

The COVID-19 Outbreak – Working from Home Series:

6 Strategies to Keep Your Employees Productive

The COVID-19 crisis has transformed remote work from a flexible workplace perk to the new business normal until social-distancing restrictions can be lifted. While it takes time and effort to organize, once employees have the necessary resources and understand their performance expectations, they can be highly productive while working remotely (maybe even more so).

But there are challenges. What works best for some remote workers won't work for others. Factor in various unexpected issues, and it can quickly turn into a problematic situation for employers. That's why thinking creatively and planning now can save headaches later if provincial lockdowns remain in effect over several months for non-essential businesses.

So, how do employees remain productive with children (especially toddlers) co-habiting their new workplace (a.k.a., their home)? What's the best strategy to prevent employees from feeling isolated? What equipment, systems and procedures do they need to work efficiently and effectively? These are all critical questions to consider in these difficult times—especially with so much uncertainty swirling around our eventual return to workplace normalcy.

With that in mind, here are six tactics to help employees achieve work-from-home (WFH) success:

1. Stock their WFH toolkit.

Ask employees for a list of technology and equipment they need. That might be a monitor, keyboard, or a mouse, or the chair they currently use at work. Some employees may need office materials, as well. In addition, make sure employees have access to the applications and SaaS-based platforms needed to conduct their work. Remote workers often rely on video conferencing and collaboration software such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom or Slack to communicate with their teams and clients. Ensure all technology, including Wi-Fi and VPN, actually work from home to prevent their workday from being interrupted by technical difficulties.

2. Help them set boundaries at home.

While not everyone who works from home will have a home office, it's essential for employees to create a private, quiet workspace, if possible. That may be easier said than done for staff who now have young children at their feet thanks to school closures, but it is possible. The most productive workspaces are generally not those associated with leisure, such as working from bed or the couch. Over the last couple of weeks, there have been photos posted to social media of employees using ironing boards and laundry baskets as desks. Emphasize ergonomic best practices to support good posture while working from home, even for a short period of time. A dedicated workspace will help employees focus during working hours and, mentally, aid with work-life balance. It's also best to advise employees to keep their home space organized to minimize distractions.

Recommend noise-canceling headphones if employees have loud distractions such as neighbours, barking dogs or construction outside. Also, encourage them to avoid TV, video games, and social media to help stay focused. Anything they wouldn't be doing in the office, shouldn't become a habit at home.

3. Help them create a WFH routine.

When working remotely, employees need to set a schedule and stick to it. Without in-person meetings to break up the day, they can quickly lose focus or burn out. Employees should have clear guidelines for when to work, when to take breaks, and when to call it a day. This will help them work more efficiently, while also helping them maintain work-life balance.

Recommend that employees stick to regular workday routines, such as getting dressed in their normal workplace attire. It can be tempting to roll out of bed and head straight to the laptop clad in pajamas, but it's easier to get into a professional mindset, and mentally healthier for employees, to do whatever they would typically do before setting out to work.

4. Manage expectations.

Employees should set ground rules with their family and other people who are home while they work. Their family needs to understand WFH hours to minimize interruptions that could impact productivity.

Working from home with children around is tough, so employees will need to find activities to keep their little ones entertained and focused. Suggest they stock up on puzzles, books, and games. Most parents limit screen time, but right now streaming services can buy parents some added work hours during the day. Discuss what is realistic to accomplish from home and what isn't—and be flexible. Sometimes a two-year-old's tantrum won't align with your scheduled conference call. Also, ask employees about any questions or concerns they may have regarding WFH rules to help manage the transition as smoothly as possible.

5. Increase daily touch points.

When employees are working remotely, they don't have the option to grab lunch with a co-worker or pop their head into a colleague's office for a quick chat. To minimize feelings of isolation, make it part of your routine to interact with employees regularly by phone or your preferred video conferencing platform. Reach out over messaging apps, even if just to say "hello". Try incorporating icebreaker conversations at the beginning of team meetings to interact with team members in a more personal way. The get-right-to-business approach to managing meetings through technology—although ideal for efficiency—can make employees feel more isolated at this time.

Confirm how the team will be connecting, whether through email or via video conferencing. Using webcams during team meetings or client calls helps with communication and minimizes the feeling of isolation. Not every employee will feel comfortable with technology, so be patient.

6. Capitalize on the opportunity to build organizational engagement and loyalty.

Working from home comes with unique perks. Employees can avoid long commutes, do laundry during a scheduled break in the day, or play a game with their kids. Encourage your staff to evaluate the times of day that are most productive and have them schedule their most important work during those hours. They can use an online calendar to create events and reminders that tell them when to begin new tasks.

Make sure employees know to end work at the same time every day where possible, put away their devices and stay out of their designated workspace. Their day starts with a routine, so it's important that it also ends with one.

To learn more and for assistance, contact Flashrock HR.

