



June 2008

Managing a Remote Workforce

by Katie Ford

In the age of Web 2.0, the definition of "workplace" is quickly changing. Given the right tools, an employee can crank out a day's work, and even participate in meetings, yet never set foot in the office. Remote working arrangements are hardly limited to big business: according to market intelligence firm IDC, more than 65 percent of teleworkers are employed by companies with less than 100 employees. A small business can slash overhead expenses by leveraging a remote workforce, but it introduces a new set of challenges. If left unchecked, these challenges can lead to poor internal communication, inefficient processes, and an ambivalent company culture.

So how do you ensure that your employees out yonder are operating at maximum efficiency, with full alignment to the company's vision? It all starts with the vision from the top, according to Chuck Andrew of The Clarion Group, a management advisory firm. "A company must spend time thinking about its mission and desired mindset and how it will communicate and model these things often and regularly," he says.

It's also imperative that executives regularly communicate their expectations to each off-site employee. This includes "the rules of the road": who they report to and how often, what their areas of responsibility are, and how their individual roles help the company as a whole fulfill its mission.

Dr. Noelle Nelson, a clinical psychologist and author of *The Power of Appreciation in Business*, says a combination of weekly teleconferences -- either one-on-one or with a team -- can do wonders to keep a remote workforce on task.

"Ask each participant what they've encountered in the past week and if they have any issues they need to bring to the table," Nelson says. "This call is not just about 'did you do your work and meet your goals this week?' By sharing what's going on in each person's area of responsibility, you're creating a group and building a team, even though you have one person in San Diego and another in China."

The next step is to set goals for each team member for the coming week based on what was shared in the meeting. Nelson says the weekly teleconferences should be complemented with a weekly e-bulletin that arrives at a different time in the week -- for instance, a teleconference every Friday, followed by an e-bulletin the following Wednesday. "It can be just a list of bullet points that explains what's going on with company overall," Nelson says, "and it doesn't always have to be good news either. Whether you're announcing a new hire or sharing that the big contract didn't go through, it helps the off-site employees feel connected to the company and informed about the bigger picture."

Nelson adds that off-site employees also need to know what resources are available to them. Be sure to spell out what support is available to them, and how they can access it, in the company handbook. Reinforce that message in the weekly e-bulletins. Speaking of handbooks, leaders should create company policies that facilitate good communication between on-site and off-site staff. Andrew suggests the "three email" policy. "If an issue can't be resolved in three emails, it's time to pick up the phone and talk it out," he says.

Nelson adds that quickly responding to questions and concerns from off-site employees is also imperative to building a strong team, so much so that it's worth assigning formal responsibility around it. "Make it a policy -- put people in charge of responding to specific issues," she says.

It's also beneficial to know which mode of communication works best with each employee. "Baby boomers generally need to hear a voice; Millennials want it in an email," Nelson says. "You need to find out what's their preference and try to honor it to the degree that it works for you and is appropriate for what you need to communicate to them."

To lead a remote workforce successfully, Nelson says business owners need to be:

- Consistent in company messaging about goals and protocol.
- Authentic in their communications. If the business is struggling, you don't need to air all the dirty laundry, but it's good to be straightforward about where the company stands.
- Accountable to others. "If you say it, you must follow through with it," Nelson says. "Every initiative left hanging chips away at an owner's credibility."

Last, but certainly not least, praise the work and acknowledge the struggles of your off-site employees. "Because that's something they're not getting out there," Nelson says. "There's no supervisor stopping by their home offices to say 'Hey, good job today, by the way.'"

Adds Chuck Andrew: "It only takes five minutes to acknowledge one employee's good deed with an email blast to the entire company. We all have egos and it feels good to be recognized for what you do." He says that it also pays to think through the other ways you motivate remote workers. "Be thoughtful about what kind of incentive system will help your employees meet their goals," Andrew says. "And, of course, it's always good if they can see a straight line from performance to compensation in their paychecks."