



Coronavirus and Teleworking Employees: Set Guidelines, Priorities

By Kathy Gurchiek

March 5, 2020

Concerns over containing the spread of the coronavirus is prompting many employers, including Twitter, to encourage their employees who can to telework. But employers will want to set expectations, especially for those employees who have not previously worked remotely.

"In general, it's important to make sure your employees have a clear understanding of their work priorities—a responsibility that managers can take ownership over," said Ronni Zehavi, co-founder and CEO of Hibob. The cloud-based people management platform is based in Tel Aviv, Israel.

Set clear expectations on establishing work hours, prioritizing tasks and attending meetings that usually would be held in person.

[*SHRM members-only toolkit: Telecommuting Policy and Procedure* (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/policies/pages/telecommuting_policy.aspx?_ga=2.52958123.2016021264.1583159551-1296205769.1578683579)]

"Empower team leaders to create to-do lists and deadlines for employees to make sure projects are progressing at a good pace. Work-from-home policies will be unique from one organization to another, but organizations must create policies that are effective for their teams."

There will be some adjustments for people working remotely for the first time, said Patrick Bobilin, manager of SEO and content at GetVoIP, an information technology and services company in Queens, N.Y. Some employees who have traveled abroad recently, for example, are being instructed to work remotely until several weeks after their return to make sure they are symptom-free, he noted.

"By keeping employees at safe distances, companies can help contain or reduce the potential spread if anyone on their teams contracted the virus."

Feedback

Managers should set general expectations for the hours they need employees to be on the clock, Bobilin said, with the understanding that flexibility might be required in specific situations.

Since telecommuting eliminates commuting time, "let [employees] know you care about their work/life balance" by allowing different start and end times where applicable.

[*SHRM members-only sample memo: Temporary Telecommuting Arrangements* (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/Pages/Memo-Temporary-Telecommuting-Arrangements.aspx)]

Keep remote workers engaged, whether they are longtime teleworkers or new to the process. Check in with them periodically, Bobilin suggested.

"If not daily chats, then a video conference on a weekly basis where they can express their concerns and you can have some face-to-face contact to let them feel more connected than through the anonymity of [online] chatting."

Ad hoc conversations can take place when people bump into one another in the workplace, noted Society for Human Resource Management blogger Ross Smith. He suggests creating an "always on" video or chat channel (<https://blog.shrm.org/blog/if-you-never-worked-from-home-before-here-are-10-suggestions>) to create such interactions digitally for remote workers.

Here are some other things employers and managers should keep in mind:

Provide Communication Tools

Employers need to set standards in advance for how employees are to communicate and collaborate, Bobilin pointed out. In the tech industry, for example, team members are expected to use version control to ensure everyone is using the organization's most up-to-date version of a working document.

Set up employees with remote log-in access and company laptops and make sure employees share their cell phone numbers with team members.

Conference calls and collaboration systems such as Skype and Zoom help teams get together from a distance, Zehavi noted. He suggested encouraging employees to download and test all apps in advance of teleworking.

Bobilin noted that many people in the tech industry typically share keyboards when they collaborate, such as when making coding changes. Discourage this practice by having each person use Bluetooth keyboards and other portable devices wherever possible, he suggested. Additionally, consider using a team collaboration app, which not only is more hygienic than using others' keyboards but also provides documentation of exchanges.

Record Your Meeting

Smith suggests recording meetings for those unable to attend in person. This also may be helpful for those working or traveling in different time zones. Be mindful, too, of those who are teleconferencing and repeat questions so everyone can hear. Make sure to give people on the phone opportunities to speak up.

Limit Nonessential Office Visits

Facebook is restricting visits (<https://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-bans-social-visitors-offices-reduces-on-site-interviews-coronavirus-2020-3>) by employees' friends and family to all of the company's offices in 35 countries to limit their workers' exposure to the coronavirus, *Business Insider reported*, and using video conferencing to conduct job interviews.

Promote Hygiene Protocols

For workers in specific industries, telecommuting may be difficult or even impossible.

"In situations like these where an employee can't avoid going to work, it's vital workers are staying informed as well as ensuring their personal hygiene remains a top priority," Zehavi said.

Washing hands, avoiding touching one's face and using hand sanitizers and similar products are important to staying healthy, he added. Post handwashing reminders (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/Pages/stop-the-spread-of-germs-at-work.aspx) and provide disinfectant wipes for everyone's computers and workstations.

Also, discourage employees from shaking hands (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/Pages/Coronavirus-Time-to-Rethink-the-Handshake.aspx) so they can feel comfortable declining to shake hands with others. Put up COVID-19 specific posters, which are available in various languages (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/factsheets.html>) from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

When employers take extra precautions, it sends a reassuring message to employees and customers, Bobilin said.

He was in a drugstore Tuesday and noticed all the employees were wearing gloves. He saw the manager disinfecting the card readers and self-checkout kiosks. Witnessing this, he said, made him feel that the people there care about the issue and are taking it seriously.

"This isn't a time to cut corners," he said. Buy gloves for employees, for example. "Companies need to be ready to spend extra money and listen to employees—to what they want, what they need."

Noted Zehavi, "Employers should always put their team members' safety first. If remote work is an option in the face of a public

health scare, it is certainly advised employees take this opportunity to avoid the spread of coronavirus."

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