

A New Era of Work: Recognizing and Rewarding Remote Employees

By Priya Kapila

Addressing common concerns about working from home now will help you improve trust, reduce employee turnover and build teams that are invested in your organization's future.

Continuous improvement in technology led to telecommuting – the ability to continuously work from a remote site – as a recognizable term nearly 50 years ago. However, until last year, it was highly doubtful anyone suspected remote work would be a government mandate!

For many years, telecommuting has been touted as a benefit to the employee experience. Studies show allowing employees to work from home results in greater engagement and retention. The challenge is that [this evidence was gathered from industries that were generally regarded as more conducive to telecommuting](#), like technology and professional services—and not those that have long required physical presence, such as manufacturing, hospitality and construction.

It's no surprise, then, that many engineering and construction company executives are now asking, "How do we continue to monitor productivity,



measure performance and reward employees who used to be in the office but aren't anymore?" Long-term solutions are largely unknown, particularly given the uncertainty as to whether wide-ranging remote work will continue or if this is actually the new normal. But for now, there are near-term steps and strategies that can be implemented to support employees and encourage company productivity and success.

Addressing key concerns

Key concerns we've heard from work-from-home (WFH) employees are highlighted below with suggestions on how leaders can best identify these problems at the onset and address them effectively. Keep in mind, there are a number of challenges faced by WFH employees, but these seem to be among the most common themes.



Employee Concern #1: My remote setting is not good for focusing on work.

There are too many distractions.

Water cooler conversations and office gossip have been replaced by family demands and household chores as activities that reduce productive work time. Advocates for telecommuting and many remote employees did not envision working from home while their children learned remotely and they dealt with rampant concerns about global health, the economy and social issues.

Leaders can address this problem by encouraging structure and allowing flexibility. Expressing an understanding for these new distractions is important, as is helping employees not become bogged down by them. Direct managers can support this effort through routine communication with team members, from basic check-ins to formal project reviews.

Optimal workspace is lacking.

From kitchen tables to closets, many employees lack a permanent home office that is conducive to productive work. To believe that workers will be just as efficient working hours in ill-suited “borrowed”

space is irrational. This may be less of an issue for individuals who expect to return to offices soon. But surveys continue to indicate that WFH numbers will remain higher than before the pandemic. For example, [various survey data suggests](#) that remote work will increase from an average of 5% of the time to 20% for U.S. workers. In other words, the average employee would be working from home once a week (versus once per month previously).

If a company has accepted the potential for continued work from home options, and particularly if employees are requesting it, then promoting effective remote workspace is critical. This may be as simple as managers offering tips for optimizing a home office. For more employee-centered contractors, it may mean providing office equipment to employees.

A firm that directly (and financially) supports creating or improving WFH space can offer it as part of a recognition program to highlight those who have performed well. To be fair, if all WFH employees receive additional tech equipment or office furnishings, consideration should be given to what comparable benefit can be provided to individuals who are working on-site.



On a separate, but no less important, topic, [recent polling shows many employees are feeling heightened stress](#). Anecdotally, it would be nearly impossible to assume otherwise. To help employees cope, management and human resources teams should encourage employees to address their emotional and physical health through existing or enhanced benefits programs.

Even if workers return to traditional offices soon, they will remember the employers that offered support during this challenging time. As a word of caution, individuals are also not likely to forget a perception of abandonment or indifference. This may be a strong reason not to reduce compensation or benefits to achieve cost savings at this time.

Employee Concern #2: I feel disconnected from my company and colleagues.

An essential social outlet is now lacking.

It should be noted that workers who have been identified as most interested and most productive in the WFH environment are seasoned employees without young children. For others, being in an office offers the valued opportunity to take on a defined role outside of household demands.

What's more, individuals who need training or simply excel in an experiential setting frequently benefit most from in-person interaction. Consider onboarding in today's workplace. While it may be less stressful to prepare for a first day of video introductions from home, engaging with new leaders and colleagues, noting mannerisms and interests, and integrating into the organizational culture do not come nearly as easily.

At the other end of the employee spectrum, it is important that emerging leaders continue to feel recognized by executives and that they remain an integral part of the team. It is well documented that employees are most inclined to leave a company when they become dissatisfied with management or their jobs. This underscores the need for company leaders to stay in front of teams, presenting an outlook for the days ahead and employees' roles in that future. Employees who feel like they are important contributors in their organization's future and understand the company's vision tend to be more dedicated to the company and their colleagues, even when they're not coming into an office every day.



One way to discourage tendencies to isolate and disconnect is by incorporating or improving team-based goals within employees' incentive compensation programs.

This is an ideal time for leaders to continue to continue to be vocal proponents of manager feedback. It should be incumbent on direct managers to remain in regular contact with their team members. As needed, managers may require coaching to ensure ongoing communication is construed positively and not as micromanagement.

The beginning of the year is a great time to develop defined performance goals. Given employees' concerns that their results will go unnoticed, equipping them with clear objectives helps them demonstrate success. Of course, goal achievement holds greater weight when it is rewarded; so be sure to align performance with a rewards program. While a traditional incentive plan is cash-based, companies may choose to be more creative and financially prudent by granting non-monetary awards. Now more than ever, simple verbal appreciation and praise go a long way.

People feel more isolated and alone.

In recent years, surveys show that individuals may be lacking human interaction. One 2018 survey documented that more than half of employees who spend four or [more hours per day communicating through technology versus direct conversation report often feeling lonely](#). Obviously, COVID-19 has only further restricted in-person communications.

Some of the same [employees who report their preferences for telecommuting also indicate that their offices are toxic](#). This should prompt leaders to address organizational culture and employee relationships, not simply allow workers to disconnect from one another.

Historical evidence suggests a negative connotation attached to telecommuting and a belief that remote employees do not work as hard. The prevalence of WFH over the last year has helped dissuade this mindset. Additionally, the revival of diversity, inclusion and equity initiatives should also help change attitudes toward WFH. As with many responsibilities, success or failure in a job depends on an individual's performance, knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors—and not necessarily the work location.



This again highlights the need for managers to remain close to their employees and be proactive in development, positive reinforcement, prompt course corrections and remedial training as needed.

One way to discourage tendencies to isolate and disconnect is by incorporating or improving team-based goals within employees' incentive compensation programs. A team goal will require colleagues to engage with one another, which ideally results in greater performance for the company as well.

Team goals may be financially focused or encourage collaboration through executing cultural initiatives, improving internal processes or cross-training. It almost goes without saying that money is a motivator for many employees, and in combination with healthy pressure to respect one's team members, these goals should have a high probability of achievement. The recognition and reward that follow serve as natural reinforcers and foster more cohesive group dynamics.

Finally, employees should not sit idly by, waiting for their companies' executives or their managers to communicate with them. Many open-door policies may be virtual for now, but workers should continue

using or requesting them. In some instances, a video chat from a home office may be far more constructive than attempting to hold a one-on-one conversation at a job site or in a buzzing headquarters.

Field workers cannot be forgotten during the focus on remote work. Because there is a natural disconnect when an employee is always at a job site, many contractors have struggled to close this gap. When field workers are continuously interacting with customers, other contractors, suppliers and colleagues—versus being in a corporate office—they need specific recognition and rewards programs that align them and encourage loyalty with their employers. These programs can range from supplying effective personal protective equipment, to more memorable actions like spot bonuses for exceptional behavior and tokens of appreciation sent to employees' homes.

Emerging from the pandemic stronger means thinking about your employee retention and engagement strategy along with your business plans. Addressing common concerns about working from home now and supporting employees through the current disruption will improve trust, reduce worker turnover and build teams that are invested in your organization's future.

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