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Coronavirus and Teleworking Employees: Set Guidelines, Priorities

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Take-Aways

- Managers can help teleworkers by defining clear priorities and setting expectations about work schedules.
- Stay in contact and encourage engagement.
- Mitigate the challenges that arise in teleworking meetings.
- Take precautions if some of your workers must remain in the office.

Recommendation

Team managers face a substantial challenge now that COVID-19 has sent many workers from their office buildings to temporary work stations in their own homes. Managing a teleworking team from afar can be a daunting task, particularly if you and your team members have never worked remotely. In this article from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), editor Kathy Gurchiek provides clear advice that sounds deceptively simple, but will help you create a checklist so you won't forget important steps. She includes some tips to keep people safe when they aren't able to work remotely.

Summary

Managers can help teleworkers by defining clear priorities and setting expectations about work schedules.

"Employers should always put their team members' safety first," say Ronni Zehavi, CEO of the Tel Aviv-based cloud management company Hibob. "If remote work is an option in the face of a public health scare, it is certainly advised that employees take this opportunity to avoid the spread of coronavirus."

However, for those who have never worked remotely, teleworking will be an adjustment. If you manage a team that's now working from home due to COVID-19, help your team members by setting clear priorities. Keep specific work hours and let your employees know you still expect them to carry out their work and attend meetings, even if the sessions aren't held in person.

> *"Work-from-home policies will be unique from one organization to another, but organizations must create policies that are effective for their teams."*

Virtual teams benefit from having deadlines and to-do lists to keep them on track. Team managers can take the lead by staying in contact with remote workers who will benefit from regular daily or weekly check-ins and video chats to help them stay engaged. Advise your team members that keeping a normal schedule will help. However, allow them some flexibility as needed for work-life balance and child care.

Because coworkers won't have the benefit of interacting in the same space, SHRM blogger Ross Smith suggests simulating water-cooler conversations by having an "always-on video or chat channel."

> *"Conference calls and collaboration systems such as Skype and Zoom help teams get together from a distance."*

If possible, test laptops, remote log ins, apps and connections before the switch to teleworking. Then, make sure everyone knows the plan for how and how often communication will take place. Tech workers should use version control to make sure each team member has the latest version of any document in progress.

Mitigate the challenges that arise in teleworking meetings.

Supply your at-home team members with the equipment they need for remote meetings, both equipment and software. They should have one another's cellphone numbers if they need to be in contact. When you set

meeting times, be aware that some team members may be in different time zones. During meetings, repeat questions clearly so teleworkers can hear, and make a point of giving everyone a chance to talk. Record meetings for those who can't be there via video conferencing so everyone stays up to date.

Take precautions if some of your workers must remain in the office.

Take a page out of Facebook's coronavirus handbook by closing your office to visitors and using video conferencing for job interviews. Remind workers of important safety precautions with signs that encourage hand-washing and other good hygiene practices. Consider providing sanitizing wipes and hand gels.

> *"Employers need to set standards in advance for how employees are to communicate and collaborate." (manager Patrick Bobilin)*

Employees who must be in the office should take extra precautions. Make sure they don't share keyboards and devices. Team collaboration apps can be helpful in documenting changes, even when people use their own bluetooth keyboards. Employers' precautions, such as supplying gloves, creating distance between work stations or displaying COVID-19 posters (available in several languages from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) reassure their employees.

Patrick Bobilin, manager of SEO and content at GetVoIP, a New York IT services company, recounts seeing the employees of a drugstore wearing gloves and disinfecting checkout stations and other equipment. He says this showed him that the company took the need for extra hygiene seriously. Bobilin advises, "Companies need to be ready to spend extra money and listen to employees – to what they want, what they need."

About the Author

Kathy Gurchiek serves as the associate editor covering global issues, OED and Diversity at the Society for Human Resource Management and SHRM Online. Her writing has appeared in the *Chicago Tribune, The Associated Press* and the *Salt Lake Tribune*, where she was a staff business writer.

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