Managing and Measuring Productivity Among Remote Workers

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2020 has already seen mass adoption and increased acceptance (both begrudging and enthusiastic) of remote working. There is, however, a substantial difference in having a few team members working remotely versus the entire team working from home—and this is the challenge for which most businesses were not fully prepared. Taking a few important steps can help leaders measure and manage remote workers’ results instead of just activity.
Set expectations and communicate: Communicating objectives clearly and continually will help ease tensions and anxiety among the team that may occur as a result of the many changes and pressures. Daily scrums and regularly scheduled one-on-one meetings are ideal for keeping teammates in the loop and providing each other with regular support. Calendar sharing, scheduled meetings, scheduled breaks or status updates, and other ground rules for team communication can help productivity. Setting expectations and communicating them clearly can combat the myth (held by executives) that “working from home” is code for slacking, as well as relieve pressure (felt by employees) to make themselves constantly available. Also, two-way communication helps to establish the trust required to make remote working a success for both employees and managers.

Microsoft Teams, for instance, can provide instant insights into how a team collaborates, such as who’s active and inactive. Managers can identify which team members may be disconnected and set up one-on-one communication to address any issues. And to make sure everyone is aligned to the same strategy and goals, Microsoft Teams’ Live Event feature can connect the entire organization through virtual town halls to keep everyone updated on the organization’s priorities by hearing it directly from the company’s leadership.

Key Takeaway: Establish communications, availability, and collaboration expectations as team code-of-conduct guidelines to eliminate confusion. Daily updates are good for deadline management and tasks, but weekly check-ins help everyone see the bigger picture.

Invest in the right tools: Using the right tools is an important part of any work culture, but remote work makes those tools critical. Since communication is a core aspect of a remote team, small hiccups can translate to large hassles. Many tools are already addressing different organizational needs, such as chat, project management, web and video conferencing, scheduling, workflow automation, and collaboration and prototyping. And these can also provide great insights into how work gets done in an organization.
A lot of mature collaboration tools like Microsoft Office 365 help measure manifold insights. My Analytics provides personal productivity insights like time spent on deep work, how one can improve focus time, well-being, networking, and collaboration within the organization. For managers, the analytics provide insights into how a team can use collective action to improve team norms and drive even greater performance. And Workplace Analytics helps leaders gain unprecedented enterprise-wide information about whether the current collaboration patterns are helping the organization meet targets, what contacts may be missing, and time and networking trends, which can help in addressing complex business challenges.

Key takeaway: The best remote teams have a good strategy and the right tools. They exhibit stellar communication skills, support each other, and hold each other accountable. The tools themselves increasingly assist in running an effective organization by providing individual, team, and organizational insights.

Accountability and motivation: For remote employees, interactions can determine their engagement level, which in turn often influences performance. In the context of an abrupt shift to remote work, managers need to acknowledge stress, listen to employees’ anxieties and concerns, and empathize with their
Trust: Trust in the workplace is integral to remote employees’ unlocking their performance potential. It’s important to understand how to build relationships with remote employees, individualize your approach to managing them, and help them achieve their best performance each day. A necessary ingredient for accomplishing any of these is to first establish trust. Trust among people in the workplace—physical or virtual—increases speed, efficiency and, ultimately, performance. Employees need to trust that their managers understand them and are looking out for their best interests. And managers need to be transparent and fully aware of remote employees’ talents to assign roles accordingly. Some managers choose to opt for video calls for meetings and one-on-one discussions, which can help build a strong relationship with a remote team and build trust on both sides.

Key takeaway: Even a general question such as “How is this remote work situation working out for you so far?” can elicit important information that you might not otherwise hear.

Accountability helps remote employees see the big picture and continuously improve their performance no matter where they do their work.

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Key takeaway: Typical quantitative metrics may be less relevant for measuring the productivity of knowledge work. Unless your metrics definitively show otherwise, trust that your remote employees are working hard to complete the tasks you give them.
Evaluate the measurements, too

Every new idea needs testing; measuring the productivity of employees working remotely from home is necessary to ensure the right tools, processes, and practices are in place. But to be useful, such measurement must be done in a way that’s meaningful to the business and helpful to the employees, who want flexibility but don’t want to feel disconnected or, worse, isolated. Above all, remember that everyone works differently. Being clear but not rigid, tailoring your approaches to the projects undertaken and the technology available, allows you to revise and adapt your systems regularly to ensure you’re measuring the right outputs most equitably (after all, to be effective, managers need flexibility, too.) Giving employees as much information as possible can ease the burden caused by the disruption and also keep everyone productive, even during stressful times.
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