the coming week. It helps a manager to keep an eye on workload and productivity as well as being a really useful tool for planning.
- Set some commitments from you – be a role model. Tell the team what contact, work, and commitment they can expect from you and stick to it. You might commit to a catch up call for each person at a regular time, or set out the face to face reviews that you will plan over the coming months.
- Consider a regular team conference call. This helps the team to get to know one another, to understand the roles of their colleagues and to build trust amongst team members.