

BUILD BRIDGES, NOT WALLS: *WHY YOU SHOULDN'T FEAR A REMOTE WORKFORCE*

Sentiment toward a remote workforce is changing rapidly. In the two months following the eruption of COVID-19 in the United States, we surveyed just over 250 employer partners about their approach to long-term remote work as a result of the pandemic, and 32% reported they adopted new, permanent remote work arrangements for at least part of their workforces. This mirrors the larger trend across America, with ZipRecruiter reporting only 1.3% of pre-COVID job postings mentioning the opportunity to work from home, a figure that has since jumped to 11.3%.

One of the most common objections leaders make to employing remote workers is the loss or dilution of company culture. We think that's bogus, and here's why:

Culture is the sum of the actions employees at all levels take when no one is looking, counting, filing, reporting, or asking in order to achieve the type of success the company rewards. Culture can't be stopped or started by a policy or a person or a pandemic. It permeates cubicle walls, seeps under office doors, and climbs ladders. It's a better teacher than any training department, and it's capable of transcending every physical boundary it encounters.

Allowing or disallowing a remote workforce by policy is one sign of a company's culture. Some companies trust, manage, and promote employees by measuring productivity and performance; some do the same by measuring proximity to the boss's office.

So let's be clear about one thing: Your company's culture should absolutely be a top concern, but you're fooling yourself if you think controlling it with walls is the only way to affect a positive outcome. All you should worry about is providing the right people with the right tools, the right leaders, and the right management techniques. If you do this, a remote workforce is not such a formidable foe.

WELCOMING A REMOTE WORKFORCE

Once you've done the work to hire the right people—the people who have the skill sets you need—make sure you welcome them with the same energy you'd welcome an in-office employee:

- Build buy-in by clearly explaining the mission and vision of the company through video or meet-and-greets with executive leadership.
- Offer on-site equipment pick-up for local employees so they can meet a few co-workers face to face; or
- Overcome distance by making equipment delivery extra-special for workers who live far away: Send a box full of branded desk supplies or a desktop floral arrangement in your company colors.
- Schedule one-on-one virtual meetings with key culture/brand influencers during each new hire's onboarding period.
- Use video conferencing to conduct remote orientations.
- Give specific examples of how current employees live and breathe the mission and vision each day and how they are recognized for it. This sets the tone for how new employees will approach each workday.

ENGAGING A REMOTE WORKFORCE

It's 2020 and breaking the communication barrier is so *2010*. Tons of communication tools—both free and paid—are at your disposal, so pick a select few and require your workers to use them.

- Analyze your communication structures to ensure processes, tools, and programs support remote and in-office workers equally.
 - Tackle daily collaboration technologies first. Slack, Google Chat, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams are all commonly used by small and large corporations. Make communication so effortless that it's as easy or **EASIER** than walking to a co-worker's cubicle.
 - Like daily communication, training should not be harder for remote workers than it is for in-office workers. Record webinars, live-stream training sessions, or create e-learning opportunities; do not expect remote workers to join live trainings via speakerphone.

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- Employ short pulse surveys to measure the sentiment and satisfaction of your remote workers. If it differs from that of in-office workers, figure out why. (And don't be surprised if satisfaction is higher for remote workers!)
- Set up formal video conferencing opportunities, like a fixed weekly meeting. Or, write a list of questions and host a companywide "speed networking" event where remote workers have the chance to build rapport through short, three-to-five minute conversations. Engagement should sometimes be fun and games.

MANAGING A REMOTE WORKFORCE

Hands-on management and personal connections are important because they guide workers and give them a sense of what's right and wrong and a sense of belonging.

- Clearly communicate to managers that they must prioritize all workers equally or appropriately based on their roles. It's not OK to ignore remote workers because it's "harder" to IM or pick up the phone.
- Remote workers need to be assessed exactly the same as in-office peers—from performance metrics to responsiveness. In practice, this means clearly communicating performance expectations and setting reasonable expectations for response rates (e.g., don't demand a remote worker respond to every email within 10 minutes if you don't have the same expectation of your in-office workers).

EMBRACING THE UNIQUE TRAITS OF A REMOTE WORKFORCE

Read up on best practices of companies with successful large or remote-only workforces, like Williams Sonoma and UnitedHealth Group, and embrace the fact that your company culture now includes the idiosyncrasies of your remote workers. Let the subculture flourish and watch how it positively affects your larger culture. You'll likely notice that workers in the office change their approaches to work and work style, and you may find it affords you opportunities to let in-office workers work remotely at times—a benefit that costs you nothing but means everything to the employee.

CONCLUSION

If you're still hesitant to consider remote work, here's a challenge for you: Write a short statement describing the type of culture you want your company to have and then list five reasons why remote work will ruin that culture. *It's hard, isn't it?*

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