Managing Staff Remotely

Remote and hybrid working are now the norm in most organisations. Within certain sectors - such as the humanitarian and international aid sectors – they have been part of working life for some time due to team members being geographically dispersed.

Whilst our familiarity with working from home, or outside the office, is increasing, remote working can still present challenges to managers and be linked to wellbeing issues within teams. This information sheet is aimed at highlighting key areas for consideration, giving managers practical guidance on managing staff remotely.

Getting to know staff

Many organisations have diverse workforces, employing staff with distinct backgrounds and life circumstances, often situated in different locations. Staff may also have varied feelings about remote working – some being more comfortable and embracing of it, whilst others find it difficult or have reservations. Knowing about your staffs' relationship with remote working, and being aware of any challenges they might face, can help you, where possible, adapt to their needs.

- Make time to speak to your team members individually about remote working.
- Identify, for example, any preferences they have around communication frequency and medium (eg. email, instant message or phone call), and also any barriers they might face with regards to remote working, such as poor internet connectivity, lack of confidence around use of certain mediums, outdated equipment, or being in a time-zone that is at odds with other team members.
- Where possible, offer adaptations or make allowances that will help staff members to remote work more efficiently and with greater levels of comfort and confidence. This might include things such as extra training, new equipment, or more considerate scheduling of meetings.
- Get to know your staff members' life circumstances as much as you can, inviting them to consider how these might impact on their ability to work remotely. Again, offer solutions and compromises where possible. Whilst many people enthusiastically welcome the ability to work from home, some find it lonely, and others practically challenging due, for example, to sharing their living space with others. Hybrid working (working a certain number of days remotely and the rest in the office) or allowing staff to return to the office may be best, where possible, in some such cases. In others, a quick daily call might help to keep certain staff

members on track and replicate the kind of communication that would be had in an office environment. See what you can accommodate for your staff whilst balancing their needs and the needs of the business.

Accountability and expectations

When employees are working remotely, one of the biggest challenges is that it removes the managers ability to monitor them within the usual workplace setting. A common difficulty for managers is therefore striking a balance between supporting and communicating appropriately with staff who are working off-site and being perceived to be 'micro-managing' by checking in too frequently, or in a way that feels intrusive or reflective of a lack of trust.

Setting expectations early on in your relationship with remote working staff members is therefore important, as is explaining the rationale behind them.

- Let staff know that you trust them to get on with their work – as they would in the office – but that you need to be able to reach them consistently during working hours.
- Encourage staff to take regular breaks, and a lunch break – again, as they would in the office – but to let you know if there will be significant periods of time when they will be unavailable, for example, due to leave, appointments, online meetings or setting time aside to meet project deadlines.
- Ask staff to keep their work diaries up to date and arrange to give them sight of yours. This can prevent both you and your staff from feeling unsettled or making erroneous assumptions if you're unable to reach one another immediately. Setting up 'out of office' messages on email accounts and on work-phone voicemail can also help to this effect.
- Set expectations around acceptable time periods for returning calls and responding to emails. However, if you are managing staff in different time zones, it is important to take this into account and adjust accordingly.

Team relationships and cohesion

Remote working means team members won't have the same inbuilt opportunities to connect and build relationships with one another as they would in the office - where, for example, sharing a workstation or chatting on a tea break might facilitate staff getting to know one another. There are ways in which team cohesion can be promoted online though.

- Schedule regular team-meetings with your team using a video-conferencing platform and encourage staff to put their cameras on where possible to foster a sense of connection.

- As well as using team-meetings as a means of discussing and dealing with work issues, make them a time for checking in with staff members, encouraging them to share any significant 'non-work' news as they might in the office.
- Be sure not to overlook 'hellos' and 'farewells' when it comes to welcoming and introducing new team members or acknowledging the departure of others. Remembering and acknowledging birthdays and key achievements (such as the completion of significant projects) can also help staff members to feel seen and valued within the team, even when working remotely.
- Encourage staff to connect remotely with one another – particularly as a means of relieving stress and reducing feelings of isolation. Setting team-members shared projects to work on together can be one way of facilitating this, as can setting up 'buddying' systems through which longer-standing or more experienced team members are asked specifically to welcome and support new recruits.
- Some organisations set up 'virtual coffee mornings' or online social events such as quizzes to help foster connection amongst staff members working remotely. These are usually put in place with the intention of reproducing the bonding that might happen amongst staff in the office kitchen or at after-work drinks. Whilst they can be effective and fun, these types of events might not be to everyone's taste, so, if you initiate them, it's important to stress that they are optional.

Supporting psychologically healthy remote working

Whilst remote working affords many people the opportunity to work more effectively – cutting out, for example, commuting time, and allowing increased flexibility in terms of attending to family and other responsibilities – it can present risks to wellbeing. Outside of the office environment, it can be easy for individual staff members to slip into overworking and working outside of their set hours, perhaps also neglecting to take breaks and step away from their screens. Being physically far from colleagues can also mean staff who encounter high levels of stress and trauma within their day-to-day work have little opportunity to informally 'offload' with one another and gain perspective through supportive conversations. These factors can all pave the way to increased levels of stress for staff and, in some cases, burnout. Ensuring that wellbeing and psychological health are regularly discussed and prioritised within your team is an important way of protecting against this, alongside taking some of the following ideas into consideration.

- As a manager, encourage and model healthy practice in terms of your own engagement with remote working, to help foster this within your team. This might include logging off from work platforms outside of your set working hours, taking appropriate breaks and annual leave, and avoiding sending e-mails or making other communications at such times – unless strictly necessary.

- Let staff know that you're open to them talking to you about stress and psychological health issues, and that they will not be penalised for doing so.
- Observe for signs that team-members may be working excessively or outside their own working hours (for example, e-mails and communications sent late at night, or unexpected levels of productivity) and address this with them, seeking healthier alternatives and solutions where possible. If staff members are working beyond their remit due to feeling under pressure, for example, can certain tasks be delegated or deadlines extended?
- Encourage staff to set up healthy workstations at home – perhaps sharing their ideas around this in team meetings. Keeping the area decluttered, ensuring optimal natural light or placing plants, photos, or favourite objects around the workstation are some ideas that people find helpful.
- Consider providing your staff with access to workshops and other forms of training on psychological health and wellbeing. FD Consultants 'Stress Management & Resilience Building' is a three-hour online workshop that invites staff to consider wellbeing challenges in the workplace and practical ways of addressing these.
- Build your awareness of other forms of support that might be available to your staff and make sure your staff know about them. For example, many organisations have an EAP (Employee Assistance Programme) through which staff can access confidential counselling. Others have trained PFA (Psychological First Aid) peer supporters within the workforce to help support their colleagues in the event of a crisis or psychological health difficulty. PFA training can, again, be provided by FD Consultants and tailored to your organisation's needs.

About FD Consultants

For organisations looking for employee psychological support, FD Consultants are the trauma specialists and well-being service, who will best deliver a reliable, quick, and bespoke support system in the workplace. FD Consultant's team of accredited specialists will offer ongoing support to help manage stress, prevent burnout and provide specialist trauma care where required, enabling your staff with the tools to cope, and recover more quickly.

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