

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

RUNNING A BUSINESS | APRIL 21, 2010, 10:16 A.M. ET
SMARTMONEY

Six Ways to Manage a Virtual Work Force

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With Earth Day just days away, consider greening your office. Or better yet, get rid of it altogether.

Thanks to improved technology and the high price of gasoline, working remotely has become an increasingly popular—and less expensive—option for both large and small work forces. Since 2006, the number of U.S. employees who worked remotely at least one day per month increased 39% to 17.2 million in 2008, according to the latest survey available from WorldatWork, global human resources association in Washington, D.C.

Employers that go this route typically like the reduced rents and technology savings telecommuting affords, while employees appreciate spending less time commuting and lower transportation costs. Despite these benefits, however, many employers remain concerned about whether they're getting the most from employees, says Rieva Lesonsky, the founder and president of GrowBiz Media, a small business consultancy in Costa Mesa, Calif. "It's a loss of control thing for them," she says.

How to tackle the challenges of managing a remote work force? Here are six strategies.

Start off slow

Inevitably, there will be systemic kinks and bugs that will accompany a transition to a remote office. Instead of dispatching all of your workers simultaneously, transition gradually, suggests Ms. Lesonsky. "Until you get more comfortable with having a disparate work force, offer the ability to work from home one day a week or three days a month," she says. Then, be sure to check on those workers at the end of the month. "See if there are any glitches," says Ms. Lesonsky.

Probation periods

Unless you have a 100% virtual company, don't let new employees work from home right away, says Ms. Lesonsky. Having a remote work force is built mostly on trust. "You have to be sure you can trust your new workers with the responsibility of working from home," she says. Ms. Lesonsky suggests giving new workers a 60- to 90-day probationary period before giving them the OK. For fully virtual companies, hire workers who don't require much managing and can thrive in an autonomous setting, she says.

Set expectations

Although working at home lends itself to more flexible hours and working in one's PJs, it should be clear to employees what's expected of them, says James Sinclair, the CEO of OnSite Consulting, a hospitality management and consulting firm in Los Angeles. Mr. Sinclair delegates the day-to-day management of his 65 employees to team leaders, each of whom heads groups of five or six workers. The leaders are responsible for defining project goals and making sure workers adhere to both daily and weekly tasks. "We don't have people on our staff walking around looking for something to do," says Mr. Sinclair. "But we do have to monitor and track them nonetheless."

Use technology

Technology can also be vital for keeping up with virtual employees, says Andy Miller, the CEO of CardStar, a smartphone application provider that stores loyalty, rewards and club membership card information. His team is located in three different U.S. cities, and each employee has a laptop, cellphone and USB modem "so that they can connect anywhere," says Mr. Miller. Texting and email, along with meeting via video Skype, provide something akin to face time. "When I was in corporate America, I realized that it was highly inefficient: There were so many meetings you didn't have to be at but were required anyway," says Mr. Miller. "You end up working harder and doing less."

Don't stalk employees

It's perfectly acceptable to check in on workers and make sure they're doing their jobs appropriately. However, there's a fine line between just checking in and watching them, says Ms. Lesonsky. "The danger is if the employee goes home and you are constantly questioning them, they'll feel like they are more under your eye," she says, adding that retaining employees in such a situation will likely become difficult.

Establish performance measurements

Of course, it's perfectly reasonable to want to know how remote workers spend their time, which after all you're paying for. When Ken Clark, the CEO of 1-800-Translate, a translation and language management service in New York, started moving his work force home last year, he found it challenging to manage a 12-person staff, plus thousands of contractors around the world. To keep employees on track, Clark turned to performance reviews. Each time a job is completed, the company sends out quality assurance emails to customers. This practice helps signal early on which employees are doing well and which aren't, he says. "For small businesses, especially, one bad apple can put you out of business," Mr. Clark says. "Even a marginal employee is a tremendous strain on an organization. Our aim is to identify with them quickly."

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