Teleworking Tips for Managers

TELEWORKING FUNDAMENTALS

Remember that teleworking is working, just doing so outside of the office. That said, certain traits are associated with greater success while teleworking. These include:

1. Ability to work with minimal direct supervision
2. Organization in terms of work practices
3. Ability to plan ahead for work (with your help, as appropriate)
4. Ability to meet schedules and deadlines
5. Effectiveness with regard to time management
6. Effectiveness with regard to communication
7. Comfort with technology

Encourage your employee to review this assessment to help them determine whether teleworking is a good fit.

Review your agency's teleworking policy and related IT policies and encourage your employees to do the same. These policies likely include information and guidelines related to:

1. Eligibility,
2. Scheduling,
3. Timekeeping,
4. Dos and don'ts of teleworking,
5. Workspace requirements,
6. IT support, information security, and data privacy, and
7. Equipment usage and expenses, e.g., for printing access and cost.

Familiarity with the teleworking and IT policies will help you support your teleworking employees and address teleworking-related challenges. Make sure you and your employees have participated in any required teleworking orientation or technology assessment.

Teleworking eligibility should be decided based upon the position and not the person. We now know that most positions can telework at least part time. For example, public-facing positions can telework on a rotating schedule, and employees who work in the field can complete reports from a home or satellite office. If an employee needs special accommodation, work with Human Resources as necessary to accommodate teleworking in a transparent way.

In the event that you cannot approve a special request to telework, follow these guidelines to protect yourself and your employee:

1. Respond promptly to the request.
2. Provide a written explanation and include data to support your reasoning.
3. Relatedly, follow agency policies and procedures for the denial and cite them where relevant in your explanation.
4. Include any options for an appeal or future teleworking available to the employee.

Teleworking Tips for Managers

TECHNOLOGY & TRAINING

Assess technology and training needs – Do you and all of your employees have the technology (hardware, software, data protection, and virtual access) needed to be successful while teleworking? Remember that if part-time teleworkers can reserve certain duties for the office, they may not need complete access from home.

Do you or your teleworking employees need any training? Time management and other training related to teleworking can help employees build skills that will increase their chances of success.

If you identify a need for technology or training for yourself or your employees, think through how you can help meet this need to set the stage for teleworking success.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Troubleshoot problems with performance

If related to teleworking in general, investigate what isn't working, and why not. Communicate your concerns with your employees and ask for their help to develop solutions.

If you experience problems with an isolated employee's performance, schedule a meeting with them to review the expectations in their teleworking agreement, provide specific, constructive feedback tied to objective data, and strategize about potential solutions. Modify the teleworking agreement as necessary to clearly articulate expectations, and set a timeframe for the employee to demonstrate improvements in performance.

In the event that an employee demonstrates an inability to successfully complete their duties while teleworking, discuss the situation with your Human Resources department to determine next steps. Ensure that your concerns are backed up by objective data to protect both you and your employee from potential allegations of subjectivity.

For additional teleworking information, reference:
www.telework.gov
Manager Training in Telework Fundamentals (Telework.gov)
www.eworkplace-mn.com
Microsoft Teams training videos
Teleworking on Short Notice (Association of Commuter Transportation)

Acknowledgements
These tips draw from the resources available on Telework.gov and eWorkPlace, presentations sponsored by the Association of Commuter Transportation, and findings from survey and focus group research with City of Tempe employees.

Teleworking Tips for Managers

COMMUNICATION & EXPECTATIONS

Establish and communicate clear expectations about:
1. Communication (including frequency and format of general communications and specifically with regard to responsiveness),
2. Accountability (timelines for project deliverables, accurate documentation of teleworking in timesheets, and methods for check-ins),
3. Confidentiality and privacy (related to project and/or client information),
4. Teleworking eligibility (who is eligible for teleworking and how often),
5. Teleworking schedule (fixed versus flexible schedule),
6. Teleworking restrictions (e.g., the need to be present during work hours unless PTO is used),
7. Workflow (who is responsible for developing tasks and projects), and
8. Performance (outcomes).

Document these expectations in writing, preferably in a teleworking agreement or contract with each employee.

Give support – Check in regularly with your employees to see how they are doing, brainstorm about next steps and/or future work, and help them troubleshoot issues.

Receive support - When needed, delegate work to employees who have additional capacity, particularly when it can help the employee build or improve upon a skill.

Communication is key
1. Establishing regular check-ins provides employees with the security of a space to air concerns or troubleshoot problems with you. Mutually agreeing upon the frequency of check-ins shows respect for employees' autonomy while providing accountability for progress.

Image credit: elenabsl.Shutterstock.com

2. Clearly communicate your expectations for the outcome and trust the employee to develop the process. If challenges arise, be forthright about them and discuss ways to mitigate them.
3. Foster employee connection and collaboration through brief morning meetings or longer weekly meetings.

Teleworking Tips for Managers

PROFESSIONALISM

Manage by results, not process – Teleworking provides an opportunity to replace the traditional process-based method of assessing progress with an outcome-based method that is ultimately more impactful for success. Follow these tips:

- Be consistent in the outcomes you expect from office employees and teleworkers, relative to their job duties.
- Communicate clear expectations about outcomes and let your employees tailor ways to meet them. Use the following questions as a framework for expectations:
  - What must be done?
  - How well must it be done?
  - What constitutes a completed job?
  - Why must it be done?
  - By when must it be done?
- Work with employees to develop a high-level work plan for each assignment.
- Use consistent accountability methods for teleworkers and office workers.
- Connect performance reviews to outcomes for teleworkers and office workers.
- Tie advancement to clear milestones to provide clarity and motivation for your employees. This clarity will also protect you and your employees from concerns about bias.

Plan for teleworkers at every meeting – Teleworking is likely a permanent aspect of work going forward and needs to be treated as such. Follow these tips:

- Include a teleworking option – video if possible – in all meeting invitations; consider having all employees attend the meeting via video, even when in the office.
- Strongly encourage or require all teleworkers to participate on video to mitigate the tendency to be distracted by emails or other work while on the call.
- Remind employees to remain muted when not talking, to avoid disruptive noise.
- Remind employees to "raise hands" or type into the chat box so that they don't talk over each other on video or phone conference calls.
- Monitor the chat box so as not to miss important thoughts or feedback.

Think long-term – How can you work with your employees to set up structures that work for long-term teleworking? Honestly assess your concerns and be open to hearing their concerns and desires so that you can collaborate on solutions.

Be policy-driven – Follow teleworking policies at all times to ensure that there is no subconscious bias in your decisions. Teleworking eligibility should be defined based on HR policy, and should be pursued proactively, rather than reactively.

Teleworking Tips for Managers

HEALTH & WELLBEING

Take breaks and aim for work/life balance, and encourage your employees to do the same, including:

1. Aim for a balance between screen time and off-screen time to help support long-term success and happiness teleworking.
2. Incorporate time for exercise, healthy eating, and spirituality/mindfulness breaks to help you stay focused. Many teleworkers use the time formerly spent commuting to invest in their health and well-being.
3. Strive to eliminate distractions from your workspace so that you can stay on task.
4. Incorporate a minor routine to signify "arrival" to and "departure" from the workday, such as opening and closing office blinds.

Support a healthy workspace for yourself and your employees

1. Work with HR to determine the extent to which you should evaluate your employees' workspaces; there may be liability requirements for an evaluation.
2. Remind employees that healthy workspaces include the following:
   a. Proper head alignment (eyes straight ahead)
   b. Straight wrist alignment while typing
   c. Chairs that support a straight back
   d. Adequate lighting and ventilation
3. Encourage employees to add an element that acts as a reminder of the office and helps signify a shift to professionalism when they arrive. This could be as simple as a candle or knickknack, as long as it signifies a distinction between home and office.
4. Encourage employees to protect their workspace from internal and external distractions, including by mitigating outside noise through white noise and closing windows and doors, designating times for responding to email, and mitigating visual distraction (e.g., in the household) through a space separator like a screen.

Remember the importance of social interaction and down time, both for yourself and your employees. Encourage social connection through, e.g., virtual happy hours, lunch hours, or other non-work activities (socially distanced if necessary). Occasional team-building activities at the office may also help. Staying connected may be particularly important for newer employees or more extroverted employees.

Image credit: Kay Scanlon / Los Angeles Times / Getty Images