



12 TIPS FOR TELECOMMUTING UNDER COVID-19:

MAKE SURE YOUR REMOTE WORK STRATEGY IS A SOLUTION TO THE CRISIS, NOT THE CAUSE OF A NEW ONE

Telecommuting is certainly not a new concept or practice. Leading-edge organizations seeking to boost productivity, promote work-life balance, and amplify employee engagement have implemented remote work programs for years. While the approach doesn't make sense for every business, a surprising number of companies across industry sectors are able to deploy virtual workspaces that allow for flexible and effective operations. In a normal world, telecommuting is just one tool in your technology arsenal – one that empowers your workforce, which is why 95% of employers surveyed by Global Workplace Analytics found that allowing telecommuting increased employee retention rates.

But there is nothing normal about our world under COVID-19, and telecommuting per government order is definitely a new concept and practice. In theory, remote work programs are the ultimate answer to this unprecedented emergency; virtual workspaces are by definition instruments for social distancing. They are also the solution to a clear and present business crisis, allowing work to continue when it might otherwise grind to a halt.

But how do you ensure that this essential crisis management tool does not create a new cascade of calamities among your employees and between your company and your customers? How do you avoid miscommunication, disconnection, and a frayed sense of teamwork? Before COVID-19, telecommuting was used by different organizations to different degrees. Some businesses saw it mainly as a tool for traveling workers; other employed a virtual army of home office pros. Certainly, though, it was never envisioned as the engine for your entire operations, as it is now becoming for many companies for the foreseeable future.

Based on our years of embracing remote work options for our employees, here are some guidelines to help make sure your telecommuting approach is the answer to a crisis, and not the source of a new one:

1. Manage by objectives, not attendance.

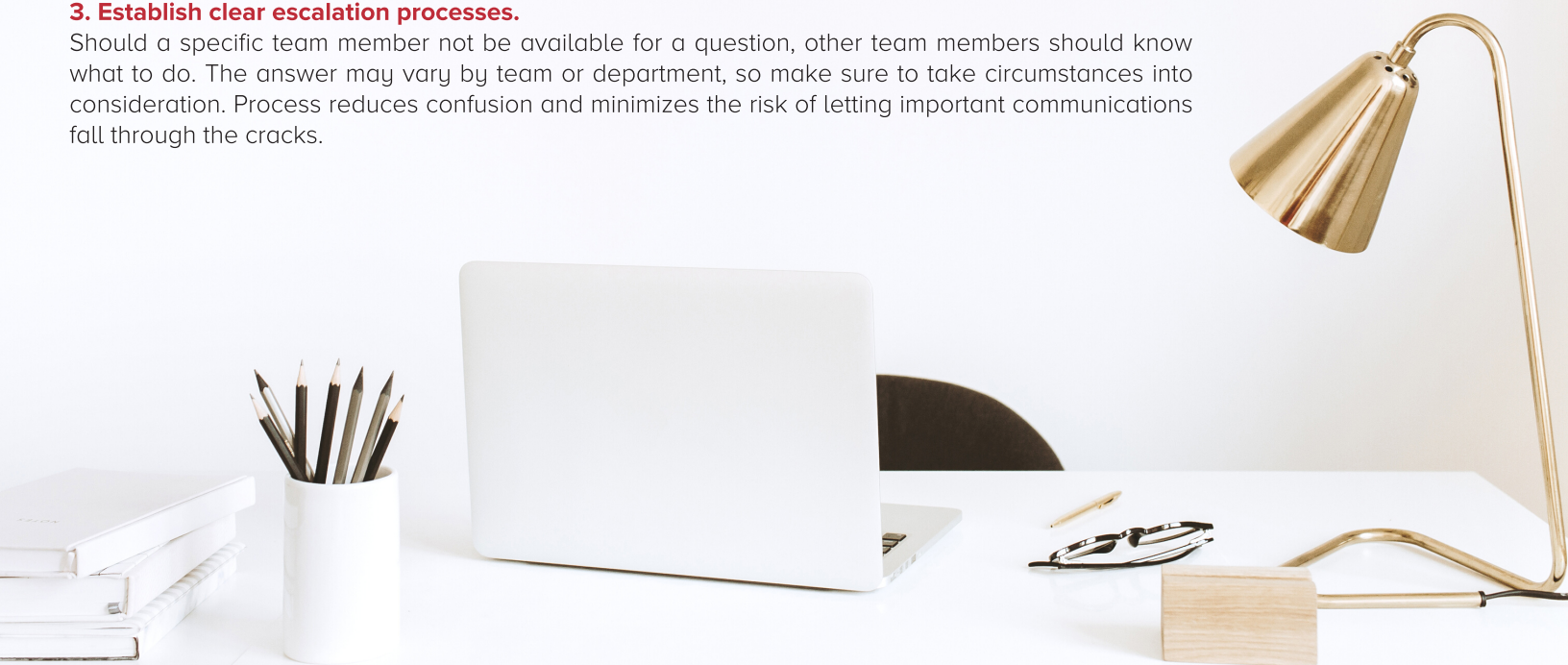
From a hands-on perspective, focus on defining work according to clear, defined outputs and outcomes, not hours in front of the screen. Team leaders need to make sure everyone knows exactly what they need to accomplish, and when. Since your people can't be in the office, regular office hours should not define the scope of a day; instead, it's the results that matter.

2. Offer multiple collaborative tools.

Companies that prioritize collaborative working are five times as likely to be high performing. Thus, leaders should ensure that clear and effective communication channels are in place by turning to collaborative tools such as Slack, Skype, Teams, Google Docs or project management software.

3. Establish clear escalation processes.

Should a specific team member not be available for a question, other team members should know what to do. The answer may vary by team or department, so make sure to take circumstances into consideration. Process reduces confusion and minimizes the risk of letting important communications fall through the cracks.





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4. Define expectations and team roles or responsibilities.

Team members should know what is expected of them before, during or after calls and meetings. Consider regular team meetings via phone, Skype, etc. and divvy out who does what. Be as communicative and open as possible.

5. Keep your team plugged into the overall operations and status of the business.

Team leaders should schedule regular check-ins with each remote individual. Team-wide or company-wide calls or video calls should be conducted to keep employees up-to-date with the overall status of your organization. In these uncertain times, employees need reassurance from leaders and a sense of connection to the overall operation of your company.

6. Ask for ongoing feedback on the remote setup.

Employee feedback is integral to success. What can be added, changed, or improved upon to make the remote work experience better? Your employees are best equipped to let you know.

7. Suggest that your employees create a defined remote workspace.

What does the perfect workspace look like? The answer varies from person to person. Experience suggests that having a regular, defined place in the home to work is key for productivity, so let your team know that this structured approach will help.

8. Emphasize the importance of organization and regular communication.

Let your employees know that they need to efficiently track their time and report in on their projects. They should also feel encouraged to speak up if there are technical barriers or any other issues affecting their ability to operate remotely.

9. Promote company culture and connections.

Keeping employees engaged when they are disconnected physically is a challenge. As the length of the COVID-19 interruption becomes more clear, consider setting up virtual professional development programs, lunch and learns, webinars, and other on-line group events.

10. Have employees set up a professional video space.

When working remotely, video conferences are inevitable, particularly when working with individuals outside the company. Skyping or Zooming creates a more intimate setup and helps you feel more connected. Employees should designate a space with a professional background for on-camera time, and they should ensure they are dressed for the part and that lighting is good.

11. Encourage virtual water-cooler conversation.

Lax conversation between coworkers on a sports game or current events can go a long way in bringing the team together digitally, strengthening company culture. It also helps people feel less isolated and boosts morale. These types of conversations work best on instant messaging platforms, so make sure you have one. Saying hello to a coworker and asking about their weekend can go a long way.

12. When in doubt, pick up a phone.

Employees should be reminded of an old tech tool: the phone. If caught in a web of back-and-forth emails, they should remember that it's time to communicate directly. Video calls are also a more personable alternative to this, especially when dealing with clients.

If you feel that you and your team require more guidance or counsel during these extraordinary times, there are resources available to help. COVID-19 may have forced many organizations into a remote world, but once given a taste of the benefits, some may find it hard to go back.

