THE

VIRTUAL WORKPLACE'S RULES OF CONDUCT

The Virtual Workplace's Rules of Conduct

The best of Business Management Daily's advice

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With so many employees now working in different places, everyone is being asked to communicate in two dimensions far more often. For every gain in convenience, efficiency, and safety, the virtual world can set us back when it comes to clear communication and the alignment of schedules and goals.

In this special report, we've collected the best of Business Management Daily's advice on how to make sure everyone at your organization works in rhythm—and obeys employment law—no matter if they're in Indiana or India.

Here, there, everywhere: Foster harmony and productivity with a hybrid workforce

Flexibility remains the buzzword at many workplaces. Numerous organizations continue to allow employees to decide where they want to work. This hybrid model results in some individuals returning to the office, others coming in for a few days each week, and many staying remote.

Such arrangements allow for better safety precautions and relieve some of the chaos experienced by working parents with children e-learning at home. For managers, however, the set-up can prove a major headache.

How can leaders improve the harmony of a hybrid workforce and perhaps save their own sanity? Consider these ideas:

Stay organized. As basic as it sounds, know each person's location every day. Quick access to whereabouts spares the time and frustration of searching. Create a central schedule available to all on your team so everyone's abreast of their colleagues' whereabouts.

Prioritize communication. Always a cornerstone of success, communication takes on even greater significance in hybrid arrangements. If not careful, having different work environments can up the odds of someone failing to receive a message.

"I can't stress enough the importance of strong communication," says James Surrey, founder of Review Home Warranties. "A common problem is that members that are in the office relay messages to each other in person but don't disseminate the message to those working from home. As a consequence, half the team is mal-informed, and the miscommunication isn't fully realized until a resulting problem occurs, such as a missed deadline."

To avoid such situations, standardize communication procedures. Share information in set ways that ensure timely delivery to all involved. This might entail a group email to all individuals working on a certain project, even if one of them is sitting in a neighboring cubicle.

For staff meetings, adopt a similar mindset of everyone consistently receiving the same information at the same time regardless of location. At many companies, all employees continue to log on to Zoom for meetings whether at home or in the office. This action eliminates logistical dilemmas, promotes a sense of equality and maintains on-site social distancing.

Simplify collaboration. Get all members of the team on the same page, both figuratively and literally. Leaders must ensure workers know company objectives and standards during this trying time and have the means at their disposal to fulfill them.

"The best way to ensure a hybrid work environment runs smoothly is to give everyone on your team the collaborative tools they need to do their jobs. This means things like Slack, Trello, Google docs, and any other tools that allow your teams to sync up what they're doing and work off of the same information," says Carter Seuthe, vice president of content at Credit Summit.

He notes, though, that these tools are only as useful as the education provided with them. Managers need to be well-versed about company technology and able to teach team members the most effective ways to use them.

Pay attention to fairness. Resentment builds when employees think one group of workers receives preferential treatment or operates under a different set of rules. Smart managers know they must deal with this topic quickly and carefully.

"The first step to minimizing bias is to acknowledge it exists," says Phil Buckley, managing director at Change with Confidence. "Next is to define and adopt identical practices for all team members, such as meeting each member once a week for priority alignment, coaching and feedback. Another technique is to meet with your entire team (on-site and remote) to discuss team ways of working. The team discussion will reveal potential managerial biases and ways to address them."

Other helpful actions: Monitor who receives plum assignments to judge if the scales tip too far toward on-site staff. Give all interested workers equal opportunities for learning and development. Avoid the tendency to provide remote workers with corrective feedback but failing to acknowledge their accomplishments.

Promote a sense of togetherness. Lastly, remember that teams thrive when people feel connected and united toward common goals. Vary who works with whom to dismantle feelings of "us" and "them." Share good news together to build group pride. Celebrate milestones, birthdays and holidays in ways all can enjoy. Physical arrangements change, but our desire to bond with others endures.

Stay ever-present when working remotely

Do you worry that if you're away from the office and mixing face to face with colleagues for too long, they'll simply forget how important you are? There are ways to keep injecting your presence even from far away:

1. Be the first one at every videoconference. You don't have to say a thing; just having people see your face and name upon first entering the room establishes the sense that you're always ready and enthused. If you show up at the last minute, many won't even notice you're there.

2. Attach a message to every deliverable. A brief comment should come along with the reports and files you send to others. Now is not the time to send "ghost town" attachments; always let them know there's a person behind the work.

3. Launch a new email signature. Anything different about your emails will catch attention. Pick one new tweak and stick with it.

4. Get on the phone. Many of us shy away from this method of contact when working remotely. It can feel like we're intruding on someone at home, and we never really know when they're ready and willing to take a call. But your voice, speaking one-on-one to someone whose attention you have in full, is the best connector of all, far more powerful than any other digital method.

5. Be the Fun Club. Many offices have had to let light team-building events slide. Be the person to get something simple going—be it a Zoom trivia contest, a pet photo day or just a chat channel to share TV and movie recommendations.

Caution when conducting virtual interviews

Congratulations! You're hiring! You've narrowed a pile of résumés down to eight. Now it's time for interviews. These days, that means replacing face-to-face meetings with virtual sessions via Zoom or another virtual platform.

The same principles that have always guided your interviewing protocols apply in an online environment. However, just like in-person interviews, virtual interviews can trigger discrimination complaints. Follow these tips to avoid potential pitfalls:

Always screen candidates via paper or online résumés before proceeding to video interviews.

Apply your usual anti-discrimination policies. The legal risks are the same as during face-to-face interviews.

An informal EEOC letter addressed this issue, saying, "Under Title VII, it is not illegal for an employer to learn the race, gender or ethnicity of an individual prior to an interview." However, "Video clips might be analogized to information on a résumé that clearly tells an individual's race, such as, 'President, Black Law Students Association.' In this situation, as with the video clip, the employer needs to focus on the person's qualifications for the job."

Also, if you see on the video that the person has a disability, "You have not violated the inquiry prohibition of the ADA, but you must not use that information to discriminate in hiring."

Retain electronic copies of all virtual interviews, in addition to documenting all aspects of the hiring process as usual.

5 ways to make your virtual meetings more engaging
by Kevin Eikenberry

While we all go to lots of meetings (too many?), more and more people are spending more and more time in meetings using technology, rather than being face to face with everyone. And while meetings are still meetings and people are still people, virtual meetings are different.

One of the biggest challenges with virtual meetings is keeping people engaged and participating. Having led many virtual meetings, I've found five things that can help make a difference to increase participation and engagement, and reduce distractions for meeting participants. Let me share them with you here.

Determine and communicate the purpose of the meeting. There are many purposes for meetings. Some meetings are intended to be one-way information exchanges. If that is your purpose consider three things:

- Is a meeting the best way to share this information? Perhaps a meeting with everyone isn't the best way to convey your information. Consider a video of your slides (or sending the PowerPoint file) for people to review on their time, with a much shorter scheduled follow-up meeting or call to handle concerns, questions and clarifications.
- If a meeting is the best choice, let people know what to expect — at least they will know that it is one-way information flow.
- If you are meeting for this purpose, adjust your expectations of participation. After all, if you (or someone else) is doing all the talking, how can they engage or participate anyway?

Distribute an agenda before the meeting. This relates to the last point but expands on it. Inside of your meeting you might have several desired outcomes that you want to achieve. Once you have decided that having a meeting is the best option, put together this agenda in advance and distribute it to the attendees. This does several things, but in the context of our conversation of engagement, it can serve as a way for people to know when during the meeting they need to be prepared (and are expected to) participate. There are at least three big mistakes that people make when building agendas:

- Describing topics of discussion, but not the desired outcome or goal for that portion of the meeting.
- Not describing when people are expected to participate.
- Trying to pack too much into the meeting. Since engagement and participation is often harder in virtual meetings, this is an especially important point. Recognize that if you want people to participate, especially if the group is larger than 4-5 people, it will take likely take longer remotely than face to face, so be careful about how ambitious you get with your agenda.

Expect participation. If, as a leader you aren't getting the level of participation you want from your virtual meetings, make it clear in both the meetings and one on one communications what your expectations are. This is especially true if most of the virtual meetings in your organization are "dead" with little participation or very unequal participation.

Design the meeting flow for participation. This is a critical point. There are several things you can do to engage people that you might not have to do, or even want to do in a face to face meeting. Here are a few strategies to help you get started.

- Ask specifically for input from people or sites. While in a face to face meeting you might not call individuals out, in this setting it is more important. Face to face people can see who is ready to talk, so fewer interruptions occur. One of the many reasons people don't speak up is that they don't want to interrupt someone else.

Asking "Angie, what do you think?" gives Angie space, permission and sets an expectation that she share.

- Move through the group randomly. In meetings where everyone will report out, I have come up with unusual ways to order the group and then have the group try to figure out how I selected the order. I've done obscure things like the alphabetical order of the college they graduated from, reverse age of their oldest child and much more. It keeps everyone on their toes and ready to participate, reduces the multi-tasking that too often plagues these meetings, and injects a bit of fun.
- Have people call on the next person after them. If you want everyone to participate, have each person pick who they want to share next.
- Facilitate more strongly. Because people can't see each other, someone needs to moderate the discussion a bit more than might be needed in a face to face meeting. As just one example: When two people speak up at once, intervene and ask one person to continue than let the second person in next before allowing the discussion to continue. This makes people feel safe and heard — and improves the chances they will speak up the next time.

Reduce the use of mute. You've experienced it — people are talking but are still on mute and their comments weren't heard. Or someone asks them something and there is a long pause before they respond. While I have mostly avoided the big elephant in the virtual meeting room — which is multi-tasking — we can't avoid it. One of the ways people try to hide their keyboard clicks (and other noises) is by muting their phone. While there may be a time for mute if there is lots of background noise, the bigger question is, how can people really engage in the topic at hand if they are in a noisy place? Expect people to participate from a place where they can concentrate, and not use mute unless absolutely necessary for the success of the call.

This gives you five strategies to promote and create more engagement and participation in your virtual meetings. I encourage you to take the action steps to make your future virtual meetings more effective and successful.

The Kevin Eikenberry Group provides speaking, training, consulting, and coaching services to organizations who believe in investing in their most valuable assets – their people. **www.kevineikenberry.com**

Telecommuting policy considerations for your employee handbook

Creating a policy will buy you a great deal of legal protection—if it is done correctly. The trick is to develop a policy that is broad and flexible enough to be customized by individuals and work groups while still providing enough structure to offer guidance.

The Bay Area Telecommuting Assistance Project, located in Oakland, Calif., recommends that your telecommuting policy:

- Be administered by human resources personnel, with input from management and employees.
- Define and interpret the role of telecommuting at your company, and explain your company's commitment to it.
- List the principles of telecommuting at your company. Explain all your firm's precise business needs, terms and conditions of employment, workspace designation and telecommuting agreement.
- Discuss scheduling and dependent-care arrangements.
- Discuss the tax implications of a telecommuting schedule.
- Establish the voluntary nature of the program.
- Explain your criteria for selecting telecommuting candidates. Describe the type of job, employees and supervisors who are best suited for telecommuting at your firm.
- Define what equipment will be provided and who will be responsible for its care. Include company policy regarding proprietary information and security.
- Explain how you will measure performance and evaluate the success of the program.
- Provide guidance on when and how long employees are supposed to work. Include specific information about overtime.
- Include your safety policy, as well as a brief statement on ergonomics.

Caution: The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission says that working at home can be a reasonable accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act. You can deny a request to work at home if it is unreasonable, but you'd better be able to prove that to the EEOC. You can try to make your case when the EEOC forces you to go to trial, or you can avoid that by setting up a policy now—one that states which jobs can and cannot reasonably be performed away from the office.

According to Jim Reidy of the Sheehan Phinney employment law firm in New Hampshire, a comprehensive telecommuting policy should also address:

- **The extent to which the employee has access to network resources.** Work with your IT department to partition your network so employees have access only to those drives they need to do their jobs.
- **Your right to monitor the employee's technology use.** Clearly state that telecommuters should have no expectation of privacy regarding any-thing they do or store on the devices they use for work—you retain the right to review all sent, received and stored data and content. Retain the employees' signed acknowledgment that you can monitor their devices.
- **Your rules for maintaining data confidentiality and proprietary use of technology resources.** Emphasize that safeguarding data is the employee's responsibility (by avoiding risky websites, for example) even if you provide reasonable protection such as anti-malware software.

How to manage remote teams

Amy Leschke-Kahle, VP of Performance Acceleration at The Marcus Buckingham Company, and a keynote speaker at the American Payroll Association's virtual Congress says you don't have to be tough to be a good boss.

Connecting with employees—via text, email or Zoom, consistently and over the long term—is the key to engaging employees. Engagement, Leschke-Kahle stresses, isn't about happiness; it's an emotional precursor that's necessary for employees to do extraordinary work and have extraordinary outcomes.

In an unsettled environment, Leschke-Kahle suggests you should consider answers to the following key questions your employees may have, stressing the "we":

- What is the critical work we need to do now?
- Given all the distractions, how can we create focus?
- How can we stay connected?
- Is there a way we can stay ahead of the curve?

High touch, high reward

We think of work in an org-chart way, but work happens in a networked, complicated way, Leschke-Kahle points out. It's also emotional, so it's OK to use emotional words at work, she said.

To keep your staff engaged, check in with them. There is no right way to check in and check-ins don't need to be in-person.

Check-ins are frequent, one-on-one, five-minute conversations—weekly, Leschke-Kahle advises—during which you and your staff connect over work and share your priorities for the next five days. They should be strength-based, and not soft and fluffy, she noted.

During check-ins you should:

- support your staff's priorities for the next five days by asking how you can help;
- instead of saying "this is how it's always been done," provide coaching when necessary, so employees can find their own way of accomplishing the task at hand;
- ask how they are.

To Zoom or not to Zoom: Videoconference security issues addressed

by Melissa Esquibel, MCT, MOSM

Increasingly, organizations are turning to Zoom to enable the necessary videoconferencing capabilities that make these shifts possible. But is that the right move?

Zoom was founded in 2011; by 2013, it boasted one million participants. It has quickly rushed up the videoconferencing charts past titans like Skype, GoToMeeting and Webex.

Zoom became so popular because it was easy to use, offered a robust and free solution for up to 100 participants and was reliable. With the COVID-19 crisis looming large, businesses, school systems and families turned to Zoom to help them.

Hitting the brakes

But as with many other apps and online services that rose to popularity, vulnerabilities were discovered and exploited by people with ill will. Some of their goals were simple pranks, others were more nefarious.

The news cycle was relatively quick to jump on it and the headlines sounded dire. *Examples:* "'Zoom is malware': why experts worry about the video conferencing platform" and "Zoom Users Beware: Here's How A Flaw Allows Attackers To Take Over Your Mac Microphone and Webcam."

Social media had a field day, reporting a small fraction of the facts and broadcasting certain doom for anyone who used Zoom. What was also remarkable was the speed with which Zoom founder Eric Yuan owned the problems and started working on solutions. On April 1, he stated, "We recognize that we have fallen short of the community's—and our own—privacy and security expectations. ..." All engineering resources in the organization were shifted to closing the gaps. The app updates started rolling out nearly immediately.

Now, the default is that meetings are password protected. Meeting IDs are no longer in the app toolbar, which made them easily screenshotted and shared with unauthorized individuals. If you are a Zoom user, you received updates and patches nearly every day the week of April 5, 2020.

How to Zoom safely

1. **Don't share your meeting link** on social media or other public forums. Anyone with the link can join the meeting.
2. **If you have a PMI (personal meeting ID), don't use it for public events.** Zoom allows you to generate a single-use meeting link for each meeting.
3. **Utilize the "waiting room" feature.** Permit people in one at a time.
4. **Do not give up control of your screen** and prevent others from sharing their screens. This puts you in the driver's seat with content shown to meeting participants.
5. **Allow only signed-in users** to join.

Visit Zoom's blog for a full list of best practices.

If you are communicating highly sensitive information during Zoom meetings, review the current state of security often. Changes are rolling out quickly. You may find that the Zoom of today doesn't meet your security requirements, but by week's end, it might!

Why you should think twice about a 'Zoom termination'

In a recent webinar, Anniken Davenport, Esq., addressed one key aspect of terminations some employers might be approaching incorrectly.

"Right now," Davenport told her audience, "there are an awful lot of employers who have resorted to Zoom or some other virtual format for video conferencing, and many think,

'Well, maybe I should use this for discharges too.' But I think that a simple, standard conference call is probably a better bet.

"Why? Because when you're doing something by Zoom or any of these other virtual face-time methods, it's unusually easy for the person on the receiving end of the discipline or discharge to be able to download and record the entire session. Although you may not have anything to hide, it's often not a good thing to have displayed to a jury. How you perceive yourself may not be how you actually come across in a video recording of a discharge. I think an audio conference call works better right now for this purpose."

One other thing to keep in mind about terminating remotely: You don't want to put yourself into a situation where technical problems could complicate the meeting. Video might be more susceptible to dropouts and freeze-ups. Keep it simple if you can.

Keep in mind Davenport's general tips for termination meetings:

- **Schedule the meeting after preparing the termination letter and other related documents** like COBRA notices and severance agreements.
- **Treat the employee with dignity even if they're being discharged for cause.** Making the worker angry may make a bad situation worse and send them into the arms of an employment lawyer.
- **Always include at least one additional company representative in the meeting who had no direct involvement in the decision.** He or she should ideally be skilled in de-escalation.
- **Try to end the meeting on a positive note.** For example, offer transition assistance like career counseling if the discharge isn't related to performance, or offer a positive reference.
- **Check to make sure you are complying with all state or local laws on last pay.** Many states require you to pay fired workers immediately for any work already performed, regardless of paycheck due date. (Alice Gilman, Esq., points out that early in the pandemic, lots of employers gave employees laptops loaded with special software and peripherals so they could work from home. If you're now thinking of letting some of these employees go, don't hold a final check hostage until they return this property to you. In general, most state laws require you to pay the final check, regardless of whether your property is returned. However, a handful of states do allow you to hold the final check, so you should check your state law.)
- **Make the meeting short and end it promptly.** Don't engage in a debate over the underlying discharge reasons. Do emphasize that the decision is final.

Put an end to conference call angst

Few things cause people more angst than the nuts and bolts of a conference call. "Do we dial 9 first?" "Where's the mute button?" "Wait … should we have pressed #? Is that why we can't hear?" Help out by providing terse, clear and permanent instructions beside each common phone in the office.

Suffer from 'face stress' on Zoom? You're not alone
by Linda Wojtowick

Like many people, I had my first Zoom experience in the late spring of 2020. I'd used a few other video conferencing platforms at work, but I had no deep or comparative knowledge. I was aware of Skype, though I hadn't yet used it for personal use.

I meet with a group of six or seven friends every couple of weeks to discuss our creative endeavors, and we decided to try Zooming to keep our momentum. When our faces appeared onscreen, Brady Bunch-style, we all began adjusting our computer audio and joined in a round of "Can you hear me?" Then, with audio and video rolling, we settled in for the group discussion.

After we'd been talking for a few minutes, the next question was raised: "Is there something I can adjust so I don't have to look at myself?" Though we recognized there was a phenomenon at work, and a distortion, we were still hugely distracted and preoccupied with our own faces. We kept adjusting posture, analyzing our lighting and the height and angle of our monitors. And, sadly, we weren't liking what we saw.

Most, if not all, of us have felt uncomfortable with our image. There's an interesting paradox that's becoming more and more pervasive: With the emergence and evolution of smartphones, most of which have cameras, we have experienced the dawn of the Age of the Selfie. Supposedly, this means we are more comfortable with our own images, even powerfully fascinated by them.

But it's much more complicated than that.

We're technically seeing ourselves more than ever these days. But that doesn't mean we're seeing ourselves in a complete way, with every objectivity on board. It's not the

same as looking in a mirror, where we are really engaging with the idea of our "self" and what we perceive that to be. The same is true when we take a selfie: We control it, and are, in many ways, choosing what is captured. We subconsciously tailor what we see. On video, our image is what the world sees: our shell, which can be surprisingly difficult to relate to and can even seem, sometimes, barely recognizable. Just hearing our own voices can be its own surreal and possibly cringeworthy experience.

The December 7, 2020 cover of *The New Yorker* ("Love Life" by Adrian Tomine) shows us a woman in the midst of a video conference. She's carefully groomed from the waist up, poised with a white blouse and pert martini in front of an accordion-fold room divider. All around her, and invisible to her fellow conferencees, her tiny apartment is cluttered and messy. Instantly relatable—and immediately viral—it lightheartedly acknowledges the schism between controllable perception versus unruly reality in our changing lives.

Don't be too hard on yourself. No one is counting your extra chins except you.

Linda Wojtowick is an administrative assistant and podcaster from Oregon and writes regularly for Administrative Professional Today *and* Leadership Briefings.

10 hard telecommuting questions to ask remote workers

As telecommuting becomes ever more accepted, more of your employees will drop hints that they too would like the option to sometimes work from home—in fact, in a strong job-seeker's market, some prospective hires might even assume that'll be part of the conversation from the beginning.

Before you agree to any telecommuting arrangement, sit down with the employee and go over the basic ground rules, but then dig deeper. When a separation is created between worker and office, there can be many side effects that go along with the perceived benefits. To avoid unpleasant surprises, ask these 10 questions.

<u>On their productivity</u>

1. "What are the 'distractions' you'll be avoiding?" Telecommuters generally argue that office life brings on a variety of distractions that impede their productivity. It's important to investigate what those are. For example, if co-workers are a "distraction," why is that, and what constitutes an unnecessary interruption?

Say a co-worker has a valid question or update, or wants to discuss work-related matters … is that a distraction or part of the workflow, the necessary give-and-take that produces understanding and quicker results?

Often workers perceive anything that knocks them briefly out of their own flow as a negative. Make sure the so-called distractions don't add up to someone simply not wanting to be bothered.

2. "How willing are you to jump on the phone?" We all think we're just a phone call away from engaging with our colleagues. "Just give me a call!" we say.

Some of us, however, don't really mean it. Emails and Slack messages are comfortable because we're offering someone a cushion in which to respond; these make life convenient for them. Phone calls, however, represent a real-time request for attention, much in the same way the sudden office drop-in does.

Is the person requesting a telecommuting schedule someone who's likely to pick up a ringing phone without a second thought, and likely to make a call as soon as an issue is more easily resolved with that method of contact? Or might a natural complacency, even shyness, keep problems from being addressed immediately, resulting in ever more emails and instant messages that go waiting?

3. "Are you susceptible to 'islanding'?" One problematic result of remote work is that an employee can stop seeing the rest of the office world to its full degree.

When we work utterly on our own, there's a natural tendency to focus intensely on our individual workload and block out everything else. Little by little, our jobs can take on an oversized importance in our minds, and the intrusion of others' concerns can seem more aggravating. If you don't talk to people in the break room each day or sit with them in meetings often, it becomes very easy to forget how important their own stakes are.

Get a handle on the employee's awareness of and interest in what goes on outside their own sphere. Make sure they're not looking for an excuse to essentially disappear and cut themselves off.

4. "In what ways will you be better? In what ways will you be *worse?*" The second question will produce more interesting results than the first, of course. Expect to hear the usual answers: "I can be more efficient at home" and "Easing the commuting stress will help with work/life balance." What you're really after is an honest appraisal of someone's self-discipline. If an employee can see no downside at all to telecommuting, they're not quite looking at themselves or the situation closely enough.

Pinpoint at least one specific potential problem issue so you and the employee can address it together right now.

<u>On their contentment</u>

5. "Are you okay with the fact that telecommuting could end?" Working remotely is a powerful benefit—the kind that people get used to quickly and don't ever want to give up. But you must make it clear that nothing is forever if the perceived results aren't quite what you'd hoped for. And ultimately, it might be difficult to put your finger on just why you're not happy with those results.

An employee, for example, may produce just as much, if not more, than they did before, yet you feel communication among the team is suffering, or the culture is breaking down. In this case, you might find the employee becomes greatly put out by no longer being able to telecommute. After all, they didn't do anything wrong.

Everyone will *say* they understand that the benefit might not be permanent, but few will let it roll off their backs if this amazing convenience is pulled away.

6. "Are you okay with not being a 'full part' of the culture?" The office is far more than a place to show up and work. It's also a place where connections are made, lives are shared and a community is grown. Going without that can be an energy-sapper and create the sense of being always on the outside, looking in.

Is the employee used to not having co-workers around whose energy can be stimulating? And can the office itself withstand an environment where many people feel only tangentially connected to the culture?

7. "Would you object to digital monitoring?" We're not talking here necessarily about video cameras and ankle bracelets. I.T. has more subtle ways to check in on remote workers, even with something as simple as compiling log-in and log-out times. And perhaps you as a manager will find yourself sending a few more emails and making a few more calls to a telecommuter than normal. At what point might that begin to seem like *de facto* monitoring?

Here, the danger is in creating a trust disparity between remote workers and those in the office. If you keep tabs on one group, why not the other? Ask an employee how they feel about monitoring even if you don't intend to do it currently—you never know if things will change, especially as technology develops and makes it easier and less intrusive.

<u>On cold reality</u>

8. "How reachable do you plan to be?" To avoid causing frustrations, a remote worker must adopt a response method that satisfies everyone.

Find out if the employee intends to work a very regular schedule, including meal breaks that correspond to everyone else's, or wants to play it looser. Don't demand a response time that's faster than normal, but do make it clear that when someone in the office tries

to reach a telecommuter and isn't immediately successful, a mental clock begins to tick a little faster than normal, unfair as that may seem.

9. "Do you know when *not* to work?" There are workers who excel at home to such a degree that they find it difficult to *stop* producing. Once set up with the tech they need to work from anywhere, anytime, they bring nights, weekends and holidays into play, potentially without you realizing it.

If you're dealing with a nonexempt employee, overtime rules could easily be broken, and that could come back to haunt you. Make sure they understand what time is countable and payable. Do they realize what constitutes unpaid *de minimis* time?

Even if a salaried employee is exempt from such considerations, remind them of the potential burnout that can happen if they work themselves too hard. When certain personality types no longer have an off switch, they can do amazing things—it's your job as a manager to know when it's coming at a price.

10. "Do you know the misperceptions that are created by telecommuting?" When a staff is divided between telecommuters and those who come in every day, it's difficult for the efforts of those working at home to be as visible. They're not there as often to talk about that work, they're not seen walking through the hallways with papers in their hands, they miss meetings and informal huddles. And when the inevitable nitpicking of someone's efforts happens, naysayers often fall back on the first line of criticism: "They're not *here.*"

Frustrations can mount. Petty jealousies can grow over perceived benefits; after all, why can't *everyone* work from home? Be sure your employee understands that a telecommuter can risk becoming the victim of certain misperceptions.

Here's how to review remote staff performance

As employers transition to remote work arrangements, many managers now find themselves tasked with how to lead employees from afar for the first time. Performance reviews—often difficult and stressful, always important—pose special challenges when not conducted face-to-face.

When it's time to have those critical performance conversations, these simple tips can help you make the most of virtual meetings.

Let employees know that you'd like to see them. Sensitive conversations like performance reviews are far more streamlined when you can see the employee's facial expressions and reactions. Use videoconferencing tools if they are available.

Schedule at least one hour to have your performance review conversation, and let employees know that the review will be the dedicated focus of the meeting.

Give your employee several days of advance notice that you'd like to have the conversation so he can prepare for a private and professional exchange while working from home. This is especially important for employees who have to juggle their jobs with home schooling their children.

If your company doesn't use videoconferencing tools (or those you do use tend to freeze, delay or crash), arrange to speak via FaceTime or video chat on your phones.

Make it a two-way conversation. Everyone is collectively dealing with uncertainty and anxiety as we navigate these challenging times.

Traditional performance review conversations focus on basics—recent successes and challenges, compensation adjustments, promotion opportunities. They usually highlight opportunities for improvement, skill development and growth. All those factors still apply to a remote performance review. But remember, employees in this new environment are probably more concerned with the present and future than the past.

Approach the review first and foremost as a collaborative conversation. Plan to listen more than you talk. Invite the employee to ask questions about the "new normal" in the company as you review past performance, new goals and areas for development.

Discuss changing priorities openly and honestly. Business priorities may have shifted in your company in the last few weeks. Your employees may now fear for their job security.

Dedicate time in the performance review to discuss the wins and misses of the past, and how the employee can remain a valuable contributor moving forward. Clearly outline duties that may evolve or change in the coming months so the employee understands where to focus and why.

Create a plan to support your employee. There's plenty of evidence to suggest that remote workers are more productive than those who work in a physical office. However, those stats are based on employees who have chosen to work remotely.

The fact is, remote employees may not feel connected to company culture or their co-workers. Remote work can be isolating, and require a level of self-direction, motivation and discipline that's not intuitive for every employee. Regardless, few of us have a choice about where we're working right now.

Dedicate at least part of the review to discuss how your employee can still collaborate with you and co-workers in this new normal. Ask:

- How much coaching, guidance and support does she need while working from home?
- Does she understand her priorities and goals?
- Is she confident she has the tools and skills to achieve them?

Every employee has a different workstyle and varying needs when it comes to succeeding remotely. Now is the time to get to know what your employee enjoys doing, where she feels capable and where she's struggling. Agree on a plan that will fuel your employee's professional success moving forward.

Just as important, assure your employee that her mental, emotional and physical health is as important to you as her job performance right now.

Love the view from your living room as you work? Heed the downside

How many things in life are sweeter than sitting at home and working in your sweatpants? The silence, the focus, the mug of home-brewed hot chocolate at half past three: Telecommuting's gifts are many, and more workers are seeing it not just as an unexpected privilege but something to be bargained and fought for. What many don't realize, though, is that working from home just a little too often can transmit a subtle broadcast to the rest of the staff, and you might not like what's on that channel.

Before you inform the boss that from now on, you'll be available on Tuesdays and Thursdays "just by picking up the phone," consider the viewpoint of those who are in the office all day, every day. You may get more done in your own breakfast nook because of the lack of interruptions, but many of those are from people who do need answers from you, and more importantly, need to engage you in the kind of back-and-forth, free-flowing discussions that can't get off the ground electronically. Even simple yes or no answers should be available ASAP, but the real communication breakdown comes when there's a more complex issue on the table.

When you make someone pick up a phone or send an email to contact you about something important, you've put them in the position of having to make a blind intrusion. Swinging by someone's office can be a friendly, informal gesture, and within one second we can sense if it's a good time to pop in or not. A call or message that springs up in an inbox, however, is like an unseen animal scratching at the door to be let

in. You may find that certain people leave you entirely alone on your telecommuting days, putting off any contact till you return. It might be because they just don't want to be the ones to send an escalating series of tiny irritations over the wires.

No matter how much you're getting done at home, meanwhile, you can forget about ever taking home the award for Most Diligent Dynamo. If you're not in the building each day, it's a real hurdle to convey to the rest of the staff how much you're accomplishing away from them, and your insistence that you're knocking it out of the park may come off as hollow and defensive. The office-bound will always suspect the absent of popping out here and there for errands, lingering over lunch, and generally taking it down a couple of notches. A phone call or email that goes unanswered for longer than 30 minutes is guaranteed to generate unforgiving mental images in those waiting for a response. The habitual telecommuter is often resented, rightly or wrongly, for perceived idleness; life always seems easier for those who don't spend as many hours in the physical trenches as others.

But it's not just your own image that's at stake. The sense of camaraderie and common mission among staff can dissolve when a company doesn't rein in its telecommuters. The unnatural silence that falls on a half-populated office conveys one message: Few find it beneficial, or even agreeable, to be there. Telecommuters can disappear into their own jobs, becoming islands unto themselves and no longer bonding as much with others. They engage in fewer kitchen chats and informal brainstorming sessions. The unpredictable ideas and exchanges that happen organically in a beehive atmosphere no longer occur with the same frequency. Communication is hamstrung; "I'll just wait till I see her tomorrow" becomes the norm, and no one is even sure where anyone else is at any given time. When you toil far away with the radio on in the background and the kids occasionally flitting past you on their way to destroying the house, you've chosen to connect in only the thinnest, most artificial way to your co-workers, and may even be inadvertently hinting that they're an impedance.

Telecommuting raises the issues of what we owe to our co-workers in terms of face time and whether a company can truly flourish if people aggressively detach from it. Since you're supposed to be working your full eight hours when you're home—you are, aren't you?—it can fairly be asked, Why don't you want to be *here?* Is saving money and time on a commute worth degrading communication, inconveniencing those who need to truly interact with you, and sapping the energy that exists only in an office with full attendance? Don't be too surprised if you occasionally sense whispers about your schedule and your work ethic, unjust as they are; it's a natural reaction to those who seem to be always headed anxiously for the exit.

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