



Companies have long debated whether allowing employees to work remotely is feasible or a good idea. Even giant tech companies like Yahoo¹ and Intel Corporation, for all their resources, have found it challenging and gone back and forth on remote workers. If these tech giants found it tricky to manage a telecommuting workforce, what's a municipality to do?

Since March 2020, municipalities had to quickly make decisions on which roles are essential for in-person operations and which can be done remotely. It was the only way forward at the time. With the pandemic well under way and the finish line hopefully near, municipalities may be wondering what the next steps should be for their remote workers. This article will focus on remote work policies, fostering a productive and connected culture, and creating a plan to return to the office.

Policy Considerations

Best practice for those allowing remote work long term is to create a policy or telecommuting agreement to address legal, financial, and practical considerations. While a policy or agreement is best practice, a more pragmatic approach for short-term remote workers would be to reiterate some of the current municipal policies through conversations with employees.

Among items to specifically address are safety, insurance, and workers' compensation. Creating a common understanding that the employee is responsible for the safety and security of their home working space is a good place to start. Thus, policies can provide that employees who take municipal IT equipment and documents home are responsible for safekeeping those materials. A policy should also address the need for an employee to hold home or renter's insurance in case of damage to the workspace to clarify that the municipality is not responsible for any damage to that space. A policy should state that the employee is responsible for setting up an ergonomically efficient workspace and reporting any concerns to the appropriate party. Some policies may even provide diagrams of proper ergonomic desk setup.

On the more practical side of things, your municipality should decide whether to provide reimbursement or stipends for costs related to phone, internet, and electricity. This will depend on

Remote Work

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your municipality's budget, but rules regarding reimbursement for office supplies and workstation extras should be clarified.

It is also important to address wage and hour issues. Remote employees and their supervisors must be clear on work start, stop, and break times. Supervisors should discuss whether they are open to a split shift, other flexible work hours, and what shift changes need prior approval. This applies to both exempt and nonexempt employees. If this conversation has not happened, the time to do so is always now. More information on wage and hour issues can be found on the US Department of Labor's website for the Wage and Hour Division. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd>

Staying Connected and Productive

Connecting to those working in other locations has never been easier, yet working away from the team can come with certain hinderances. Employees who work remotely often feel a loss of connectedness to the team, e.g., missing out on hallway conversations that may clarify context or priority level for a particular project development. This pandemic has also brought on distractions for remote workers such as virtual schooling, meals, and other family members sharing the same space. In a recent Forbes article² referencing a survey of 2,000 global employees, 40% reported their mental health had declined since the pandemic and working from home. These workers reported more anxiety and stress, which can only lead to a less productive workday.

Municipalities can explore formal means of encouraging employees to connect through virtual lunch 'n' learns, mentorship programs, or cross-training initiatives. Informal engagement can be a low budget way to encourage connection and might include book clubs or fitness groups. Currently I participate in a daily virtual planking group. It takes less than 10 minutes per day and makes me more connected to my teammates.

Addressing productivity head on is sometimes the best approach. All employees should be aware of the tools available to them to connect and share information. That might be a phone application that connects the desk phone with an employee's cell phone. Or it might be a free or paid conference calling service. Many teams use free online tools like instant messaging services to connect to one another when the

organization does not provide those resources. Any new team members should be made aware of those cultural habits to help them fit in to the group.

Work output and deadline expectations are another aspect of employee productivity to establish. Employee accountability is important, but so is the need for approaching this conversation with an open mind. This pandemic has created anxiety for all and, for some, devastating loss. When having this conversation what is discussed is equally as important as how it is discussed. There are multiple ways to address productivity expectations, many of which can be approached informally and economically. A more expensive option for some organizations is monitoring software for company-owned equipment. While this is certainly an option, using it can erode trust and is only recommended as an option if the employee is suspected of abusing their paid company time or company resources.

Return to Office Plan

Now is a good time to plan for when the entire team can safely return to the office. Post pandemic questions to address today are: 1) Which positions are eligible to work from home or partially work from home and why? 2) How will a productive work-from-home employee who pushes back on returning to the office be handled? 3) Can employees request an alternative work schedule?

Additionally, maintaining access to IT tools and equipment employed during this time is recommended as hybrid meetings and some work location flexibility will likely continue. Municipalities should review their resources available to employees dealing with dependent care responsibilities, mental health, and loss. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) can be a valuable resource for these and many more issues.

Most importantly, when everyone is back at the office, continuing to support

a connected culture is key. Treat this moment as if a new project team is coming together and build in the “get-to-know-you” time.

The horizon of this pandemic is finally visible, but it is still unclear how long it will take to get there. Addressing the issues associated with remote work employees is a big undertaking, but it is necessary to formalize employee expectations and organizational policies. Consider your policies now and going forward, facilitate a connected and productive culture, and plan for the return to normal. We will get there.

About the Author:

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2. Is Working Remote a Blessing or a Burden? Weighing the Pros and Cons, Bryan Robinson, Ph.D., Forbes.com, June 19, 2020.



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