Article from

The Stepping Stone

July 2017
Issue 66

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT
Remote Management: Tips for Success

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With unemployment rates across the country continuing to drop, employers are finding traditional talent pools increasingly constrained. One solution is to look toward remote workers and managers. By employing effective management techniques, companies can be rewarded with a broader pool of prospective talent, better employee retention and increased productivity, and can also create value for the company.

According to *GlobalWorkPlaceAnalytics.com*, 20 to 25 percent of the U.S. workforce teleworks, while as much as 50 percent hold jobs that are compatible with at least some level of teleworking. Many actuarial positions and other associated technical professions such as underwriting are amenable to the option to work remotely, if the situation is set up properly. I have been working remotely for LifeMap Assurance Company (a Cambia Health Solutions company) for the past five years from my home in southern Utah. During that time I have gone from holding an individual contributor role to managing both the actuarial and the underwriting teams with members in New Jersey and Oregon.

The essential skills and tools for successful remote management are not drastically different from those used with more traditional teams. However, some key adaptations are required to ensure maximum efficiency. These tools are necessary the moment there is any separation of location between a team member and manager. Once that threshold is crossed, responding to the challenges that arise as a remote manager is really only a matter of degree.

In my experience, there are several important core elements to being a successful remote manager.

HIRING PRACTICES
Successful remote management begins with careful screening of potential employees for characteristics that will lead to their success, and consideration of the environment in which they will work. If an employee's location or work circumstances are not conducive to having a remote manager, not only will the employee be dissatisfied, the manager will find providing the necessary support both difficult and time-consuming.

Remote employees need to be able to work independently and have strong ethics. These are desirable qualities in any hire, but the need to identify them in the hiring process is more critical when the manager is remote.

Consideration should be given to the level at which the employee is working. With entry-level employees, working within an office environment with the support of co-workers and peers is generally beneficial, and will help with their career growth.

TECHNOLOGY
In order for remote employment arrangements to thrive, companies must invest in a certain level of technology. Most important, remote managers need to be able to link into company systems and work from their home office in such a way as to appear to be in the office to their co-workers. If this isn't achievable, effective electronic substitutions need to be made available. Instant messaging, video conferencing, web meetings, screen sharing, phone, email and shared network drives all go a long way in helping remote managers feel connected to their team members. The manager needs to use all of the tools available to maintain connections to the team members and stay on top of any needs that arise.

PERSONAL CONTACT

A remote manager needs to make extra efforts to stay personally connected to employees. Regular one-on-one meetings either by phone or video conferencing are critical. This will take time out of a manager's day, but is in part made up for by less time spent away from his or her desk. As with any manager-employee relationship, regular conversations are important in keeping track of progress on work projects and providing assistance and training as necessary. They also offer the opportunity for more personal conversations that help in building a bond of trust—another critical element of success for remotely managed teams.

TRUST

Working as a remote manager requires a bond of trust between the employee and manager. A remote manager needs to make a continuous effort to build trust in and with employees. Trust is developed by regular contact, follow-up, mentoring, encouragement and allowing team members to grow and feel a sense of ownership in their work.

FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS

Even the best technological advantages and most effective remote managerial techniques can't replace an occasional face-to-face meeting. The timing and frequency is naturally subject to company budget constraints. As a remote manager, I have found that being able to meet with teams in the home office on a monthly basis is beneficial. For remote workers that are widely scattered, I have found benefit in an annual in-person visit, at a minimum.

HOURS

Remote work allows schedule flexibility, which is one of the main attractions of this arrangement. However, business needs and regular office hours are important. A remote manager will have the best success in managing a team by being online and working during hours that generally match those worked by the bulk of his or her team. A remote manager needs to be willing to work hours that may start early or run late in order to accommodate the needs of the team.

Through active efforts to connect with, mentor and follow-up with team members, a remote manager can find success with a productive team that brings additional value to the company. ∎

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