Technology Helps Remote Workers Get the Feedback They Need

By Dave Zielinski

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The "out of sight, out of mind" phenomenon can be a major detriment to remote workers' well-being during the pandemic. Research shows that employees working from home often receive less performance feedback and appreciation for their good work than those in the office receive, which can take a toll not only on engagement and productivity, but also on employee mental health.

One study by research and advisory firm Gartner found that employees working from home receive far more corrective feedback than praise.

"If you compare employees in the same job and one is working from home and the other in the office, our research shows the employee working remotely is twice as likely to receive corrective feedback and half as likely to receive positive, affirming feedback as their colleague, even when the two perform at roughly the same levels," said Brian Kropp, a group vice president specializing in HR issues at Gartner.

Experts say such factors can harm employee mental health at a time when workers need to feel more connected to and recognized by their organizations. A U.S. Census Bureau study found that more than one-third of the U.S. population has shown clinical signs of depression or anxiety since the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak.

An August study from Eagle Hill Consulting in Arlington, Va., found that 58 percent of U.S. workers were experiencing burnout, up from 45 percent in the early days of the pandemic. Almost 40 percent of those survey respondents attributed that feeling to lack of communication, feedback and support from their organizations.

During periods of disruption, employees' desire to be recognized for good work increases significantly, Kropp said. "Our research shows the need to be recognized increases by 30 percent in terms of how important it is to employees. The reason is people are more concerned about keeping their jobs, they want assurances managers know they're working hard, or they want to know they're making a difference."

Using Technology for Virtual Recognition and Feedback

Some organizations are turning to technology to help give feedback and recognition. These platforms can nudge managers to offer feedback or appreciation, suggest situation-specific questions for managers to ask to guide performance or development conversations, capture feedback, and help managers publicly recognize team members for work well done.

Kropp said these platforms can achieve high return on investment if they are easy for managers to learn and use in the flow of their daily work.

"The natural behavior of most managers is to not think about providing feedback," Kropp said. "So you want a system that both reminds managers to provide feedback or recognition at the right times and makes it easy for them to do so. At the end of the week, it might send an automated e-mail asking, 'Who are the people on your team who performed well over the past week?' and then prompt managers to send a thank-you of some sort."

Kropp said employees are working with more co-workers than ever because of remote working arrangements. "That makes having a platform with features like good peer-to-peer recognition capability even more valuable during the pandemic," he said.

Recognizing Good Work from a Distance

Marisol Hughes, executive vice president and general counsel who oversees the HR function at WilsonHCG, uses a technology platform from provider Kudos to encourage peer-to-peer recognition across her company. Colleagues at the Tampa, Fla.-based recruitment process outsourcing and HR consulting company can recognize each other with text messages or video recordings posted on an online public-recognition wall for the whole company to see. Kudos also offers e-gift cards, customized awards and certificates for employee recognition.

Hughes said the platform has been helpful in stemming the sense of isolation and disconnection inherent in remote work. Employees have used the platform to thank information technology staff for solving home computer issues and recognize co-workers for collaborating effectively and providing above-and-beyond service to clients, Hughes said.

"To get recognized on the public wall or get a note of appreciation out of the blue does a lot to boost people's spirits in what has been a challenging time," she said. "It's been integral to helping people feel they're still connected and valued during the pandemic."

Joell Gray, head of total rewards, global well-being and recognition for Refinitiv, a provider of financial markets data in Stamford, Conn., also is a believer in the power of recognition software to keep remote workers feeling connected and appreciated.

Gray said more employees are using a recognition platform from vendor O.C. Tanner during the COVID-19 outbreak. The platform integrates with e-mail and internal collaboration networks to let employees tout peers' achievements.

"We've seen a growing linkage between recognition and employee well-being during the pandemic," Gray said. "When people working at home are acknowledged for their hard work or long hours, it can have payoffs not just in productivity or engagement but in their mental health. The platform also makes it easier to recognize the 'silent heroes' of the company who are sometimes overlooked."

Gary Beckstrand, vice president of the O.C. Tanner Institute in Salt Lake City, suggested using the technology in ways that create "high touch" recognition events for remote workers. "Avoid text if possible," he said, "and use video to create a more meaningful experience for those being recognized," such as inviting others to participate in the moment.

Technology Helps Facilitate Performance Feedback

Technology also can be a lifeline to managers struggling to provide regular performance feedback to remote workers. Reflektive is one such system that can help. It delivers performance feedback, guides workforce development and provides employee recognition. The platform integrates with e-mail and collaboration networks, such as Slack, so that managers can schedule check-in meetings with employees, gather and review feedback over time, monitor goals and send thank-you messages to team members.

"The obvious big challenge today is managers can't see employees' behavior on a daily basis," said Rachel Ernst, chief human resources officer for Reflektive. "As a result, we think managers need to be more proactive in having guided performance and development conversations with their people when they're working from home."

Reflektive can provide conversation starters for leaders to use with workers in specific situations, such as "How can I best support you while we continue to work remotely?"

Dave Mills, a regional operations leader for Kittelson & Associates, a transportation consulting company in Portland, Ore., uses the Reflektive platform to send company employees—about 80 percent of whom are working remotely—performance feedback, career development plans and recognition.

Kittelson has a flat organizational structure with few executives, and the platform allows employees to take greater ownership of their own career development, Mills said. Workers make frequent use of the feedback-request feature.

"At any given time after completing work, employees can stop and say, 'This is an area of my performance where I may need more feedback' and then request that feedback via the platform from one or more people," he said. "It allows people to drive their own development more proactively in a time and space that makes sense for them."

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