



Dear Workforce: How Can Employees Adapt to Working Virtually?

Clarify expectations and develop support systems for the new environment. Don't rely solely on technology, but make sure your managers are involved, too.

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Dear Workforce:

Our not-for-profit will be moving to smaller quarters at the end of the year. We will be “hotel-ing” employees in the new space, and encouraging much of the staff to work from home at least part of each week. How do we help people adjust? Which policies effectively keep productivity and dedication high in organizations with a dispersed workforce?

—On the Move, director of HR services, services, New York City



Dear On the Move:

Your organization is making key decisions about working arrangements—possibly to streamline operations, as are many organizations in today’s economic climate. While providing flexibility around where people work can produce many benefits, it also poses challenges relating to how effective people will be in their roles.

To minimize the initial performance dip that can occur with a major change, clarify expectations and develop support systems for the new environment. Below are a few ways to effectively manage the transition.

Leverage technology and social networking portals for employees to connect. There are both established and emerging technologies to distribute information and engage virtual teams, with a few key options outlined here. (Be sure to clarify your organization’s policies before beginning these initiatives.)

- Rarely, if ever, is no news perceived by employees to be good news. Senior leaders should conduct virtual “town hall” meetings to share information, clarify expectations and foster dialogue.

- Use “convergence software” (like WebEx, GoToMeeting or Live Meeting) to facilitate online meetings with audio and video. These tools also offer virtual document sharing, white boards and breakout sessions, mirroring what can be accomplished in person.
- Leverage online social networking and collaboration portals (like Huddle) to manage team documents and use message boards. An existing intranet portal may also be enhanced for these activities. Consider these options for formal and informal exchanges among employees.
- Use communication tools like instant messaging for real-time interactions and questions. This is a great way to communicate efficiently and build rapport among colleagues.

Designate opportunities for face-to-face interaction. Maintaining productivity and engagement requires a balance between virtual and in-person contact between colleagues, teams, managers and leaders.

- Teams and work groups should schedule regular times to meet in the office to ensure alignment around key activities and enhance rapport
- Formal and informal opportunities for cross-level and cross-functional interactions should also be established. This will help prevent people from becoming “siloes” and isolated.

Leverage the manager role to drive performance and engagement. Managers play a vital role in helping employees stay focused and motivated in a dispersed environment. They can do this in the following ways:

- Clarify any changes to roles and expectations for all employees, including themselves (in particular, any new responsibilities around virtual interactions).
- Partner with employees to set short-term goals for projects and assignments. They should also conduct regular teleconferences/videoconferences to discuss achievements, next steps and additional support needed.
- Hold weekly conversations with each employee about current performance and development goals. Make sure to allow time just to catch up and talk about how they’re adjusting.
- Help their teams develop guidelines for how they expect to work together in the virtual environment, referring to the guidelines as needed.

There is no magic bullet for maintaining productivity and dedication through the transition—it will require a combination of virtual and in-person communication, manager involvement and other activities unique to your firm. You will no doubt uncover innovative ways to excel in the virtual environment that weren’t available before.

SOURCE: Courtney Mohr, Organization Effectiveness Practice Lead, [BPI group](#), Chicago

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