

Managing Both Onsite and Remote Workers Requires Finesse

Onsite workers fear health risks, while remote workers feel out of the loop

By Lin Gensing-Pophal

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Without a vaccine for COVID-19 and with cases continuing to spike in hot spots nationwide, many employees are choosing to keep working remotely when their jobs allow them to do so.

At the same time, employees with jobs that can't be performed remotely—or who have employers that prefer workers to be physically present—are being asked to return to their worksites, wear masks and practice social distancing.

That can lead to feelings of resentment between employees who are allowed to continue working remotely and those who are being told they can't any longer.

"There may be onsite workers questioning why they need to come in when others get to stay home," said Matt Erhard, managing partner with Summit Search Group, a recruitment and executive search firm based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. In some industries, such as retail or construction, working from home isn't an option. But often, "the distinction between who needs to work in the office and who doesn't is more nebulous" and may be left to a manager's discretion, Erhard said.

Employees' experience during the pandemic can complicate matters. "If your entire staff has been working from home for three months, they may wonder why they need to return to the office now," he said. "As a manager, you need to be able to explain your reasoning in detail and be open to feedback from staff who want to continue working remotely."

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Communication and Connections

Telework has long been perceived as a potential benefit for employees, allowing flexibility and saving them time and money that would have been spent on commuting, business attire and other expenses. Now telework has another associated benefit: personal safety. Taking it away can stoke fears about exposure to COVID-19 that could negatively affect employee engagement and productivity.

"During uncertain times and periods of change within organizations, authentic and transparent communications play a critical role," said Kate Bullinger, New York City-based president of United Minds, a management consultancy specializing in organizational transformation. A "consistent cadence of communications is key," she said, "to help manage employee anxieties and increase employee trust."

A recent poll by KRC Research in partnership with United Minds studied employees' perceptions of how their employers responded to COVID-19 (<https://www.webershandwick.com/news/employee-perceptions-on-returning-to-work/>) and the implications as companies navigate the re-entry phase. Among the findings:

- 90 percent of employees who received information regarding COVID-19 at the outbreak of the pandemic are proud to work for their employer, but 35 percent who did not receive information said the same.
- 85 percent of employees who received information on COVID-19 believe their employer's response was exactly as it should have been, but 28 percent who did not receive information said the same.

These results are based on a poll of 498 employees conducted April 15-17.

One major complaint from remote workers, Erhard said, is feeling isolated or left out of the loop. "Managers can help prevent this by giving remote staff easy, clear channels to communicate with both co-workers and managers throughout their workday."

Daily e-mail check-ins and memos aren't enough, he said. "Simulating an office environment with an open chat space or virtual water-cooler program can be a great way to help workers at home feel like part of the team."

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Another important action for employers is to lead by example, said Todd Horton, CEO of KangoGift, an employee recognition company based in Arlington, Mass. "Have corporate HR teams onsite [as workers return] to demonstrate 'we are in this together.' "

The worst message to send, however unintentionally, "would be to suggest the office workers can hide out [at home] while other groups do the dangerous work," he said.

SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Remote Work (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/Remote-Work.aspx)

Creating Conversations

Employees called back to the traditional workspace—or those who were never able to leave—may feel disadvantaged by risks to their health, whether those risks are real or perceived. To address their fears, companies can't do too much to promote safety, Horton said. "We haven't heard any complaints that employees feel like the company is overdoing it on safety."

Employee listening "has to be at the core of your work," said Sarah Stevens, SHRM-CP, who directs the people team at Limeade, an employee experience software company based in Bellevue, Wash. Being proactive about seeking information and input from employees can help to identify sentiments regarding inequities and other concerns. Listening instruments can include surveys, focus groups and one-on-one interactions, Stevens said.

Companies need to show they care about their employees during such a stressful time and ask themselves, "Are we demonstrating care, and will employees know that we're demonstrating care?" Stevens noted.

Employees working from home also may wonder if they are missing development or promotion opportunities available to those working at the office. At Limeade, Stevens said, managers are expected to check in weekly with each of their direct reports. "It's a chance to check up on the employee's well-being," she said.

Explain to employees how decisions were made about working remotely or onsite; don't assume they already understand why. It's also not the time to be silent about the benefits employers provide—not only tangible benefits, such as health care coverage and flexible schedules, but the intangibles, such as safety and wellness efforts.

Lin Gensing-Pophal is a freelance writer in Chippewa Falls, Wis.

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