

Workplace Flexibility and Remote Work Best Practices

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Modern technology – secure remote connectivity, the Cloud, collaborative software, VoIP phones, and “Bring Your Own Device” (BYOD) – is disrupting the way we work and providing opportunities for remote out-of-office work. Many managers and employees are already working outside the office using their personal devices, but typically on an ad hoc basis without clearly written remote work best practices. Employers may have implemented security measures to protect their systems and data, but they rarely address the larger trend issue of remote work, also referred to as telecommuting. Remote-work best practices is not just about technology and security; it is also about the needs of people and companies. This guide will discuss the various types of remote-work options and best practices for organizations to implement a successful remote work and work-life fit program.

Technology has transformed every part of our work and life. The 9-to-5 workday has been rapidly disappearing as more employees do some of their job outside the office. According to a recent study done by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 59% of U.S. employers allow employees to work from locations outside the office. This trend will continue to grow. Some employers still believe that a flexible work arrangement is strictly an employee benefit, but most have recognized that giving employees the ability to work outside the office has made employees more productive and has greatly benefitted the business. It has also led to the blurring of personal and work life and the expectation that we must always be available.

Although BYOD (using personal smart phones, tablets, laptops to work from anywhere) has been effective by making organizations more responsive and efficient, managers still have not overcome their concerns about employees working remotely. Many still believe that they can only manage people if they are physically in the office where they can see them, but research has shown that managing people by sight doesn't guarantee productivity or quality outcomes. The new prevailing philosophy focuses on results, on meeting goals and completing tasks on time, whether all the work is done in the office, in a combination of in-office and remote work or totally remote.

The new best-practices management approach focuses on outcomes, not suppositions. The emphasis is on flexible work arrangements and on finding and keeping talent, which may mean accommodating diverse physical locations and non-traditional work-life fit arrangements. According to the American Staffing Association's Workforce Monitor statistics, SHRM and other research, for most employees, work-life balance and schedule flexibility rank higher than pay.

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The Research on Working Remote

There is a sufficient body of research about the effectiveness of remote work/work-life fit programs. The findings are consistent.

Companies that implement flexible remote work arrangements believe they benefit from:

- Increased productivity;
- Decreased employee turnover;
- Increased ability to attract talent;
- Decreased sick days;
- Decreased overhead;
- Reduced environmental imprint.

Employees say:

- They are more productive and get more work done.
- They appreciate the flexibility.
- They are happier because they enjoy the flexibility.
- They feel more valued than those in the office.
- They feel it is beneficial to their family and their well-being.
- They have increased job satisfaction.

Over all, when people work from home, they start earlier and take shorter breaks. Contrary to popular opinion, they do not run errands at lunch and they work until the end of the day.

The Three Types of Remote Work Arrangements

There are basically three types of remote work.

- As-Needed Remote Work – Someone who needs to work from home on an as needed basis or a company emergency situation, e.g., a sick child or a snow storm.
- A Flexible Work Arrangement – someone who works from home part of the time on a regular basis.
- A Remote Worker – someone who works from home 100% of the time.

As-Needed/On-Demand Remote Work

Every company faces a number of attendance issues. They can range from:

- Office power outage
- Inclement weather
- An employee is ill
- An employee has a sick family member

- An employee has a personal appointment or home maintenance need requiring him/her to be at home.

For an organization to function optimally, it should provide all employees with the option to work from home temporarily. If staff cannot get to the office because of inclement weather or if an employee has to stay home to care for a sick child, they should be able to work from home and not lose a personal day. By not providing all employees the ability to work remotely on an as needed basis, agencies lose valuable hours of productivity.

Today, no one – not an employee or an employer – should lose valuable time if an employee misses a day in-office for a legitimate reason. By not allowing people to work from home on an as-needed basis, employees lose personal days; staff who cover feel overwhelmed; customers do not get the service they need, and the returning employee needs to play catchup. Everyone loses.

Flexible Work Arrangements

Flexible work arrangements accommodate the needs of employees and agencies. More companies are recognizing that to keep talent, they need to accommodate the life needs of their employees. Work-life fit comes in many sizes, such as:

- Arriving later to work to see kids off to school, then working core hours at the office, returning when kids come home from school and working at the end of the day to complete the hours needed for finishing the day's work.
- Working from home one, two or three days a week to meet family and work obligations.

A Remote Worker

As local talent has become more difficult to find, companies have recognized that a fully remote qualified employee may be another option for recruiting talent. A fully remote worker works from a home office and may never or rarely come to the office. With the proper setup, qualified remote workers are highly productive.

There are a few reasons why an employer should consider a remote worker:

- Many employers have experienced the all-too familiar conversation with a productive employee who explains that she/he needs to resign because she/he is moving. Finding a qualified replacement and transferring the client relationship is far more difficult than setting up the employee to work from home. And for the employee, finding a new, satisfying job may be very difficult. With today's technology, no excellent employee needs to resign because she/he is moving.
- Many employers can't find the talent within driving distance to their backyard. An experienced remote worker is more effective and far less costly than settling for a revolving door of the wrong talent.

Creating a Successful Remote Work Program

An effective flexible remote work program must meet the needs of the company and the individual. A flex-work arrangement is of course not for every employee. Some people prefer only working in the office and some don't have the discipline to work from home. From a pragmatic and customer-service perspective, all companies should implement the "As Needed/On-Demand Remote Work" option. It is the easiest to implement, monitor and see results.

These are some recommended steps management should take in determining what options might work for the organization.

1. Evaluate each of the positions and determine if an employee's physical presence is required full-time, part-time or never, except for periodic meetings.
2. Decide which remote work programs might be viable work options for you.
3. Identify which employees have sufficient institutional knowledge and experience to be considered for a flex/remote work arrangement.
4. Evaluate the different communication and collaborative tools such as Skype and GoToMeeting.
5. Develop a guide for each type of remote work option.
6. Decide on a pilot program and on a trial group of staff for the pilot. For example, the pilot program might allow a trial group to work from home one day a week, scheduling the home days on different days so that they are not all working from home on the same day.
7. Schedule a company-wide meeting to discuss flex-work arrangements and the positions and level of experience that a flex-work arrangement would be suited for. Afterwards, have managers meet with each of their eligible staff to determine the level of interest in a work-flex arrangement.
8. Train the entire staff on how to use the communication and collaborative tools.
9. Implement, monitor and evaluate the pilot program.

Below are some of the key areas to include in the Remote Work Guide. Crucial are the home office setup and security, which are further outlined below.

- A description of the various remote work arrangements;
- Corporate policies and procedures for remote work;
- Company-wide and department meeting times;
- Rules and guidelines for family during work hours, such as interruptions, noise, etc.;
- Child-care policy;
- Home office setup requirements;
- Security Requirements;
- Home computers maintenance guideline.

Include helpful hints for employees when they work from home, such as

- Taking quick periodic breaks
- Taking time to eat lunch
- Know when to stop and log out
- Reinforcing work rules with family, friends and neighbors

The Home Office

Whether an employee works at home on an as needed home-life basis, on a regular flex-schedule or a telecommuting, a home office should be setup in a separate room where the door can be closed so as not to be disturbed while working. Most homes today already have some type of home office setup. The home office should include the following:

- A desk large enough for computer and other equipment.
- A PC or laptop with a minimum of 4GB RAM, a webcam, speakers and a second monitor. Hardware requirements can vary depending on the remote connection setup desired.
- Multiple monitors for efficiency.
- High speed modem with a wireless router. The download (DL) and upload (UL) speed should be sufficient to support both the remote applications required and an internet phone. The current recommended DL speed is 50 mbps and upload speed 20 mbps.
- A smartphone or VoIP handset or headset. Most companies today use a VoIP phone systems A VoiP phone system can provide the ability for calls to be forwarded to a smart phone, transcriptions of the call in an email, and the use of a handset or headset through a wireless internet router from a remote location. For flex-work and full remote work arrangements, the employee should be provide with a VoIP handset or headset. This acts like an extension on the company's phone system.
- For the best connection possible, outdated equipment should be replaced. Cable modems from internet providers are typically available to be swapped out at no charge. Cable modems should be replaced every year or so. Router technology has advanced significantly in recent years and newer models offer tremendous speed and reliability over their predecessors.

Security

Security should not be left to the employees to implement on their devices. Security should be controlled and managed by the employer.

1. For employees who may occasionally work from home, provide them with remote access from their home computer to their office desktop.

2. For employees who work from home a few days a week or all of the time, provide them with a dedicated inexpensive laptop that is secure and setup just as you would an employee's desktop at the office.
3. Basic security measures should be implemented whether a company supplied laptop or an employee's home desktop or laptop:
 - The user sign on must have a strong password with a minimum of 8 characters, including a combination of capitals and lower case letters, numbers and a special character. If there are others in the household who use the desktop or laptop, they must have a separate sign on.
 - The desktop or laptop must be configured to manually enter passwords to the organization's system and any website logins.
 - Client information is confidential. If there are others in the household using the same desktop or laptop, the employee must sign off the remote session or business applications whenever the employee leaves her/his desk.
 - Login details and passwords should not be written on pieces of paper and never written on a post it and stuck to a computer screen.
 - The employee must have a secure, private wireless connection.
 - Microsoft and operating system updates should be working properly and updating automatically.
 - A paid version of anti-virus software should be installed and renewed annually.
 - A Microsoft firewall, or another firewall that may come with the antivirus, should be on and active.
 - If a provided laptop, the employee should not be allowed to download other applications without permission. If the employee's desktop or laptop, the policy should be that employee can only download applications that come from reliable sources. Because applications (e.g., games, mobile apps, coupon sites) may contain viruses or malware, it's important to know and trust the source of an application before downloading it.
4. Clear procedures should be written and followed for logging off and closing the computer when not in use.
5. Educate and train employees on security issues and requirements.
6. Establish a periodic schedule to check all remote devices.

Making it Work

The following management principles are essential to a successful flexible remote work program; they are also the qualities of good management for all employees.

- A team culture.
- Strong committed managers.
- Clear, precise and measurable goals.
- Results based performance evaluation.

- Clear expectations about work schedule availability.
- Consistent and uniform methodology for communicating regularly.
- The right tools to get the work done.

Some Helpful Tips

- Rotate days at home so that a certain percentage of staff is always in the office or schedule mandatory days in the office.
- Make sure expectations are clear.
- Check productivity and performance regularly to determine if it is not working for someone. A flexible or remote work arrangement may not be right for everyone.
- Keep remote workers in the loop just as if they were in the office.
- Establish consistent methodology for communicating.
- Have the staff add their photos to Outlook and Skype.
- Use Skype for instant messaging and video capability to talk instead of email or phone for all staff whether remote or in-office.

Some Pitfalls to Avoid

- Avoid micro managing, the #1 deterrent to productive and successful remote work.
- Not communicating on a regular basis.
- Not inviting remote staff to meetings.
- Not checking the activity reports to see productivity.
- Not spot checking the actual work being done.

Whether in the office or working from home, if you provide employees with clear expectations, realistic metrics for success based on results, and the proper tools to get the work done, they will get it done.

Summary

To keep and attract talent, all companies will need to have a policy with best practices to accommodate work flexibility.

Research has clearly shown that for most employees who have any type of remote work arrangement, they:

- Met their goals more reliably
- Were more productive
- Were happier
- Were healthier
- Experienced less stress

Businesses have benefitted greatly as well with increased productivity, talent retention and lower overhead.

We all recognize that the latest advances in technology has disrupted many industries; but we haven't fully recognized how it is disrupting how and where we work as well as how we will manage people. All businesses will need to adapt to flexible work arrangements to find and keep talent and adapt managing people without borders. New employee generations will expect it, and because we are living longer, so will older employee generations expect it as they will work beyond the historical 65-year retirement age. The future work paradigm will be that the right work with the right person can be done from anywhere.

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