



Guidelines for Supervisors Managing Remote Staff

Managing, remote workers can bring about many challenges. It is critically important that you are especially clear about your expectations of the hours worked and availability of your team. Do you want your staff available between set office hours? Are you OK with them tracking their hours, as long as they're available for meetings? In short, don't make any assumptions about what working remotely is – define it with your staff.

Expert Tips for Successfully Managing Remote Staff

1. Create a Digital Workplace
2. Give Crystal Clear Directions
3. Break Things into Tiny Tasks
4. Check-In Daily
5. Hold Regular Meetings
6. Recreate the Water Cooler
7. Share Goals and Wins
8. Build a Culture of Showing Your Work
9. Understand When to use Which Tool

1) Create a “Digital Workplace”

There's no shortage of digital products to help your team communicate and collaborate from anywhere. The best options include task management and scheduling, as well as the ability to share documents and celebrate milestones. LVC offers the following platforms (Office 365, Base Camp, Zoom, WebEx, Skype, Campfire (a group chat app), please ask IT about others)

It is important to use these various modes of communication wisely. Since it's so easy to miscommunicate when you're not physically in the room with someone, make sure every interaction you have with your staff is delivered on the right platform. Guard against “group think,” make sure everyone has a chance to be heard especially those who may have a dissenting opinion or may be more introverted.

Don't use email or instant messaging for delivering critical feedback – lengthy or difficult conversations are best saved for video chat or, if that's not possible, a phone call. Once you have your digital workplace set up, clearly outline what each type of communication tool should be used for.

We really need to make sure we give everyone a chance to talk especially those who may dissent or those who are more introverted. It's hard to see a face or even feel the emotions of someone who maybe wants to say something but can't. Groupthink is especially dangerous on conference calls.

2) Give Crystal Clear Directions

When you're not in the same room with someone, it's extremely easy for them to misinterpret something you've said. Develop a way of communicating your expectations in such a way that it's virtually bullet-proof. You might want to use an electronic method to record your expectations, manage a project, etc. You should specify *absolutely everything* you can about your work expectations and the approach you want your team members to take. Depending on the type of work, this could include the length, style, time you expect a project to take, desired end-result, your KPI's for the work, tone, design, style, language or really any expectation that you may have. Think screen-shots, examples, screen-casts, diagrams, etc. You really cannot provide too much information when you're managing remote staff.

3) Break Things into Tiny Tasks

At first, the tasks you delegate should be tiny. Once you have confidence in your staff, expand the scope of the work, but don't get ahead of yourself. Even if you communicate your expectations flawlessly, there will still be times when you are misunderstood – especially in the beginning. Go through everything to avoid confusion: key projects and deadlines, important daily or weekly tasks, and scheduled meetings. Be patient when this happens – just correct course and keep going.

4) Check-In Daily

Remote staff are out of site and it's all too easy for them to be out of mind. Before you know it, you can easily let days or weeks slip by without any contact. If this happens, you quickly lose touch with your team and soon enough, the only thing you have is an overdue project. Don't let this happen.

Have a routine where you check in daily with each other. Make sure you include everyone so no one feels left out and everyone hears the same thing. It might just be 5 minutes using a chat platform or it might be a quick progress update. But either way, don't skip the daily check in as a key part of managing remote staff.

Having an agenda, now more than ever, will really help keep online and or phone calls short and efficient. Having a long conference call every day can be tiring and inefficient.

5) Hold Regular Team Meetings

This is really important when it comes to managing remote staff. Having a scheduled meeting where you can get an update on the work, but also dive deeper into other issues is so important. You can cover things like; what's working/not working for your team, goals, anything holding success back, or their ideas for making improvements. Scheduling these regular meetings helps your remote staff to feel valued and will increase team success. Remember some staff members may have young children at home, so it may be easier for them to work later into the evening versus early in the morning. Find out what works best for your team and develop a schedule.

6) Recreate the Water Cooler

When you work in an office with others, you can't help but have some banter which is non-work related. It might not seem efficient to chat about sports or your respective families, but in the long-run, it makes a lot of sense. When your team is separate from you, it's easy to overlook the importance of this casual chit-chat.

Try to get inventive as to how to recreate the water-cooler in a systematic way. It might be something as simple as starting each meeting with some casual conversation. Although it might seem like a waste of time, these discussions help your remote staff feel more comfortable. Conversations happen naturally in an office, and although you might have to force it a little bit at first, you'll soon find that people will get the hang of it when working remotely as well.

7) Share Team Goals and Wins

When team members understand the bigger picture of their work, it usually correlates to higher motivation and productivity. When you're managing remote staff, make sure you give them the greater "why" behind the work and don't just focus on the task at hand. It's also valuable to get team members' input into short and medium-term goals.

Remember to check in on your staff, ask how they are personally. This will be a very trying for many, both physically and emotionally. If we can offer EAP services or other services, we need to do so.

8) Build a Culture of Showing Your Work

When people work side by side, they hear a lot about what is going on in the department/division. They can hear and see what is being done and know what struggles the team is facing. When you've got a team that is working remotely, none of that is true. Find a way to keep everyone up-to-date on what everyone else is doing. This could be a weekly update from everyone during a meeting, or a chat channel where you all share a small win for the day.

An end-of-day email is also a fantastic way to both encourage people to focus on their accomplishments, and to increase the transparency between team members. Encourage people to share even the things that might seem mundane or trite to others.

9) Understand When to use Which Tool

Working remotely allows a great deal of efficiency but be careful you don't lean too far this way. The quality of your communications is equally important. Different tools are better suited for different situations and in terms of communication quality, in general "Video > Phone > Chat > Email" are the best ways to communicate most effectively. When you communicate by video, you're much less likely to be misunderstood and you can more easily get everyone on the same page.

Video is perfect for when you have a sensitive or complicated issue to discuss. They usually take more time to arrange and not everyone loves video, but it's great for getting everyone on the same page.

The phone (or any voice call like Skype) is a step down from that as you lose the body language and facial cues. But you still have the verbal tonal differences which communicate a lot. Most people can communicate far more thoroughly and effectively on the phone than they can in writing.

Online chat is very fast and is great for lots of day-to-day updates. However, if there are disagreements or an issue becomes sensitive, it's best to switch to a voice or video session. Chats can easily get lost as well, so anything that requires detailed communication should not usually be done using this method.

Email is great for detailed communications – especially if you'd like a record a reference to go back to later. Email is very one-way though so is quite prone to misinterpretation.

While not an exhaustive list, by sticking to these practices, everyone tends to be more productive and happy – which is exactly what you want!

Adapted from <https://dothethings.com/best-practices-for-managing-remote-workers/> and <https://hiring.workopolis.com/article/8-essential-tips-for-managing-remote-workers/>

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