REMOTE WORKER MANAGEMENT TIPS

Transition workers quickly while keeping the company legally protected.

The quick spreading COVID-19 or coronavirus requires companies to instantly update their work practices in order to keep everyone safe. As a result, many companies have had to switch from a contained workforce to a workforce that is comprised primarily of people working from home.

While many companies already have the technological infrastructure and workplace policies in place to support remote employees, many small businesses are not prepared for a sudden shift in operations.

This information was created to help small businesses transition their workforce as quickly as possible, while keeping the company as legally protected as possible. We've broken down remote worker management into three areas: technology, productivity and communication.

TECHNOLOGY CONSIDERATIONS

Since the coronavirus pandemic hit quickly, most businesses weren't afforded the time to check if their infrastructure could handle a remote workforce. In addition, since a large share of staff will be working from home, it's necessary for staff to have adequate internet connections, speed, and security on their home systems in order to effectively handle work duties, some of which may be confidential.

As much as possible, test your IT infrastructure and see if your servers can handle a larger remote workforce. Try to shift workers in phases and conduct trials of home-based work groups to see how your servers handle it. Check your emergency action or business continuity plan to determine what protocols have already been established to assist the company in case of disaster.

Regarding home technology needs, communicate with staff to determine what their home office setups are.

- What equipment do they currently have: desktop, laptop, screens, cables, keyboards, mice, headsets, routers and modems, etc? Work with your IT personnel to determine what is needed for each person or department to accomplish business needs.

- Are their telephone needs that will need to be met? For example, will workers require Skype or Google Voice to replace office phones?

- Do employees have adequate internet speed and bandwidth to accomplish their work duties? You may need to conduct connectivity tests or check with their providers to determine if they have bandwidth limits that will prevent them from successfully handling their jobs.

- Do staff have appropriate virus and malware protection? Many people take a lax approach to security at home and may create security vulnerabilities. Make sure staff have decent virus and malware protection to keep data safe.

- Are VPNs required? If staff will be performing confidential duties or transmitting sensitive personal identifiable information, security and confidentiality will be paramount.

- How will you backup work or make sure it isn't stored on employees personal systems?

- Will you need to arrange access to systems?

- Tech support: who should employees contact if they run into technical issues at home?

PRODUCTIVITY CONSIDERATIONS

Many bosses struggle with staying on top of staff productivity if they are not on location where they can be seen. In addition, staff may not have the abundance of tools and resources that are available on location. Some are concerned that staff will take advantage of this situation and use their paid time to accomplish personal goals.

I wish I could tell you that I had a tool that would eliminate that, but I don't. It doesn't exist, and it really doesn't need to exist. There has been a shift to remote workers steadily over the past years for a reason: when done well it works and saves time and money. While we may not have the luxury of time to plan it out extensively, we can still take steps to make sure staff is able to stay productive and connected to their job, co-workers, and company.

The first thing to do is to determine how you will track hours worked. From system sign in/out stamps to screenshots to shared work tools, you need to establish how you'll manage timekeeping duties for payroll purposes. Look at what you use now and if you can't use it as is, try to establish a procedure that's as similar as possible. While this won't be a big consideration for exempt employees, the coronavirus pandemic requires such a fast shift in business that many hourly workers may now be working from home. Since the system you put in place may be trial by error, be flexible and check in regularly with employees to see how it's working on their end. You may need to establish hours when the system is unavailable, i.e. times when NO EMPLOYEE should be signed in, checking emails, or any other type of work activity.

Next you need to make sure remote staff have the tools and applications they need to accomplish their tasks. This may include (in addition to the technological considerations listed above):

- Software and applications
- USB drives, thumb drives or other storage media
- Speakers, microphones or webcams
- Writing materials (pens, paper, dry erase board, etc.)
- Forms, files folders, dividers, etc.
- Collaboration and file sharing tools (Office365, G-Suite, etc.)
- Technical support: who should employees call if they run into technical problems at home? I know we mentioned this in the technology section, but an inability to work due to technical problems will have a big impact on productivity.

When it comes to the work environment in the individual homes, companies will have to be flexible and understanding with employees. While it would be ideal if everyone had a dedicated office with a door 2 floors away from kids and pets, that's not going to be the case, especially when some are faced with the need for a home office instantly. In addition, as schools are also closed, many employees will be tasked with educating and entertaining their kids, not to mention pets excited to have everyone home all day.

Go easy on employees if their child decides to have a temper tantrum in the middle of a video conference, even if it's in front of or within earshot of customers. Remember, your customers are going through this with you, so they'll understand. Evaluate situations individually and make adjustments as needed to keep it from having a negative impact on business.

Even though the coronavirus pandemic hit quickly and forced businesses into rapid action to stay afloat, it's still important to make sure that employees have a safe place in which to work, even in the home environment. Remember, even if an employee is not on site, there could still be legal consequences if an employee gets hurt on the job.
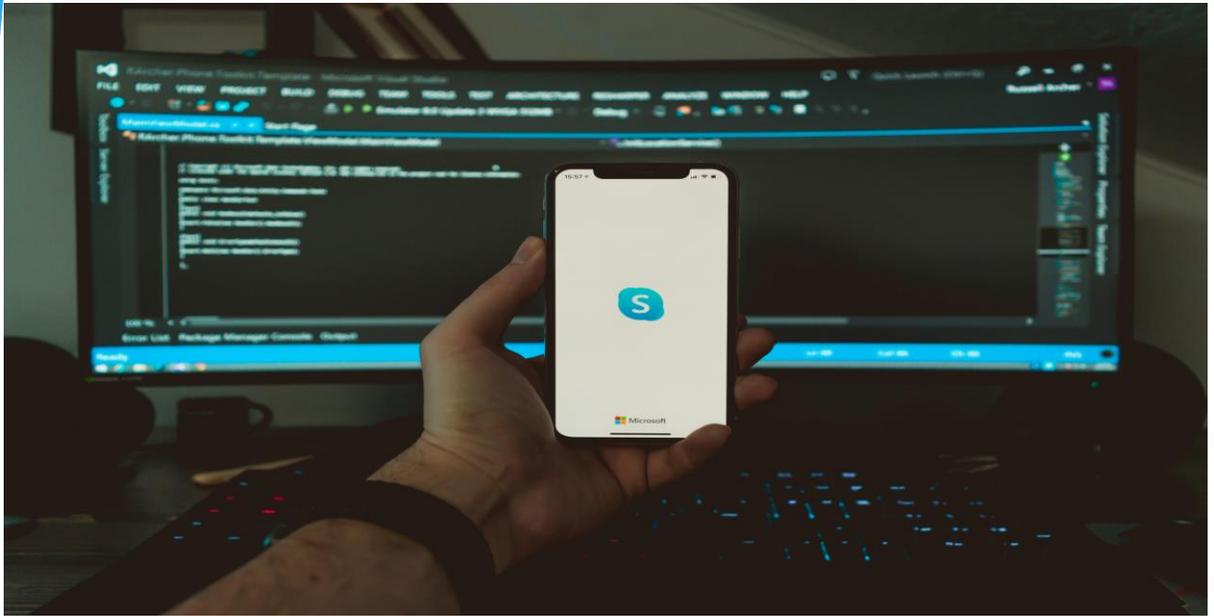
Set up as much structure as you can for remote employees. From daily morning check-ins to weekly one-on-one sessions, try to establish a new routine for workers. If it's possible to maintain the regular working schedule, that would be great for familiarity. However, it may not be possible. Establish new working hours if needed, balancing work needs with home life. Do their duties have to be completed in one 8-hour timeframe? Can the new workday be broken into 2 4-hour shifts? Be as flexible as you can, while still establishing a new routine. This is especially crucial if you have hourly or non-exempt employees who are now working from home. I don't want to be a Debbie Downer, but you have to remember that the FLSA will still be in effect, and you don't want to end up paying overtime because hourly workers went beyond 40 hours, even if it wasn't pre-authorized.

Especially at the beginning of a work to home transition, it's important for direct and upper management to have regular, frequent communication with staff, which leads directly to our last consideration for managing remote workers.

COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS

More than any other thing, communication with remote workers is crucial. Especially in uncertain times like these, constant, consistent and frank communication with your staff is key to how they perform out of your presence.

While it's very important for direct supervisors to establish a strong communication channel with remote employees, we're going to start with upper management.

It's just as important for upper management to have increased presence and communication with remote employees. This is why in hard times presidents, governors, mayors, and other department heads are constantly holding press conferences and on various media. During uncertain times, people are looking for honest information and strong leadership. With those two, regardless of the news you must deliver, you provide people with reassurance.
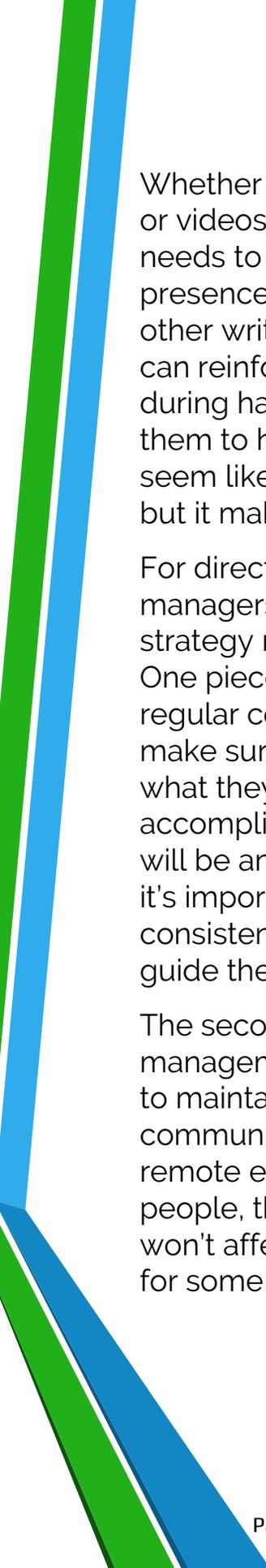
Whether it's weekly webinars or videos, the executive team needs to have a strong visual presence. While emails and other written communications can reinforce the message, during hard times it's best for them to have visuals. It may seem like overcommunicating, but it makes a difference.

For direct supervisors and managers, the communication strategy needs to be two-fold. One piece is to establish regular communication to make sure employees have what they need to successfully accomplish their tasks. There will be an adjustment period, so it's important to maintain consistent communication to guide them.

The second piece of direct management communication is to maintain more of a personal communication presence with remote employees. For some people, the social isolation won't affect them as much, but for some it will be difficult.

Establish some check ins and communications that aren't work related but mental health checks. In addition, if an employee is going through hard times, you may not even be aware of it because you aren't around them.

Think of the time when people are waiting for a meeting to start. It's people sitting in a conference room chatting with each other, catching up and establishing connections. When times like that are gone, it can hit some people hard. Add in the fear and anxiety over COVID-19, some people may be struggling mentally and emotionally.

Keep open communication channels with remote employees. Create new fun ways to stay connected. Have a lunch video chat where everyone just eats together and laughs. Establish new ways to recognize and reward employees. Conduct surveys to see how they're doing, what they need more of, less of, etc.

Regardless of how you transition to more remote workers, always stay flexible and keep people informed. We really are in this together, so the more we work as a team, the better we'll all be.

If you need help with video meetings for up to 10 people, webinars with unlimited attendees, workplace policies and procedures, employee surveys or online ordering for your restaurant, contact Paradise for a free consultation and discounted rates to help keep you strong through the coronavirus pandemic.
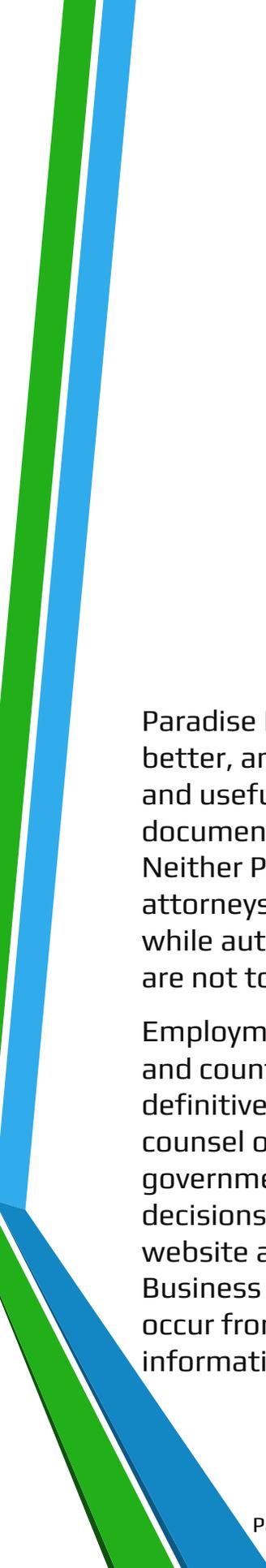
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