

Leading flexible, hybrid and high-performing teams

## Resources for managers



# Managing remote and home workers

Within your flexible team, you may be responsible for staff you rarely see face to face. These could be homeworkers or colleagues who work remotely away from your central site, perhaps in a regional site, an office hub, public spaces or a mix of locations, part-time or full-time.

Dispersed teams can be spread across sites, time zones or continents. Wherever they are, you will need strong management skills to help them work to their full potential. This part of the guide tells you how to get the best from your remote workers. It covers:

1. Training and development
2. Communication
3. Remote working team protocols
4. Objective setting

## 1. Training and development

### Qualities of an effective remote worker

The successful remote worker has particular qualities and attributes, which include:

- good communication skills;
- rapport and trust with their line manager;
- motivation and independence to work unsupervised;
- understanding of their role and objectives;
- time management and organisation skills;
- the ability to work alone without feeling isolated; and
- confidence with new technology and social networking to stay connected with others and to work collaboratively.

It can be helpful to outline these qualities and attributes to the whole team, so that everyone is familiar with them and so that colleagues are able to assess their own wish to work remotely, fully informed of what is expected, before they make a request to you.

For homeworkers in particular, with whom you are least likely to have regular face-to-face contact, you may want to arrange training for both of you in what is expected of your roles, especially around supervision and review of performance.

## **Refresh skills or offer remote workers additional training if appropriate**

Options include:

- e-learning;
- webinars;
- peer-to-peer support;
- champions, mentors or buddies;
- regular supervision through video calls or similar; and/or
- targeted support with new technology and collaboration software.

## **Do not assume that your remote and homeworkers are no longer ambitious**

Your remote workers almost certainly highly value their working arrangements. And it may be that opportunities for career development or promotion might not be compatible, if they require more on-site presence. But make sure that you do not disadvantage your team member by assuming that they will not be interested; ensure that they are encouraged and considered for new projects or promotion, and that they can be confident that you will be open to a conversation about how this might work.

## **2. Communication**

Good communication is crucial to keeping your remote workers in the heart of the team and to preventing feelings of isolation. Assess which combination of communication channels will work best for you, the rest of the team and your clients or customers. Offer training and support if needed.

Bear in mind that you should be prepared to spend more time communicating with your team on both a one-to-one and a group basis to ensure that effective working relationships are maintained.

It is particularly important you agree with any homeworkers how information will be shared, both ways, between team members and with you as the manager.

## Face-to-face communication is important

Having regular meetings with everyone present strengthens relationships and engagement. Sensitive scheduling for meetings and training sessions can allow remote workers to attend in person. In addition:

- Video calls, available through Zoom, FaceTime, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams and others, are increasingly sophisticated and affordable, and allow remote workers to pick up on the visual cues not available in telephone calls.
- Phone calls at scheduled times keep colleagues connected. Put conference call facilities in place so that remote workers can attend meetings that they'd otherwise miss – and make sure that everyone feels included by training anyone who chairs such meetings in how to run them effectively and inclusively.
- Email can be overused, and clogged inboxes can be a source of stress for any employee. The problem can be magnified for part-time workers, who may have to plough through two or three days' worth of emails at a time. Guard against needless copying in, and have realistic expectations about response times.
- Chat software is a great way for remote workers to connect informally with colleagues and stay involved with everyday conversations. While useful for building personal relationships, chat can be distracting; setting profile statuses to 'busy' is a way to prevent interruptions for tasks that require concentration.
- Collaboration software, such as Slack, Yammer, Microsoft Teams and HipChat, lets team members work together easily, share documents, message each other and comment on work wherever they are. Cisco and IBM have reported increased speed in decision-making and time to market for new products, as employees are freed from having to wait for meetings to connect with each other.

## 3. Remote working team protocols

Protocols are a useful tool for managing staff who work in a non-traditional way. In addition to the four core protocol areas for your whole flexible team, covered in the '**Flexible team protocols**' factsheet in this toolkit, you should consider more detailed protocols for your remote workers.

### Availability

Agree specific times when remote workers can be contacted or are available for meetings. This not only helps colleagues know when they can connect, but helps remote workers take reasonable breaks away from their work without feeling guilty or fearful that they will be accused of shirking.

## Whole-team communication

Regular whole-team meetings are important to maintain good communication, so find times that are suitable for all group members. Consider alternating days if it's impossible to find a time that everyone can do, or make use of conference or video calls so homeworkers can still participate. Remote workers are likely to need some notice to attend important meetings on-site. Schedule virtual 'water cooler' moments using online chat, allowing team members to form relationships and get to know colleagues they don't see every day.

- For homeworkers in particular, it will be important to agree regular times when they attend meetings or carry out some work on-site. Be realistic about frequency: someone who lives within accepted commuting distance might be expected to make weekly visits; someone who lives several hours away, perhaps only quarterly. Depending on the terms of their contract of employment, they may be reimbursed for travel costs. But it must be clear that not being available in person at pre agreed times 'because they are homeworkers' is not acceptable.

## Health and safety

Most work done at home is low-risk desk-based work and employers are responsible only for equipment they supply.

- For regular or permanent homeworkers, your organisation may wish to carry out a risk assessment at your home.
- With ad hoc or part-time homeworking at the employee's request, many employers require home-/remote workers to self-certify that their place of work – whether that is at home, another office or another location, is safe and secure.

## Office supplies and equipment

Be clear upfront how and what you will supply to remote workers, including office furniture, stationery supplies, computers, phones and broadband – and what the arrangements will be for items that may be for personal use as well as work.

## Confidentiality

Discuss with remote workers what precautions they should take to protect sensitive information. For example, there may be shared family access to a computer used for work, or your employee may sometimes work in public spaces such as coffee shops.

## Breaks

Homeworkers are more likely to work too much than too little, because they don't have a commute or cues and conversation from colleagues to break up the day. Managers should be alert to signs of overworking and the risk of burn-out, and encourage employees to take regular breaks.

## Childcare

Ensure your employee has childcare provision in place if they are working from home. In extenuating circumstances (e.g. unexpected, long-term school closures), line managers should have sensible and understanding conversations with parents and carers – particularly those working full-time – about what is and isn't possible.

## 4. Setting objectives

Remote workers need clear, specific and measurable objectives. They should know what they have to deliver and by when – and be trusted to achieve those objectives.

To help you monitor output effectively, your performance management system should be underpinned by SMART objectives:

- **S**pecific
- **M**easurable
- **A**chievable
- **R**elevant
- **T**ime-bound

With tasks and expectations clearly defined, remote workers have the freedom to manage their time and workload within those objectives. Meanwhile you can concentrate on objectives and outcomes, rather than being concerned about when, where or how your employees are working.