

An introduction to managing virtual teams



Most managers and supervisors will have their own ideas about how best to manage and supervise staff. This document is not meant to replace these processes. It only suggests some ways in which existing processes could be improved to better support and manage a 'distributed', flexible work force.

Managers of teleworkers should aim to make telework arrangements as normal as possible. The suggestions provided in this document should assist.

Contents

2. Towards a virtual team
3. Issues for managers
3. Control
4. Trust
6. Performance management
7. Communication
9. 'But isn't telework different?'
10. In summary
10. More information

Towards a virtual team

In many cases, the development of telework involves the creation and management of a virtual team. Teamwork is important in many businesses and understanding the various types of teams is important. They all have a parallel in the work place and most already have a 'virtual' element. For example:

- An orchestra is a team of musicians. They meet to perform together a dozen or more times a year, they meet in sections (brass, violins, etc.) to practise and rehearse, they play together in quartets of chamber ensembles, and they practise on their own. A teleworker, on his or her telework days, is similar to the musician who is practising on his or her own before rejoining one of the larger combinations (when back in the office).
- A sports team is a team of athletes. They also perform together, train together or in smaller groups, and also follow their own personal fitness programmes, away from the rest of the team.
- Some teams might train together but then work totally on their own for a shared objective..
- Some teams might meet only once or twice a year for a conference or team building event, spending the rest of their time working largely on their own. A travelling sales force is one example.

- And other teams will never meet, such as a consultant engineering firm designing and building an oil refinery with designers in Houston and Singapore, management in Perth and London, operational staff in Singapore and Delhi, and day-to-day management on site outside Mumbai.

Individuals, including managers, sustain each of these teams. They demonstrate collective responsibility for shared objectives and understand their individual responsibilities. Each type of team also relies on organisational support for their success.

Another characteristic of successful teams, whether virtual or not, is the recognition that the team process is all about relationships. Such relationships are based on centralised knowledge, streamlined knowledge transfer and clear communication processes. Relationships also require the involvement of employees in developing solutions.

No matter what form of team you manage or participate in, there is usually scope for telework. Indeed, some observers have noted that telework can make a team-based culture work better.

Relying on physical proximity is not the best way to create and work with a team. Shared objectives, shared commitment, and clear individual roles are more important. As a result, some organisations have found that a team that includes teleworkers is stronger and more effective than other teams.

Issues for managers

Faced with managing teleworkers for the first time, many managers have reservations. Managing “people you can’t see” can be very different to the way employees are normally managed. There are five common issues that need to be considered:

- Control;
- Trust;
- Performance Management;
- Communication; and
- ‘Telework is different’.

Control

Although telework initiatives help to create a flexible work place, this does not mean that managers lose control. Well-designed telework arrangements provide a number of tools that managers can use to retain the level of control they need:

- Telework is a voluntary, co-operative arrangement between an employee and a manager: managers shouldn’t feel forced to allow an employee to telework. Assessment questionnaires and formal discussions are normally required before an employee can qualify for telework and these provide managers with appropriate controls.
- Although managers should not normally withhold approval for qualifying staff, there are some reasons that telework could be denied. These relate to job requirements, past and present levels of performance and other work related issues.
- Once telework has been approved, managers are still able to supervise the arrangement.
 - Managers can influence the length of any initial trial period. This could be used if there is serious doubt about whether the arrangement will work.

-- Managers can influence the hours and days that telework can take place and when meetings will require attendance at the office.

-- Managers can also establish appropriate performance requirements and task lists although these should not vary from those that apply to non-teleworking staff.

- Teleworking staff will not normally be out of the office full time. International experience suggests that most managers are able to maintain sufficient control as long as telework does not exceed three days a week.
- One of the major benefits of telework is that employees have better control of their own work outcomes. With appropriate performance management (discussed below) managers are able to develop enhanced control of the projects and initiatives they manage.

In many telework initiatives, managers have found that they have more direct control than they had in the traditional environment. This is generally because managers have thought about the issues involved and taken appropriate action.

Trust

Some studies of trust and mistrust have concluded that it is a major problem for managers of teleworkers but others have concluded that managers have no trust-related problems with their telework arrangements.

(The 2004/2005 Toshiba study found that mistrust was the third most important problem, coming after supervision challenges and concern about lower work motivation but before technology, communication and productivity issues.)

The relationship between an employee and an employer is already based on trust and many factors influence the level of trust involved. External factors, training and skills, and past experiences can all complicate the issue.

There are three central factors involved:

1. A solid personal relationship;
2. Knowing that the person has the necessary qualifications and skills; and
3. Being able to monitor performance.

Strong relations

Strong relationships are built on three things: time, knowledge, and contact, in various combinations. The longer you have known someone the more likely you are to trust them. The more you know about how they react, the hobbies they enjoy, and the sports they play (among other things) the higher your trust will become. And effective personal contact will reinforce your trust even more.

There are a number of ways that managers can develop stronger relationships, and most of them are fairly obvious:

1. Don't rush it. Strong relationships take time to develop.
2. Honesty is important. Saying what you mean (tactfully) and meaning what you say ensures that employees will come to respect you. And it is impossible to build a meaningful relationship with someone whom you lie to—even if they don't know you're lying.
3. Fairness is important. Treating all staff the same is critical to the development of good working relationships.
4. Involve all employees in decision-making. If employees feel that they are involved and that their input is valued the relationship will improve.
5. Try not to talk about work related issues when in a social environment.
6. Take any opportunity to increase your knowledge of the employee and their interests. Invite them to tell you what they did at the weekend. Openly share your own plans and activities if employees show interest.
7. Actively participate in team-building exercises that the organisation organises—and encourage all staff to participate as well.
8. Try to make the workplace relaxed and fun. Acknowledge employee birthdays. Help organise social events and try to attend work-related social occasions.
9. Provide space on the office network for employees to publish their personal web pages, showing their interests, favourite photographs, and so on. Use this space to publish your own personal information.
10. Above all, ensure that ongoing contact and communication is effective and efficient (discussed below.)

As your relationship with your staff becomes stronger your ability to trust them will also increase—particularly if you also establish effective communication modes.

Qualifications and skills

Qualifications and skills can take many forms and they all involve a level of trust. Managers already trust external examinations, company processes and trainers and their more experienced staff. And as a result they usually trust that the employee can do the job to the standards required, regardless of where they are located.

There are things that can be done to increase this trust:

1. Verify that external qualifications are appropriate and genuine.
2. Ensure that all employees attend all relevant training courses and monitor the training sector to see whether there are new courses that might be more relevant and useful. Increasing staff qualifications will can increase a manager's confidence in the skills and abilities of their staff.
3. Review the induction training that staff receive to confirm that employees have all the company-specific information that they need.
4. Meet regularly with employees who have responsibilities as a 'buddy' or mentor for new employees to discuss their progress.
5. Make the effort to test the employee. Ask questions that relate to specific skill sets, invent scenarios and see how he or she reacts, or expand the duties on a short term basis to see whether the employee can cope.
6. Allow staff to telework for a trial period to confirm that they have the skills to make it work effectively.

These steps (and others) can increase the qualifications and skills of employees and improve a manager's faith in staff capabilities. This can enhance the development of trust in the workplace.

Performance management

Managing performance is a fairly simple process: define the job, communicate requirements, monitor that requirements are being met, and recognise and reward progress. These basic elements shouldn't vary much, whether the employee is teleworking or not.

The **job definition** won't be any different—it'll be just as important, have the same components and the same measurements should apply to component tasks. There could be one variation: where the components of the job can best be performed. Discussing this could help the teleworker plan his or her days both at and away from the office.

When it comes to **communicating job requirements**, the job description should be the same for both teleworkers and other staff. However, it is advisable to provide more detailed process guides (if applicable) than would be necessary for non-teleworkers. Discussions and briefings can be scheduled for when the teleworker is in the office and the telephone and email can easily substitute when necessary.

Action plans and 'to do' lists can be a useful communication tool when managing teleworkers. They provide an on-going reminder of priority tasks and

help maintain focus and productivity. They can also be an important way of monitoring performance and provide an 'agenda' for any conversations with managers and colleagues when they are back in the office.

Key Performance Indicators and project milestones should not change for teleworkers.

Taking the effort to **meet and discuss team performance** and its contribution to the organisation's goals could be more important for the teleworker than it is for other staff as it keeps them in touch with what is happening around the organisation. Allowance should also be made within the organisation's telework policy for an individual teleworker's performance to be discussed on a regular basis.

The answer to the question "how do I manage staff I can't see?" is usually another question: "how do you manage staff now?" If managers already manage on the basis of resourcing and measuring outcomes, very little change will be required when an employee becomes a teleworker.

Communication

Many managers are concerned about how they will stay in touch with their staff once a number of them are working off-site. Successful managers in a telework environment have found a number of ways around this.

Communication takes place in many ways but very few of these communication modes cause problems for teleworkers.

Announcements will still be picked up from the Intranet and email when the employee is out of the office while notice boards and posters will be seen on the days that they are in the office. Similarly, one-to-one messages by phone, post or email will reach a staff member wherever they happen to be.

Scheduled team and project meetings, together with social gatherings and scheduled one-to-one meetings can be planned. The teleworker should be able to plan their telework days around the days when meetings are scheduled and supervisors and others can plan meetings for days when the teleworker is known to be in the office. That teleworkers will usually only be out of the office a few days a week will make this easier.

Unscheduled one-to-one meetings, in person, could be difficult for the teleworker although many such meetings can easily and more efficiently be handled over the phone or by email.

Access to informal and out-of-hours social gatherings could be difficult for teleworkers, and unfortunately there is no easy answer to this. For a few days a week, the teleworker will be out of these social loops. However, many teleworkers choose to telework in order to be able to work without interruption: missing out on gossip (and unscheduled meetings) might not be all that important. Furthermore, email and phone can easily be used to arrange informal social gatherings (lunch, or a drink after work for example).

Most teleworkers are not disadvantaged by being out of the office for a couple of days a week, particularly if managers and colleagues schedule important meetings for those days the teleworker is in the office.

Communicating effectively

There are a number of things that will make communication with a virtual team more effective and efficient.

1. Notice boards should be centrally located both electronically (on the Intranet) and in the office. They should be used for all announcements and news. All staff should be allowed to post notices. Doing this ensures that employees know where to look for news, that they check back often, and that they feel involved.
2. A meeting calendar should be created on the Intranet so that all scheduled meetings are known. Agendas should also be published. All meetings should be scheduled and posted with as much lead time as possible.
3. A social centre could be established on the Intranet including a staff directory with links to individual profiles. Special interest groups (specific project teams, dog owners, movie goers, etc.) can be formed to share information easily, perhaps through email lists or bulletin boards. Such facilities can support social interaction even among physically remote workers.
4. All staff should be familiar with address lists and the 'reply to all' function built into most email software.
5. The use of 'real-time' messaging and chat options should be explored so all employees, regardless of location, can quickly contact each other. Many of these services include a 'presence indicator' so everyone knows who else is on-line at any given time.
6. Consideration should be given to the use of on-line meeting options. These range from circulating a document for comments to more comprehensive meeting tools.
7. Teleconferencing should be investigated. This includes both audio- and video-conferencing. (Meeting processes might need some changes to ensure that everyone can contribute.)
8. All meetings, whether electronic or in person, should include an update on upcoming events and meetings.
9. Minutes of all meetings should be archived where attendees can easily refer to them, whether they are off-site or not.
10. All employees should be encouraged to include alternative contact numbers and/or email addresses on their voice-mail. This can ensure that individuals will always be able to contact each other, regardless of location.
11. It is a good idea for all telework agreements to state when staff will be available. These times will not be the teleworkers work hours. They are simply the core times when they will be available for contact. All relevant colleagues and managers should be aware of and respect these times.
12. Managers of teleworkers should make an effort to check in with their teleworkers when they return to the office—to check that everything's OK, remind them of any important events, and re-establish contact. Although most teleworkers are fairly good at staying in touch with the office, even when they're off-site, a quick chat with the manager could be valuable in many ways.
13. Finally, it is a good idea to start your telework initiative with a launch function. This informal celebration is the first step in creating a successful virtual team.

'But isn't telework different?'

Perhaps the greatest challenge that new managers of telework face is the perception that it is 'different'. But is it really that different from the way things are happening now?

Telework means that employees are not at their desk or even in the office all the time but that's not unusual. Many employees are away from their desks in the course of a normal working week. There are meetings in the office and off-site, people pop out for lunch and other quick shopping trips and some staff will spend a lot of time liaising with other workers away from their desk.

Furthermore, some employees already take work home, working at weekends to meet deadlines, during illness or covering important domestic issues such as tradesmen's visits. Many could also be checking their emails from home after hours.

Telework changes the location at which work is performed but the job doesn't change, performance monitors don't change, and meetings can still be scheduled. The work still happens.

Even if telework does seem to be very different, such alternative working arrangements are often considered by organisations as part of planning for business continuity threats such as terrorism, natural disasters or pandemics. Managers who accept that working off site is a normal work option will be in a much better position to handle such events if they happen.

In summary

Telework requires careful management if it is going to be effective but the reservations commonly associated with issues such as control, trust, performance management, and communication are, arguably, unfounded.

- Managers rarely lose control of their teleworkers. In fact, well set up telework initiatives can provide managers with more control.
- Most managers already trust their employees to perform the work expected of them and there are ways in which trust can be increased.
- Most aspects of performance management can remain the same once telework has started.
- Most existing communication modes remain effective once telework starts and with only a few alterations staying in touch in a “distributed” environment becomes easier.
- Working away from the traditional office is already an accepted option for many people.

Effective management of a work force that includes teleworkers generally relies on three things. The first is to choose appropriate tasks and individuals. The second is to recognise that the only thing that should change once a telework arrangement has been set up is the location that work is performed. The third is that the telework arrangement should be accepted as part of the ‘corporate culture’.

When it is understood that the only thing that should change is the work location, answering many other questions becomes easier:

1. Turn the question around, i.e. how is this question answered for non-teleworkers? What is the present process?
2. Will the present process work when the work location changes?
3. If the answer is ‘Yes’, the present process can continue without alteration.
4. If the answer is ‘No’, ask what difference the work location has made. How should the process be amended?
5. Make the required amendment and ensure that it is applied to teleworkers and non-teleworkers alike.

Ensuring that the same management process applies to both teleworkers and non-teleworkers is an important part of making the telework arrangement ‘normal’, i.e. an accepted work option. It helps reduce favouritism and confusion and helps teleworkers feel part of the organisation.

Making telework normal and accepted is important to realising the full benefits of telework. Only when the culture of the organisation shifts to being ‘location-independent’ will management challenges reduce and the full benefits of telework become accessible.

More information

Website: www.teleworkaustralia.net.au

Email: admin@teleworkaustralia.net.au

Phone: 1800 283 089

This initiative is made possible through funding from the Australian Government.