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Overcoming the Challenges of Managing a Virtual Team

Increase Productivity with a Remote Workforce

An Adept Packaging White Paper

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Each year more companies are working with teams dispersed across the country and around the globe due to the ease of connectivity provided by new technologies and forms of communication. This shift has made working as part of a virtual team more popular than ever. As of April of 2018, 2.9 percent of the total United States workforce (3.9 million Americans) worked from home at least half the time.

However, even with the technology available now, many companies are still reluctant to extend the virtual office to include their own employees, even though studies have shown that workers who are given the flexibility to work remotely often produce work at a higher speed and quality when compared to those restricted to a designated office environment.

So why aren't more companies jumping at the chance to increase productivity while providing their employees a better work/life balance? Research shows that the following challenges might be standing in the way of companies and their decision to shift to a remote work environment.

I. Combatting Disconnect and Creating Community

Although some organizations fear a virtual office will lead to too much isolation, Gallup released a study in 2017 that found 41% of telecommuters actually felt engaged with colleagues and their projects, versus 30% of those working in a traditional office setting.

The physical water cooler doesn't exist in a remote office, but shareable documents and communication apps allow team members to communicate with one another instantly and on their own terms so that it doesn't distract from the tasks at hand.

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The freedom of working remotely is directly correlated to happier dispositions in the workplace. In a 2014 study, leading software service provider, PGI, found that 80% of remote workers have higher morale and 82% reported lower stress levels. A key strategy to creating and promoting a sense of community within a virtual office environment is to encourage and utilize input from every team member. When employees feel like they have a voice, they're more likely to use it.

Companies who foster a remote work environment often keep their employees connected and feeling like part of a community by offering in-person events to allow everyone to get to know one another and their families. In-person events aren't always possible, so companies should consider:

- ✓ Offering virtual team-building activities,
- ✓ Coordinating social time
- ✓ Monthly scheduled meetings for associates to learn about one another and allow for the banter that can be overlooked in a virtual environment

Retreats and other team building activities encourage a sense of trust that can be missed with a screen, and sometimes many miles, so removing barriers and providing opportunities for associates to bond will create a sense of team. Software like Slack and Google Hangouts affords an opportunity for associates to communicate in real time, in a less formal way which encourages casual conversation.

In addition to ensuring employees feel as though they are part of a team, virtual companies with a successfully distributed workforce take measures to ensure company values permeate throughout the organization. This can be accomplished through activities that:

- ✓ Recognize associates that display company values
- ✓ Embolden innovation and forward-thinking through panels and committees
- ✓ Encourage knowledge-sharing through training and interaction of associates with various subject matter expertise

Fostering an environment where all associates feel that they understand the company's mission and are personally contributing to growth towards that mission, allows for a sense of both personal and collaborative pride. Employees that take pride in their work hold themselves more accountable for quality results.

II.   Establishing Accountability and Trust

Companies often worry that remote workers might not be as productive or motivated due to the extra flexibility and freedom that coincides with being able to work from home. From waiting on the cable person, to running errands, to that looming Netflix login that can tempt workers who perform best on their couch, many companies worry that the distractions that exist within the home will reduce productivity.

A study distributed by the Harvard Business Review reported the results of an endeavor of Chinese travel website Ctrip, where they allowed 50% of their employees to work from home for nine months. People working from home completed 13.5% more calls than the staff in the office, meaning that Ctrip got almost an extra workday per week out of their remote workers.

With a shorter commute and extra flexibility, workers have the luxury of prioritizing their tasks more effectively and completing them at times when they have the mental capacity to be the most focused.

Another way that companies can increase the accountability of a virtual team is to take advantage of task management systems like Trello or Asana or time tracking software such as Time Doctor to ensure projects are being organized and completed in a timely manner and employees' efforts are being properly catalogued.

In addition to ensuring employees hold themselves accountable, the virtual company needs to foster an environment of trust. One of the most effective ways to establish trust with employees is to create a culture of transparency:

- ✓ Share timely updates on projects to keep the team informed and set an example
- ✓ Provide honest insight into the company's health and direction
- ✓ Provide relevant opportunities for personal growth and professional development to show employees that you are invested in them and their future with the organization

III. Protecting Employee Information

Our culture relies so heavily on technology to function that our whole lives are often contained in our computers and smartphones. Although we can share and access information much more quickly and efficiently now, we leave ourselves highly vulnerable to cyber-attacks.

Companies are often hesitant to provide employees with the ability to work outside of a physical office because that means workers are exiting the safety of the security bubble the IT department has created within that office environment. Password policies, in-house IT employees, and constant virus monitoring and protection is often built into the networks that have been set up for workers in a designated office space.

However, quality resources and programs exist now to provide remote workers with the security and protection they need to collaborate and connect from the comfort of their own home or favorite coffee shop. The current IT professionals in the workforce today are equipped with the knowledge of shared programs and databases that will best suit your organization's needs. From designated VPNs to company SharePoint accounts, keeping your information safe outside the office building is more attainable than ever.

IV. Balancing Working and Living at Home

The Royal Society for Public Health in the UK reported that 55% of people felt more stressed as a result of their commute, but some companies worry that in exchange for ditching the drive, remote workers gain the stress of living and working in the same space.

In a properly designed workspace, working from a home office can allow employees to avoid the distractions of coworkers, loud conversations, and other interruptions that exist within a conventional office setting. However, a fine line exists between living to work and working to live.

To encourage remote employees to strike a balance between work and home life, companies can allow workers to set their own working hours. The work schedule should be shared with the group so other team members know when to expect task completion and communication with them. Shared calendars can help all team members stay informed of availability for meetings and collaborative projects. The previously discussed culture of transparency can be promoted by creating a system where workers can set their statuses as unavailable and respect their time when they have logged off for the day.

V. Communicating effectively

Clear communication means more than just having a good computer, and audio and video software. Maintaining a system of one-on-one meetings with managers, clients, and peers that are working together on tasks is also integral to good communication. Regular updates and a consistent reporting structure are key to keeping people informed without being a burden on the time of others.

Leverage communication platforms like Skype, WebEx, and Zoom for chat and video conference capabilities to keep employees interacting and engaged. With the flexibility of remote work, employees can also coordinate their hours to align with various time zones and availabilities.

However, try not to get carried away with the number of communication platforms used, as you can open yourself up to crossed paths and convoluted chat threads that can create gaps and overlaps that do more harm than good. Keep conversations streamlined and consistent so that expectations are always clear and concise.

Conclusion

With the constant flow of innovative technology working to remove barriers, the remote workforce is certain to grow in popularity. Companies like Adept Packaging are embracing it now in order to attract and retain the best people from all over the world. If you are considering shifting to a remote workforce, enlist our team of packaging consultants that has been groomed for optimal performance in this kind of environment.

Adept executes the strategies discussed above to set its remote workers up for success and provide a supportive virtual community. We have a reputable track record of completing projects and providing high-quality service delivery from our associates in remote locations. The technology for a long-term remote employee to work in a virtual office didn't exist until recently, but now that it does, no global limitations exist as a barrier to your company's success. Remote work forces are the future, and there is no time like the present to overcome the challenges and embrace the benefits.

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Sources

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