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HR Strategies for Telecommuting Program Success

With the advance of technology, telecommuting and remote work has become immensely popular. Today as many as 3.15 million employees consider home their workplace. The prevalence of remote work suggests that telecommuting programs will continue to spread throughout companies across the globe, and human resource departments have a major responsibility to react appropriately. HR must face the task of managing remote workers’ performance and completing fair evaluations. Combating isolation and retaining the value of “face time” in remote workers will also be a HR challenge. Policy guidance, cost management, and legalities are HR issues to consider as well. Although it is a test for a HR department to execute successfully, telecommuting and remote work programs can bring substantial rewards to a firm if implemented properly.

Structural Considerations

When implementing a telecommuting program, it is important to first consider what positions are suitable for remote work. The ideal position for remote work requires thinking tasks (ie: writing, researching, programming), involves little face-to-face communication, allows for the creation of performance standards, and doesn’t need access to offline equipment or files. These qualities make it easier to measure employee output, reduce costs for the company, and ensure that task objectives are reached.

Once the decision is made on what positions to include in telecommuting programs, policies must be created to determine which employees are eligible to ensure the right candidates are selected. For example, self-driven employees displaying superior performance are often good candidates to consider first. Necessary restrictions must also be created and enforced to ensure protection of confidential information and company owned technology. After these basic structural policies are laid out for telecommuting programs, HR can descend into tackling the main challenges of measuring and evaluating performance as well as addressing “face time.”

Performance Management and Evaluation

There is a common misconception that “teleloafing” runs rampant in telecommuting programs and remote workers tend to loaf more than office workers. However, industries that have implemented telecommuting programs show averages of 10 to 30% for improved employee effectiveness based on documentations that show remote workers work an extra hour a day and are absent two fewer days a year on average. One of the main factors contributing to the achievement of these positive results are effective telecommuting program performance management systems.

To create an effective performance management system for a telecommuting program, it is essential to measure performance in deliverables rather than observed behaviors because of the lack of direct observation available. First, clear standards and expectations must be specified so remote workers know how they are expected to perform and what to deliver. Delivered results should then be measured and monitored frequently to ensure objectives are continuously being
reached. It is also essential to view time in regards to performance by what is done with the time rather than hours worked. Time worked does not equal achieved outcomes, so it is important to emphasize the achievement of results and development of competencies. The timely compilation of these factors can then serve as an effective performance evaluation. Individual evaluations based on the chosen objective output measures should be completed at regular intervals to ensure a remote workers’ continued success in a telecommuting program. However, when completing these performance evaluations, it is crucial to be aware of the concept of “face time” and avoid making unconscious judgments based on it.

**Retaining the Value of “Face Time”**

One of the biggest downsides of telecommuting is that it does not allow for traditional face-to-face interaction between the employer and the employee. Problems can arise from increased isolation, increased need for coordination, challenges with communication, and loss of synergy. However, there are overt methods companies can take to include remote workers’ presence in the workplace and maintain strong relationships.

Having the proper, up-to-date technology will allow for a new form of “face time” among remote employees’ and their managers that is just as efficient as the traditional form. Companies need to consider implementing communications technology (ie: e-mail, fax), electronic conferencing (ie: webinars, chat rooms), collaborative software (ie: in-house software), and the sharing of companywide computer resources (ie: “cloud” storage). In addition to the use of these resources, managers and employees must also make individual efforts to maintain strong relationships. Remote workers’ can take the initiative to make regular status reports by email or phone, be extra visible when they are in the office, be immediately available when at home, maintain strong networks in the office, and send e-mails/voicemails early and late in the day. These actions show the employee is committed, puts in extra effort, and works to maintain office relationships. Managers must be careful by straying away from trait-based evaluations and focusing on objective employee outputs and deliverables when assessing performance. These are important considerations in treating employees fairly across the office and telecommuting programs. Overall the benefits of “face time” can be retained in telecommuting programs when companies implement the proper technology and employees are willing to put in extra effort.

**Policy Guidance, Cost Management, and Legalities**

There are other key issues that arise from telecommuting programs beyond performance management and “face time.” Policy guidance is necessary to provide managers and remote workers’ with a framework for telecommuting. Guidelines should be provided on scheduling, supplies and expenses, performance, and equipment to ensure that those involved in the telecommuting program know what to do, how to act, and how to respond if a problem arises. Cost management is also an important factor to consider when implementing a telecommuting program. Telecommuting programs can greatly reduce costs, but only if hidden costs are recognized and handled properly. To ensure an adequate return on investment companies need to be cost aware by reducing office sizes and buying less office equipment for the lower number of in-office employees.

Legal issues may also arise from telecommuting programs. Home offices must meet the standards of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which means remote workers
will have to include items such fire extinguishers and ergonomically correct chairs and desks in their home offices. The Americans with Disabilities Act must also be kept in mind when providing reasonable accommodations for disabled employees to work from home. Company liability and risk should be managed as much as possible for telecommuting programs.

When implementing a telecommuting program, there are many factors and issues to consider. HR has an important role in ensuring remote workers’ performance is managed and fair evaluations are performed. The value of “face time” must be retained with new technology and policy guidance, cost management, and legal issues must also be considered. If HR can execute their role in a telecommuting program successfully, the company can reap the benefits that telecommuting programs have brought to participating companies across the globe.

References


