MANAGING A TEAM OF REMOTE WORKERS

A 10-POINT GUIDE FOR BUSINESS OWNERS AND MANAGERS

GET IN TOUCH TO FIND OUT HOW WE CAN HELP…

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INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus crisis has brought many unexpected changes, and having whole teams working from home has been a challenge for many businesses.

As time goes on, you may be recognising that a lot of your people will be working from home for the long haul, and you may be receiving flexible working requests to make this a permanent state, so now is the time to look at your policies, processes and practices to check if working from home is working for your business.

We believe that homeworking can be productive, effective and collaborative, and we hope this guide will help you build the necessary strong foundations and skilled line managers to achieve this.

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01 THE FUNDAMENTALS - ARE YOUR PROCESSES AND POLICIES IN PLACE?

In the rush to get everybody set up, resolve any technical hitches and just get through the day, it's understandable that getting the job done has probably been a higher priority for you than thinking about your HR policies and processes.

However, as new ways of working bed in, and any initial practical problems are ironed out, it's now time to take a step back and go back to the fundamentals of compliance and good people management.

You should check that you have robust Terms and Conditions of employment in place, as well as all of the statutory and best practice policies that will help provide structure and guidance for your line managers and your employees.

As well as the policies and procedures that you use to manage in "normal" times, you should develop and publish a Homeworking Policy. This will set out the standards and expectations you have of those working remotely, and the "ways of working" to make homeworking successful for both parties. The Policy will also set out your responsibilities to them, and the sources of support available to them.

It's very good practice to ask staff to regularly complete a homeworker's self-assessment which will highlight any issues they are facing around equipment, IT access, remote work and working alone. You should review their self assessments and help them resolve any issues raised.

TOP TIP

Keep homeworking policies, guides and other helpful information in an easily-accessible place such as an intranet page or cloud-shared folder, and make sure everyone on your team knows where that is.

02 RISK, HEALTH AND SAFETY AND WELLBEING

Employers have a legal duty to protect the health and safety of all their employees in the workplace – even if that workplace is at home or another remote location.

That responsibility extends to making sure they have the tools and systems of work they need, and any safety equipment. For workers who use displays and keyboards, this may mean that you should supply items such as risers and wrist supports to make sure their desks are set up safely, helping to minimise problems such as back pain and repetitive strain. Make sure everybody who works remotely has completed a health and safety workplace self-assessment form and a DSE (Display Screen Equipment) checklist and that any issues flagged up by them are addressed.

It can be very hard for employees to adjust to working in the same place as they live, with access to their work systems at all times. Support them in working as flexibly as possible and regularly check that they are not working for too many hours. Don't let them feel as if they are obliged to be checking emails or work platforms at all hours of the day.

Encourage staff to take regular breaks, even if it's just to leave the room to make a cup of tea. Be mindful of the NHS's recommended "five pillars to wellbeing" which include maintaining connections with colleagues, friends and family, being active as far as possible, taking notice of the natural world, learning new things, and giving support and time to others.

Some of these may be more difficult than usual because of the circumstances, but support them however you are able.

TOP TIP

Recognise that working remotely can be difficult and stressful for some people, as they may feel lonely, isolated or forgotten. Make time for your team to talk to you regularly, and encourage them to share any mental health issues they may be suffering from, and do everything you can to support their wellbeing and safety.

03 SECURITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Employees who are working from home may be handling sensitive and confidential information. It's important that your policies and guidelines for handling these are as robust as they are for people working from the office. Ensure that all employees have been issued with a policy which includes advice on confidentiality, including how documents should be stored securely in your IT system.

You may need to discuss with your IT provider whether the system is as secure for remote workers as it is when they are office-based. Home broadband connections are often less secure than business-grade ones, so you may wish to consider the use of a Virtual Private Network (VPN) – your IT provider can help with this.

Remember that the usual data protection and GDPR regulations still apply, so make sure you check that your systems are compliant and that your team understand their responsibilities.

When employees are making video calls, they should ensure the connection is secure and that they cannot be overheard discussing any sensitive information. Workers should understand that they are responsible for ensuring the security of all information they handle on behalf of their employer.

This applies to paper documents and those kept on a computer. Employees should ensure that nobody else in the household has access to sensitive files – particularly if they are working from a shared computer. They should make sure their work accounts are password-protected and that they log out at the end of each working session to maintain security.

TOP TIP

Computers and devices are potential weak points when they are part of a home working setup – make sure your IT provider understands how your team is working and enhances security.

04 TRUST PEOPLE TO DO THEIR JOBS

The biggest barrier for most businesses to flexible or homeworking is often a trust issue. Managers are often wary of the idea of remote working, not being sure how they can manage their team if they are not with them on a day to day basis.

We have heard many recent stories of anecdotal evidence where teams and individuals have stepped up and achieved more than ever from home, and the research supports it – According to data analysed by Rescue Time, **knowledge workers, software developers, and IT professionals are all** *more productive* **when they work from home**. This was true both at small and medium businesses and large companies (over 500 employees).

Managing a remote workforce requires line managers to build and nurture relationships built on trust and transparency, with a focus on leading, guiding and coaching.

It's the responsibility of managers to provider clear guidance on the tasks set, expected results, standards and timescales and who the remote worker can contact for information and support. Measures should be agreed in advance.

It's important that your team members keep their calendars up to date so managers understand when people are working, when they have virtual meetings and when they are away from their desks, but good managers focus on achievement rather than just working hours.

TOP TIP

The more you let go and concentrate on leadership rather than micro-management, the more your team will thrive. Focus on achievement, not hours worked.

05 USE TECHNOLOGY TO KEEP IN TOUCH

We're all getting more used to holding work meetings and conducting personal calls through video platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and FaceTime. In these difficult times it can make a world of difference to see the faces of people you know even if it's just for a quick team catch up.It also makes it easy for team members to share projects and documents they are working on, to keep everybody updated and get the input they would normally receive in the office.

Regular "meetings" are vital when your teams are working from home, for morale, for nurturing the team spirit and for ensuring that work keeps happening. It's also a chance for your people to talk about how they are coping and to raise any issues that are bothering them. To ensure these regular meetings don't fall off the radar, potentially leaving staff feeling isolated, you may wish to schedule them – once a day, or once a week depending on how your business works.

If your team are used to working together in the office, they will be missing out on the little day-to-day interactions previously taken for granted – the "how's it going?", or "how are you?" as you walk past a desk, or the office in-jokes that are part and parcel of working as a team. Consider having a social channel on your work or instant messenger platform, or a WhatsApp group, where people can check up on each other, share personal updates and ask each other the quick questions they would normally direct to each other in the office.

Remember also that some people may want to switch off from this social channel after hours, so they can wind down and focus on their families, while others will find it comforting to keep in touch.

TOP TIP

Remember that people may be missing the regular social interactions that come as part of being a team – try as far as you can to give people a virtual channel where they can let off steam.
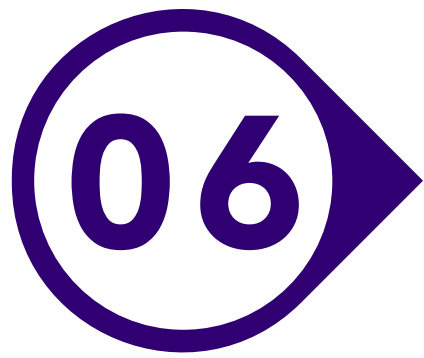
06 WORKING FROM HOME CAN BE LONELY – SHOW THAT YOU CARE

Companies are very keen to stress that it's "business as usual" and their teams are working as effectively as ever using remote technology.

While this is an important message, for individuals this may not be true. People who choose to work in an office can feel very isolated when suddenly forced to work from home. That feeling, combined with anxiety about the ongoing virus pandemic, can have a detrimental effect on mental health which employees may feel they have to hide.

When you have calls and interactions with them, ask how they are – and mean it! If you feel they may want to talk outside the group then make a point of following up with the offer of a one-to-one call. Make it a personal interaction – remember what they've told you previously and show an interest. Asking "How did your FaceTime with your mum go last night?" or "How are the children getting on with their schoolwork?" demonstrates that you understand them as an individual and not just an employee.

These connections are part of a good management style anyway but are more important than ever now. Remember that people have extra pressures at the moment – children are at home, they may be concerned about elderly parents or relatives who are self-isolating, a partner's employment may be at risk, and they may have anxieties about their own health.

As far as possible, stick to your normal programme of support for employees – for example, if you have a Wellness Action Plan for an employee, then hold the sessions and follow up as usual.

TOP TIP

Although life – and business – go on, it's important to acknowledge that for many team members it's far from 'business as usual'. Take an interest and support them.

07 HOW CAN I MEASURE PERFORMANCE REMOTELY?

While you need to support your employees and their wellbeing, you do have a business to run or a team to manage, and you will want to make sure that you are getting the best out of them in these challenging circumstances.

This is more difficult to do remotely than it is face to face, and you are more likely to miss some of the signs of poor performance that would be obvious in a physical environment.

However, managing a remote working team is very similar to managing a local one – it's about everyone involved understanding the expectations of them and their responsibilities. Set very clear expectations about the standards of work expected and the timescales for completion. Make sure your team members understand and agree when they should be available for team catch ups and client contact – and how.

Are they expected to be monitoring their emails during office hours, or at certain times of the day? Should they be available for video calls during certain hours, or just at pre-arranged times? Use online tools for workflow management and task lists, so that everyone is clear about what needs to be done and who by, and make sure everybody keeps them up to date.

Let staff know that you will be regularly reviewing progress and ensure you measure outputs and achievements rather than time spent on tasks. Some people will naturally work at different speeds and in different ways – most of the time it's the result, not the process, that's important.

TOP TIP

Online tools such as Slack, Microsoft Teams and task list apps can help you set expectations and monitor progress.
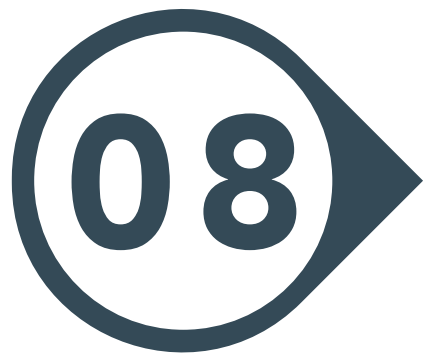
08 HOW SHOULD I CORRECT POOR PERFORMANCE REMOTELY?

If you've followed the advice in the previous section, your teams should have a very clear understanding of what is expected of them. If you spot any of them falling short, then it's important to act as soon as you can to avoid the issue getting worse.

As soon as you identify an issue:
• Define the issue simply and clearly. What was expected? What should have happened, but didn't?
• Ask yourself how well the task was set – did you communicate it effectively? Is it possible that your employee simply didn't understand?
• Was it a realistic task? Check that the employee had the time, resources and training to complete it.
• Are there any external factors – illness, stress at home or IT problems – that may have contributed to the poor performance?

Once you have been through this thought process, schedule a call or video call with the employee. This conversation may actually be easier to carry out remotely than it usually is to find a quiet space in the office!

Ask the employee whether they realised that they have missed your expectations. What do they think went wrong? Give them time to explain what has happened, and what the reasons may be.

Find out what you can do to help them in completing the tasks allocated to them. Agree a way forward – including a new deadline and a review date to catch up and check that the issue has been resolved. Remember that you may need to bring in external HR support so that these procedures are conducted correctly.

TOP TIP

Before discussing a performance issue with an employee, check that you did everything you could to set expectations and communicate the task effectively.
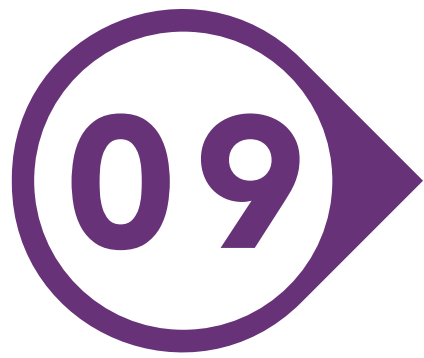
09 BE FLEXIBLE - IT'S NOT THE NORMAL 9 TO 5!

While we're all working through the Coronavirus crisis, life is far from normal. For most employees it's not just a case of working from home during the usual office hours and logging off at the end of the day.

For many there are all kinds of other factors to consider – young children who need looking after because nurseries are closed, or older ones who need support with home schooling. People may have concerns about relatives or be dealing with grief.

All of this conspires to make the usual 9am to 5pm working day difficult to stick to for many people. As a manager you may be experiencing some of these difficulties yourself.

It's important to let your team know that you understand the pressures they are under and that you are able to support them by being more flexible about working hours. They may wish to take a break during the day and pick up some work in the evenings, or at the weekends – ensure they understand that it's results rather than rigid working hours that you are interested in.

At the same time, make it clear when you DO need employees to be available – for example for a regular team catchup over Teams. If one individual is unable to pick up a call or a task at a particular time, can a colleague step in? Shared work lists with tasks clearly allocated will help cope with situations like this.

TOP TIP

Be as fair and as flexible as you can. At some point this crisis will be over, and your employees will appreciate you stickng by them and being flexible as much as you will appreciate them for working through it.
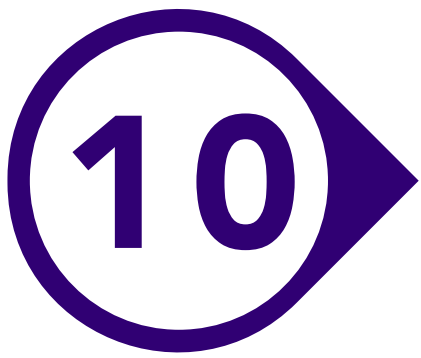
10 LEARN FROM THIS EXPERIENCE AND CHANGE!

Nobody wanted to be in this situation and we've all had to change the way we work and live our lives to cope with it. However, we have seen positives come out of it, including a renewed sense of teamwork and community spirit and an appreciation of the time we spend with friends, family and colleagues.

One potential positive is that this experience has opened the eyes to many employers about the many benefits of remote and flexible working. We are already seeing many businesses planning for more flexible and/or homeworking options on a permanent basis.

This may be an opportunity to reconsider the cost of your office space, the environmental and personal impacts of long commutes and the necessity (or not!) of business travel for customer and client meetings.

However this crisis has affected your business and its people, the team at Reality HR wish you the very best for the future, and we hope you have found this guide useful.

Keep supporting and rewarding your people and take advice on how best to support them now and as life goes on.

TOP TIP

We've all learned different ways of working through this crisis. Some of them may be helpful to retain once life begins to get back to normal.

CONTACT US TODAY

If you're a business owner and you're having to embrace working from home for the first time, and you need help with engaging your employees or getting the best out of a remote working model, then please get in touch.

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