Managing Remote Staff

One of the great advantages of recent changes in technology is the ability to work from any location with Internet or Wi-Fi access. For many people, a computer or mobile device is all they need to do their jobs.

Being able to work remotely has many advantages for employees, including decreased stress, less time spent commuting, and lower monthly expenses. It can also be advantageous for employers, who may benefit from lower overhead due to less office space and decreased use of company resources. However, it does create some challenges for managers.

When you manage employees who work from home or another offsite location, it requires an adjustment in your mindset. While you can’t see remote employees physically at their desks or in meetings, you can measure their productivity by other standards, such as work output, availability, and timeliness of responses to inquiries. Here are some tips for getting the best out of managing one or more remote employees:

- **Emphasize key telecommuting skills.** People who thrive while working remotely are effective communicators who manage their time efficiently. They also benefit from being self-starters who feel comfortable working independently. However, they need to have a good sense of when it’s appropriate to consult with a supervisor or manager.

- **Set clear expectations and reasonable deadlines.** It’s important to clearly explain goals and tasks to anyone who works outside the office (including employees who occasionally go out into the field to provide service to customers). The employee should understand both day-to-day tasks and larger organizational goals. It’s also important to have appropriate deadlines for completion of work.

- **Stay connected.** Remote employees may sometimes feel isolated or out of the loop. Holding periodic conference calls or...
virtual meetings will help ensure that everyone is up-to-date on projects. It will also help your team develop personal connections, especially if they have never worked together in person.

► **Communicate.** Good communication will help everyone stay on track. Email is often the primary way remote workers communicate, so it’s important to be prompt in your responses to questions and updates. Remember to “close the loop.”

► **Be aware of time zones.** If you have geographically dispersed staff in multiple locations, it’s important to hold meetings when it is reasonable for everyone. If you must conduct meetings in what would be early morning or late evening for one or more employees, try to rotate the schedule so the same person isn’t always working outside of normal business hours.

► **Have contingency plans.** How will workers perform their duties if there is a local power or Internet outage? Ask telecommuters to consider what their fallback plan would be in a crisis situation. Be patient with the occasional hiccup in availability due to issues outside the telecommuter’s control.

► **Offer flexibility when possible.** While some remote employees may never visit your workplace due to distances, others may be close enough to work onsite one or more days a week. Set reasonable rules and expectations for how often the employee is expected to be physically present in the workplace. If it is necessary for the employee to be in the office for a specific reason (such as a client visit), provide adequate notice.

► **Create opportunities for advancement for remote workers.** One of the drawbacks to telecommuting is a perception that it’s difficult to be promoted or advance in one’s career. It’s important to remember that remote employees are a valuable resource, and are just as capable of growing their skills and abilities as those who work onsite.

► **Provide regular feedback.** Remote employees need as much, if not more, feedback as individuals who work onsite. Remember that remote employees can’t see the sort of non-verbal cues that might indicate how you’re feeling about their performance. It’s important to say, “You did a great job on that project,” or “I thought you handled that situation really well” when an employee’s work merits praise. It’s also helpful to stay on schedule with remote employees’ performance reviews.

► **Don’t hold on too tight.** The success or failure of a remote employee’s tenure with an organization often comes down to trust. Success should be measured by how well the employee is meeting performance expectations and hitting target dates for completion of projects. Avoid micromanaging, as this could undermine the employee’s effectiveness and perhaps even decrease productivity.

The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service can offer more suggestions on how to successfully manage remote employees. Help is available 24/7/365.
Do you have an employee who struggles with time management issues or has difficulty meeting deadlines? These steps may help address the situation:

1. **Evaluate performance patterns.** Review the employee’s history to see if you can detect any patterns related to time management. For instance, you may notice that the employee struggles with meeting deadlines during a predictable busy season or after a holiday or vacation. Consider if the employee’s issues with delivering work on time are related to behavior or if they result from an expanded workload.

2. **Consult with Human Resources.** HR can help you review the employee’s work history and position and provide suggestions on how to address performance concerns. (LifeMatters is also available to consult about performance issues.) In addition, HR can provide input regarding whether the role can or should be reconfigured due to changing business needs.

3. **Meet privately with the employee.** Outline your concerns about her or his difficulty with meeting deadlines. Ask the employee to explain why he or she has been struggling to complete work on time.

   **Sample language:** “You’ve missed deadlines twice in the last two weeks, and have turned in work at the last minute several times recently. Can you tell me what’s going on?”

4. **Listen.** Allow the employee to explain the reasons for the tardy work. If the employee says that he or she is struggling because of a lack of resources, ask for ideas to improve the situation.

   **Sample language:** “You mentioned that it would be helpful to have an extra pair of hands when things are busy. Can you point to any specific times when you might need more assistance with particular tasks?”

5. **Review workflow and time management strategies.** If you determine that the employee is struggling because of poor time management, review the steps required to complete the task. Help the employee determine an ideal workflow for key projects and look for ways to “piggyback” different tasks.

   **Sample language:** “Let’s break down what’s needed to complete this project. What are the steps you need to perform, and what is the target date for each step so the overall task is finished on time?” (Note: It may be helpful to
work backwards from the due date when creating this timeline.)

6. Refer the employee to LifeMatters. If warranted, make a performance referral to LifeMatters, which can also assist the employee with addressing underlying issues that may be affecting his or her work, such as stress, schedule management, or a lack of confidence.

Sample language: “LifeMatters is available to help you get your performance back on track. I urge you to call.”

7. Follow up. Schedule a meeting with the employee to review any changes you’ve made and strides toward improving performance. If the employee has met your expectations and is still struggling to meet the target date, it may be time to consider reconfiguring your team or adjusting the project’s workflow or deadline.

The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is available to provide suggestions for keeping your team on track. In addition, counselors can assist you with personal time management or any other concern. Call 24/7/365.

Management Consultation

LifeMatters is available to help with:

- Confronting an employee about performance issues
- An employee’s personal problem
- Suspected drug or alcohol use on the job
- Interpersonal conflicts between team members
- Establishing clear, attainable expectations for performance
- Addressing crisis situations, such as a violent incident, the death of an employee, or a natural disaster
- Your own personal concerns
- Any other work-related issue

LifeMatters offers professional management consultation when you need it, as often as you need it. Call anytime.