5 Ways to Create a Healthy Remote Workforce

By Scott Clark | *Aug 24, 2020*

The COVID-19 crisis accelerated many workplace trends, chief among them remote and distributed work. It was a necessary choice in the short term but it looks to be shaping into a long term trend.

According to a [report from the Society for Human Resource Management and Oxford Economics](#), 64% of salaried and 49% of hourly employees are now working remotely most of the time, compared to 3% and 2% in January 2020. A [March 2020 Gallup survey](#) revealed that 74% of CFOs plan to move more onsite employees to remote workspaces permanently once the COVID-19 crisis is over.

According to Kate Lister, president of consulting firm [Global Workplace Analytics](#), 25-30% of the workforce will be working from home multiple days a week by the end of 2021. "Work-at-home will save U.S. employers over $30 billion a day in what would have otherwise been lost productivity during office closures due to COVID-19," she said.

There's no doubt at this point that the cost savings and productivity gains are real. What's less clear is the emotional toll the rapid move to remote work will take on employees. With so many employees working remotely along with lockdowns, school closures and social distancing, many are having trouble coping with the new normal. A November 2019 [Gallup report indicated that isolation and loneliness are a problem](#) for nearly a quarter of employees that work remotely. They often feel left out of company get-togethers and classes and miss out on casual conversations with team leaders and fellow employees. Multiply that challenge by the new number of remote workers and it's clear there's a looming problem at the heart of the new way we work.

Encouraging the physical health of employees is straightforward: Eat a healthy diet, get enough sleep and exercise, stay away from drugs and alcohol. Emotional health is more challenging because each person is dealing with their own specific set of circumstances. Here are five ways businesses can improve the emotional health of remote workers.

Empathy Is Key to Emotional Health

Empathy [is the intersection](#) between customer experience, employee experience, user experience and design thinking. When business leaders feel empathy for customers and employees, they gain insights that improve the lives of those customers and employees. This period of rapid change is the time for leaders to take an even greater interest in the welfare of their employees.

"More than half of the people working at home during COVID-19 did not have the benefit of having done so on any kind of regular basis before the pandemic," said Lister. "That alone can be hugely stressful, but add to it the fear of getting sick, having children and spouses at home, and social isolation and you have a perfect storm for emotional overload."

Employers should take steps to help people stay physically and emotionally healthy by providing access to helpful resources, train managers to recognize signs of overload and encourage connection, said Lister.

Many leaders and managers are also dealing with the challenges of working remotely and should be able to easily empathize with their employees. But don't rely on that. The way the owner of a business experiences working remotely is going to be different from that of a data entry clerk. Empathy requires imagination and taking another's perspective and communication lies at the heart of it.

"It is important for leaders to ask team members how they are doing, to open the door to the conversation about emotional challenges and struggles and to ensure that employees know their leaders care and are thinking about them on a personal level," said Carla Yudhishthu, vice president of people operations at ThinkHR and Mammoth HR. "Employees often default to not wanting to bother their leaders with their personal struggles. So creating the space for people to share what's going on personally or emotionally is critical."

Communicate Regularly and Not Just About Work

When an employee is at the office they can more easily communicate with other employees, managers and leadership, giving suggestions and taking feedback and picking up on sometimes subtle body language. Remote workers rarely have that opportunity. They can see each other's faces during virtual meetings but it's not the same as person-to-person communication. This lack of regular communication creates isolation and separation, leading to feelings of loneliness and being left out.

Employees don't want endless meetings in which leaders and managers micromanage but rather regular meetings where they can talk about work issues as well as non-work related topics. Most people enjoy short video calls but longer meetings can be emotionally draining and uncomfortable. Some businesses are now using software that uses avatars in place of faces or even allows attendees to face sideways rather than straight on.

Jason Akatiff, co-founder of Boundery, doesn't rely on video to create connections with employees but rather provides each individual with time to speak with team leaders daily. "I am not a huge fan of face time meetings as I find it takes a lot more out of me having to engage both verbally and physically," he said. "When it comes to scheduling, every team member has a daily 15-minute meeting with their assigned team leader to go over what was accomplished the previous day and what they plan to accomplish today."

When he finds an employee has an issue, they set time for further discussion to provide necessary solutions or appropriate tools. The communication process doesn't end there.

"Each team meets once a week for an hour usually at the beginning of the week, to go over the goals for that week and make sure everyone is on the same page," he said. "Also, all of our team leaders meet once a week to ensure all teams are on track and collaborating across all levels."

Use Virtual Meetings to Build Connection and Belonging

Jack Nicolaus, a facilitator at LifeLabs Learning, teaches skills including emotional intelligence to leaders at companies such as Reddit, Slack and Sony Music. In his experience, leaders need to make emotional connections part of the agenda, something the typical meetings isn't designed to do.

"Meeting agendas are designed to bring structure to group conversations," he said. "Unfortunately, organizational leaders often make the mistake of using that structure to maximize business talk at the expense of culture-building time. The fix? Budget 5% of a meeting to build connection and reinforce belonging."

Nicolaus suggested team leaders ask questions that are open-ended, providing employees with an opportunity to share with others. "General questions like 'how are you?' lead to general answers like 'I'm fine.' Better to ask 'What's one interesting thing you've learned in the last week?' or 'What's the silliest gif you've used in a text message recently?'"

Remote employees need to be able to express themselves and capture the lighthearted water cooler discussion that waspart of their lives when they worked in the office. Fun is a huge part of the equation. Find a way to play every day, Nicolaus said.

"Emotional and social connections are built through play," he said. "Office environments have many different opportunities for adult play and it's not just the obvious things like a ping pong table. Smart remote teams cultivate intentional playtime, either using digital tools like JackBox or Skribble, or simply making puns in chat during meetings. Leaders can reinforce playful behavior by encouraging teams to take work time to be silly."

Emotional Training Isn't Just for Leadership and Managers

Emotional quotient (EQ), also referred to as emotional intelligence (EI), is defined by HelpGuide as "the ability to understand, use, and manage your own emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges and defuse conflict." EQ training should be something that every employee participates in as part of the onboarding process. For remote workers, it's a valuable tool that could enable them to maintain a positive emotional state.

It's also important that leadership and managerial employees go through EQ training. EQ training facilitates the ability to manage oneself more effectively, be more self-aware, learn to be more empathetic, and cultivate and maintain healthy relationships with others. According to a report from TalentSmart, emotional intelligence has been shown to be the strongest predictor of performance, explaining 58% of success in all types of jobs. A high EQ improves the customer and employee experience, as well as interpersonal relationships.

Recognize and Support Employees' Mental Health

Insurance company MetLife released a study on employee benefit trends that indicated that 58% of employees who are struggling said their employer does not provide mental health programs that fulfill

their needs, or if they do they are hard to access or understand. The study also showed that 33% of employees that are struggling took time off from work due to stress.

As of August 2020, there have been 775,000 deaths worldwide caused by COVID-19, 170,000 in the United States. According to a report published by Statista in April, approximately 25% of African Americans and 13% of both white and Hispanic adults in the United States know someone that died from COVID-19. It's likely several employees are among those that are grieving. Yudhishthu's company recently hosted a grief workshop for managers led by Leslie Barber, who runs Grief Warrior.

"She spoke of grief not just related to the loss of a life, but also in the environment related to the many people, places and things that are missing from our life right now," Yudhishthu said. "She helped us understand that most importantly as managers we must understand, identify and acknowledge our own grief first, so that we can have the empathy to support our team members."

Leaders who are naturally positive may find it challenging to fight their tendency to be cheerful in light of the grief that an employee is going through. "Now more than ever it's important to be real, rather than deny grief and loss exist," Yudhishthu said. "If it feels awkward to bring this up with your team, acknowledge that fact and then share your own experiences and feelings to make it okay for everyone else to do so."

"I had a couple of leaders reach out to me to discuss their own personal grief. Both said it was so validating to be able to name what they have been feeling and to also have a framework for discussion with those they lead. They recognized that signs of grief were coming out in various ways from their team members without a clear connection to something like the loss of a loved one."

The stress from dealing with crisis can have many effects on employee mental health, including addiction to alcohol and drugs. Dr. Jean LaCour, founder of the International Association of Professional Recovery Coaches and co-founder of the NET Institute Center for Addiction and Recovery Education, said the COVID-19 crisis caused an increase in substance abuse, another issue employers need to take into account when it comes to the emotional health of employees. "COVID induced stress levels are at an all time high as more people are descending into the self-destructive world of addiction to cope with the unknown," LaCour said.

According to LaCour, statistics showed that alcohol sales were 55% higher in the first weeks after COVID-19 hit, a stat that is "just the tip of the iceberg." Businesses must recognize that the occasional use of alcohol or drugs by an employee before the crisis could easily turn into an addiction problem.

With the remote and distributed workforce growing each day, it's important to recognize that remote workers have challenges that office workers do not face. Emotionally healthy employees are happier, more engaged and productive and are more likely to be retained. By making an effort to empathize and understand the issues that remote workers face, leaders can play a large role in maintaining the emotional health of their employees.