

MANAGING A MOBILE WORKFORCE: SUPPORT & MOTIVATE YOUR REMOTE STAFF

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Introduction

The workplace is more mobile than ever. Huge advancements in technology alongside shifting social trends have made the practice of telework an increasingly attractive option for both managers and employees. According to a recent Reuters poll¹, approximately one in five workers, or 20% worldwide, work remotely on a regular basis. Almost 10% work from home full-time. And these numbers are growing—especially in the United States. More than a third of those employees not yet working virtually full-time say they would be very likely to do so if given the option.

With the blurring of traditional lines confining work to the office space, managers are tasked with a growing set of challenges surrounding telework. These challenges include managing those working full-time outside an office setting, whether from a home office or a local coffee shop, staying on top of positions that require frequent traveling and checking in virtually, and even the need to retain control of administrative tasks when working remotely themselves. Luckily, powerful cloud-technology exists that can help businesses support, engage, and motivate their virtual employees more easily and effectively than ever before.

The Rise of the Mobile Office

The prevalence of telework, or full-fledged remote employment, as a widespread trend is relatively recent. In the 1970s, an international oil crisis prompted a newfound emphasis on energy savings and the ability to avoid traditional long-distance commuting. Terminal-based use of corporate mainframe computers, which allowed employees to access crucial business processes and data over traditional telephone lines, began a trend of technological advancement that continues to this day. In 1973, influential communications engineer Jack Nilles coined the term “telecommuting” to evoke the idea of “going to work” without being physically present in an office building². Since then, many breakthroughs in crucial technologies, the most obvious and effective of which being the Internet, have enabled simpler and more efficient remote access to business tasks.

Now, modern businesses are almost guaranteed to have a sizable number of mobile employees, and more likely than not to have more than one *type* as well. Some may telecommute full-time from a home office, while some might be constant travellers or simply work from home one or more

One in five employees worldwide telecommutes regularly. One in ten works remotely full-time.

85 of Fortune’s “100 Best Companies to Work For” have a telework program.³

¹ Reuters: “About one in five workers worldwide telecommute: poll.”

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/24/us-telecommuting-idUSTRE80N1IL20120124>

² RITA: “Transportation Implications of Telecommuting. “

<http://ntl.bts.gov/DOCS/telecommute.html>

³ SHRM: “Yahoo Bans Telecommuting”

http://www.shrm.org/hrdisciplines/technology/Articles/Pages/Yahoo-Bans-Telecommuting.aspx?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+shrm%2Fnews%2Fhr+%28SHRM+Online%3A+HR+News%29

days of the week. In many cases, supporting these employees represents a critical business decision aligning with an organization's strategic goals.

Additionally, many employees, especially members of the growing millennial generation, place a heavy emphasis on the importance of work-life balance and flexible scheduling as facilitated by their employers. The ability to work remotely is one realization of this balance: It can allow workers to stay close to home to accommodate needs such as child care, while enabling them to fulfill their duties as though they were present in an office environment.

Alongside the many benefits to businesses and employees that telework can provide, managing a mobile workforce can propose a number of unique obstacles. Without adapting management to fit their needs, working remotely can lead to a lack of engagement and a desire for the socialization and collaboration found in an office environment. Virtual employees may feel like they are not an integral part of the team or lack an outlet to offer feedback. It can become more difficult for them to seek guidance from their managers and to know when it is appropriate to do so. Finally, if important company data is not centralized or easily accessible to mobile employees, they can wind up spending more time hunting down the information they need and less time doing their jobs.

A variety of powerful tools and strategies can remove the traditional barriers that come with distance, and help employees and managers stay connected no matter where they are. A comprehensive, cloud-based people management solution can help your organization enable these connections

Critical Tools For Remote Workers

The first step toward maximizing the potential of your remote employees is to ensure that they have access to critical solutions that can transform a home or virtual office into a full-fledged work environment. There are an overwhelming number of technology tools and applications that can help make virtual employees feel as much a part of the team as those who are on-site. Instant Messaging, video conferencing, even virtual offices are becoming more popular. Many of these are free tools such as Skype™, Oovoo, and Google Hangouts offer a simple, invaluable platform for collaboration. For your mobile part-timers, a comprehensive time management solution can take the headaches out of clocking in and out and simplifies complex timekeeping procedures for both managers and their employees. Even aspects as basic as a full employee directory accessible from anywhere, help foster communication between all employees and can be very valuable.

Making sure the processes your mobile employees follow are consistent and reliable can be a convoluted procedure, sometimes requiring virtual private networking and multiple systems of record. The complexity of these procedures is multiplied if your organization has different types of remote

Critical telework technologies—such as a unified human capital management solution—can transform a virtual office into a full-fledged work environment.

employees, such as traveling salespeople and traditional employees who work from home every so often. However, adopting a cloud-based HCM solution can help to ameliorate many of these challenges for both the employees and managers.

Revolutionizing Telework: The Cloud

The advent of cloud technology—meaning the decentralized storage and access of content and applications through the Web—has indisputably been the single most important advancement in the effectiveness of the mobile workforce. Cloud-based services represent a rapidly growing share of all technology employed by modern businesses, and among the many benefits that these Software-as-a-Service solutions can offer is a complete reproduction of the office work environment, accessible anytime and anywhere. Organizations who have adopted unified, cloud-based HCM solutions can provide nearly identical experiences for their remote and on-site employees. Some best-in-class solutions also offer native applications for tablets and smartphones, extending the reach and capability of the mobile office even further.

Managers can help build engagement in their remote staff by assuring them that they are just as much a part of the team as those working on-site. The cloud allows managers to be present and available for feedback and support without being physically nearby. For example, a cloud-enabled performance management solution allows employees to receive and refer to feedback in a collaborative, permanent record accessible online. Employees can recognize each other for a job well done, in a format similar to familiar, consumer-based social applications. Additionally processing time off requests in the cloud means that mobile employees don't have to jump through any extra procedural hoops simply because they aren't in the office. Open enrollment through a Web portal means that they can review their benefits options and make well-informed selections online as well.

Finally, a people management solution delivered in the cloud means that data for all mobile employees is consolidated in the same single system of record with the rest of your workforce. No "hunting" for lost records and no manual data entry to get your remote part-timers' HR records into the same format as your frequent travellers. Instead of adding an extra layer of complexity to your business, the cloud enables consistency and efficiency among employee data.

Managers Can Be Mobile Too

Managers are also finding it easier to work from home or on the go just as frequently as their employees. Previously, remote managers lacked full access

The cloud means anytime access to the entire wealth of data your employees need to succeed, no matter where they are physically located.

to their employee data and metrics. Therefore even the simplest of processes could become extremely challenging and inconvenient. On top of this, it was difficult for managers to appear accessible to their teams.

Through cloud-based, unified HCM, every administrative task that could be performed in the office can now be done from the living room. Everything from reviewing requests for time off to putting together new hire packages to tracking the long-term career development of your employees is available instantly. And with built-in business intelligence tools delivered in the cloud as well, even analyzing crucial workforce reporting metrics can be taken out of the office. Employees at all levels of the organization can enjoy the benefits of keeping tabs on their people data while on the road.

Mobile and Social Go Hand-in-Hand

One of the most exciting recent developments with regard to telework is the advancement and widespread use of social media platforms. Additionally, due to the nature of telework, remote employees are more likely to be well-versed in the use of collaborative media and networking services, and your organization can capitalize on this social fluency.

Popular sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and corporate social networks such as Yammer, can be creative venues for your managers to provide visible, collaborative feedback and recognition no matter where your employees are. Offering praise for a job well done is always a valuable tool for motivating your staff, and it can go even further when delivered in via a social network for others to see and comment upon. Fostering highly-communicative feedback via social tools is a powerful way to help your mobile employees feel like they have a voice as part of the company conversation, and keep them engaged.

To take full advantage of the benefits of social media for your mobile employees, look for a unified HCM solution that offers seamless built-in support for this kind of platform. Integration of social networking tools with your talent management solution can provide a familiar social dynamic that encourages active, vocal participation from your remote staff within your organization's existing online infrastructure.

About Ultimate Software

Ultimate Software has been helping businesses efficiently manage their remote employees for over two decades. With more than 10 million individual employee records stored securely in the cloud, Ultimate is a leading provider of cloud-based people management solutions. The company's UltiPro solution provides a comprehensive approach to manage the employee life cycle, from recruitment to retirement, and includes Web

Many mobile employees, especially those who are members of the millennial generation, consider social networking a "first language."

features for talent acquisition and hiring; onboarding; payroll; HR compliance; online benefits enrollment and management; performance management and reviews; succession management; career development; business intelligence; real-time reporting; time and attendance; plus 24-7 direct access for executives, managers, administrators, and employees. In 2013, Ultimate Software was ranked #9 on FORTUNE Magazine's list of the Best Companies to Work For.

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