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BUSINESS

# MANAGING THE DISTRIBUTED WORKFORCE



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Under skilled leadership, virtual employees can make real contributions to corporate performance and profitability.

## LEVERAGING THE GLOBAL TEAM TREND

Talk of remote employees seems to follow one of two narratives. On one hand, we hear that companies can disrupt their industries (or at least optimize their competitiveness and growth potential) by hiring the best talent, regardless of location. On the other are those concerns about whether co-workers can truly function as a

team when they've never met, have vastly different outlooks, and aren't even working the same hours because they live in distant time zones.

Does moving to a virtual workforce live up to those promises? Can companies make it work and overcome those challenges? While some business owners eye the trend with continued skepticism, others have made the organizational and leadership investments necessary to integrate virtual employees into the workforce.



[Global Workplace Analytics](#) reports that as of June 2017, “approximately 20-25 percent of the workforce teleworks at some frequency,” and 80-90 percent of U.S. workers would like to telework two to three days a week. That balance of work in and outside the office is seen as providing the best mix of focusing on work and collaborating with colleagues.

Among the trends identified by Global Workplace Analytics:

- 3.7 million employees work from home at least half-time
- While just 7 percent of U.S. employers offer flexible work place options, that represents a 40 percent increase over five years.
- The labor force grew 1.9 percent from 2013 to 2014, but the telecommuter population grew 5.6 percent.

And while this trend is widely seen as catering to the preferences of Millennials, the company reports that “a typical telecommuter is college-educated, 45 years old or older, and earns an annual salary of \$58,000 while working for a company with more than 100 employees.”



As these figures demonstrate, there’s still time to be on the leading edge of this trend and gain the competitive advantages that come from being able to tap into the worldwide talent market. But a geographically dispersed workforce presents managers and leaders with new challenges that shift the focus from managing projects to managing project teams. By adapting both the company and its leadership to this workplace evolution, you can create an environment in which remote team members interact productively and contribute collectively to advancing the company’s vision and mission.

## GAINING TRACTION THROUGH TRAINING

Fostering team cohesion, collaboration, and a sense of shared purpose begins with communicating expectations and performance criteria. A strong training program gives remote team members the grounding they need to understand what is expected of them not only in performing their responsibilities, but in interacting with colleagues.

“The Achilles Heel of any virtual team is communication,” says virtual team dynamics expert [Yael Zofi](#), author of *A Manager’s Guide to Virtual Teams*. Your new hire—

especially when you hire someone who's already accustomed to working remotely—will have an established work style.

It's up to you, Zofi says, to establish your expectations and requirements clearly. "Don't make them guess, because the guessing game leads to misunderstanding," she says. "Misunderstanding leads to conflict, and conflict creates trust breakdowns. Virtual or not, we're here to get something done. We're here to produce results."

Sessions devoted to procedures, systems, and technologies are part of the process of getting a new hire ramped up and ready to work with the team. But it's even more important to set expectations regarding deliverables, make remote employees aware of the other resources on the team and acquaint them with the capabilities, skills, and know-how of their new coworkers.

Make a point of learning about new employees' work styles and preferences rather than focusing entirely on their skills, experience, and background. Take the time to start developing a personal as well as professional relationship, which in some cultures is the basis of mutual confidence.

"In many western cultures, you earn trust by showing your competence,

## HELPING EMPLOYEES MEET PERFORMANCE TARGETS

Employees can't perform to expectations until they understand those expectations: both what they need to do and how their success will be measured. By creating and articulating clear parameters for individual, group, and project performance, companies support the staff's ability to contribute their best to the organization. These resources can help your company establish consistent, comprehensible work standards and support your employees in meeting shared objectives for their success.

### Performance appraisal tools

- **Trakstar** bills its solution as "simple employee evaluation software anyone can use." Its features include performance reviews, 360-degree feedback, goal setting, and succession planning tools.

- **Reviewsnap** also has performance review and 360-degree feedback components, but it also features a compensation dashboard and a "learning content integration" module that supports our ability "to develop targeted learning plans for every employee."

- **Appraid** is a customizable system for managing reviews and appraisals, objectives, and feedback. It works on the principle that employee achievement rises when management provides regular check-ins and mini reviews instead of over-relying on annual reviews.

### Workforce management software

- **BambooHR** provides a solution that encompasses applicant tracking, employee self-onboarding, master employee data/records, HR reporting, custom workflows, payroll, and more.

- **Kronos Workforce Central** offers a suite of workforce management solutions designed to engage employees, manage labor costs, increase productivity, and minimize compliance risk.

- **Namely** mirrors popular social media platforms and encourages participation. Employees can use it for functions as diverse as requesting time off and expressing appreciation of coworkers, all within an HR platform with a social community look.

showing that you're dependable," says Ray Henson, a professor at Rutgers Business School, President of [Henson Consulting International](#), and author of *Successful Global Leadership*. "But in other cultures, you develop trust by establishing personal relationships. So, when you're managing a virtual team, one of the conditions for making sure the team works well together is for trust to be built in the team. And a leader has to be aware that there are two different ways of building trust."

Similarly, those early days offer an opportunity to promote the company's culture and help employees become comfortable with their role in it. This can be especially challenging when your team has culturally diverse attitudes toward titles and seniority, expectations regarding supervision, and willingness to speak up about ideas or problems. A vigorous training program can help them to become the employees you need and ensure their comfort with the workplace and job satisfaction.



## ACCOUNTABILITY IN ACTION

We tend to think of accountability in quantitative terms: deadlines met, projects completed, performance targets hit. But accountability takes on more qualitative elements in a virtual workplace. Working on your own does not and should not mean working in isolation. Leaders therefore take on the role of connecting individuals, groups, and resources with one another. This allows everyone to feel plugged into the organization, knowledgeable about the project, and equipped and empowered to make decisions.

In this context, employees are accountable to one another, not just to the company and its clients. This is especially true, Zofi says, when projects encompass a variety of components that require the expertise of many team players who approach the project from their own points of view.

The company may also need to redefine the way it thinks about—or at least measures—accountability. The traditional mindset of noting when employees arrive, how long they take for lunch, and what time they leave for the day is outmoded. And while technologies can monitor virtual employees' activities in line with these

standards, that's a misuse of resources and a misplacement of priorities.

"You should be more interested in results and outcomes than what they're doing on a day to day basis," Henson says. "That supports defining each member's role on the team, what the decision-making process is going to look like, and how it's going to operate."

In tandem with these changes, the company must develop managers' ability to set benchmarks that contribute to feelings of individual achievement, not just completion of project deadlines. And that brings us back again to communication. Remote employees, who value autonomy and are capable of meeting expectations outside a traditional office setting, are more likely to have equally individualized parameters for achievement and recognition. To keep them motivated and committed to the company, it's essential to understand how they define job satisfaction.

## MOBILE AND CLOUD COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Your employees aren't the only ones ready to move to the remote workforce. Your desktop and mobile devices are ready, too—or can be in the time it takes to install some of these work-oriented programs and apps:

- **Workplace by Facebook** applies the principles of social media in a business context. You and your employees can initiate or participate in formal and informal discussions, share news and market information, propose ideas and seek help in brainstorming, and more.
- **Skype for Business** promotes collaboration in real time on teams of up to 250 people. Features include screen sharing, whiteboards, polls, and instant messaging as well as the ability to record meetings.
- **GoToMeeting** is a videoconferencing, meeting scheduling, and collaboration tool. Participants can initiate or join a meeting from anywhere, and sessions can be collaborated for use by those unable to attend.

## CULTIVATING VIRTUAL LEADERS

Introduction of a distributed workforce need not disrupt your company's formal hierarchy, but it will contribute to the emergence of informal leaders within the organization. This should work to your competitive advantage over the long term. It promotes an environment in which individuals have more opportunities to align their interests and aspirations with the organization's business goals, to everyone's benefit.

One change you're likely to see is increased focus on professional development rather than title changes. In the traditional office, titles offered incremental rewards as, for example, employees progressed from account assistant to assistant account

executive, account executive, senior account executive, and account supervisor. Remote workers have less invested in this type of recognition display.

That puts a fresh spin on what leadership development means within the business. “You don’t need to be managing people or managing large transactions to be a leader,” Zofi says. Members of your team may emerge as leaders in conducting research, testing theories, identifying market opportunities, creating bonds within the team, or devising efficiency



*Identifying, recognizing, and rewarding informal leaders strengthens the virtual workplace, promotes employee loyalty, and positions the company for improved performance and growth prospects.*

improvements. Each can be recognized for leadership in the context of those individual contributions. And then the formal team leader assumes the role of what Zofi calls the “agent of connection—the one who connects them to each other and to you in ways that are familiar but maybe not as conventional.”

That individualized approach carries through to finding the right rewards for each person’s contribution. Zofi notes that rewards can be extrinsic (for example, salary increases or monetary bonuses) or intrinsic, and the intrinsic rewards often are more highly valued. Identify the intrinsic rewards that resonate most to make the work more meaningful and satisfying to each employee, whether the motivation is exposure, continued learning, or simply expressions of appreciation.

Zofi recommends asking employees: “What do you need from me to be more successful?” The other side of that equation is to articulate what you need from them so they can be more successful. Work together to establish what will motivate them and what career path would be most meaningful to them. Identifying, recognizing, and rewarding informal leaders strengthens the virtual workplace, promotes employee loyalty, and positions the company for improved performance and growth prospects.

## DISTRIBUTED WORKFORCE RESOURCES

*These online references support your leadership of a productive, high-performing remote team.*

Once you've taken the plunge and hired the best—as opposed to the nearest—talent, you need a strategy for transforming those individuals into a team that supports your company's growth objectives. These articles, online tools, and other resources can help you develop a leadership style that aligns with the dynamics of a remote workplace and promotes optimal achievement and success.

### Global workplace analytics

The company's white paper, [2017 State of Telecommuting in the U.S.](#), looks at the way employers are adapting remote work strategies for their employees. The trends and developments reported relate only to full-time staff members who work at home more than half the time.

Here, the consulting firm reviews [Telework Costs and Benefits](#), such as greater employee satisfaction, reduced attrition, and increased collaboration, employee empowerment, and productivity. Scroll down to read [The Obstacles to Work at Home and Telecommuting Program](#), and get the company's input on managing and overcoming those obstacles.

### Harvard Business Review

"A location-independent lifestyle is perfect for some professionals—and completely wrong for others," says Dorie Clark, author of [Entrepreneurial You](#). She offers advice on making the distinction in [Thinking About a "Work from Anywhere" Arrangement? Ask These Questions First](#).

[Run Meetings That Are Fair to Introverts, Women, and Remote Workers](#) presents a strategy for getting the most out of team members who are smart, insightful—and less likely to speak up before a group. By encouraging participation among a larger number of employees, you promote full use of the team's intellectual capital and capabilities.

[Getting Virtual Teams Right](#) offers steps you can take to ensure that your distributed workforce's performance is equal to—and perhaps even better than—what it would be if everyone worked together in a single location. The authors review how having "the right team, the right leadership, the right touchpoints, and the right technology" can contribute to realizing performance potential.





## Yael Zofi

Multimedia resources on famed global business consultant Zofi's website walk visitors through the steps necessary to create, build cohesion in, and lead a successful virtual team.

They include her:

- **Videos** on such topics as **How to Set Up Your Virtual Team**, **3 Ways to Achieve Context Communication**, **Conflict in Dispersed Teams**, **Managing Virtual Teams and Cross-Cultural Interactions**, and **Virtual Challenge: Cross-Cultural Communication**.
- **Virtual Team-Building Strategies**, with areas of focus that include communication, trust, conflict, deliverables, culture, meetings, and future.
- **Blog**, with topic categories such as virtual management, intercultural business communication, virtual business offices, managing cultural diversity, and managing up.