HOW TO TRANSITION TO A REMOTE WORKFORCE

In response to the current pandemic, you may have employees working from home for the first time. At best, managing the transition to a remote workforce requires careful planning. Unlike in an office where you can control and manage your employees' workspace, when employees work remotely you have a variety of home environments you must accommodate. Here are important things to consider when you transition to a remote workforce.

Not all your employees have the luxury of a private space where they can work from home. Perhaps the best some can hope for is a corner of a room or half of the kitchen table where they can spread out with their phone, paperwork and computer. Employees with children at home may also need to spend time during the day taking care of, or home schooling, their children. Clearly, in such a situation, productivity will suffer, unless individuals can work at night when things have quieted down at home. You will need to discuss their home office setup with each employee individually.

Keep in mind that, even today, not everyone has their own personal computer at home. In fact, it is increasingly common for everyone to conduct their online activities through their phones. So what will you do if your employee must use a computer to do their work? Providing company computers is the most secure, manageable solution. If employees have to use personal computers, consider how you will control software access and security. Having good policies in place to govern remote access to company data will be mandatory.

Connectivity is another critical issue. What do employees have for mobile phone data plans and internet connections? Not all employees have unlimited data plans. Are you going to reimburse employees for their data plan usage or are you going to issue company-owned access points? Also, what is your contingency plan if employees cannot connect?

Remember that your office is not just a workplace, but a community. Every day your staff meets in the break room to chat, bond and build morale. How will you replicate that activity, which is so critical to maintaining your employees' sense that they are part of a team working together towards a common goal?

- First, as much as possible, do not change your normal daily office routine. While employees will have different distractions working from home, keeping standard office hours helps maintain the structure your staff would otherwise be lacking in their home environment.

- Second, manage expectations by telling your employees, in writing, what you expect from them and what they should expect from you. This includes your expectations for their availability and productivity during office hours. Set goals and deadlines based on those expectations and hold your employees accountable for achieving these objectives.

- Third, schedule regular meetings with your employees. Hold meetings via video conference as much as possible to reinforce the sense of an in-person business meeting. Remember that it is critical to maintain good communication among everyone in your business.

- Finally, incorporate new technology as much as possible. Video conferencing platforms like Zoom and Skype are excellent for group meetings. Use cloud-based collaboration tools such as Trello, Microsoft Teams, or Google's G Suite to track progress and manage accountability for all company projects. Enhance collaboration by sharing files with cloud-based tools like Dropbox, SharePoint, OneDrive, or Google Drive. As with any technology, make sure that policies are put in place to govern security and the proper use of any tool or platform that you use.

Properly managing the transition to a remote workforce will be a positive step both short and long-term for your company. By doing it correctly, you can minimize negative effects today and lay the groundwork for new efficiencies in the future.

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