

Eleven ways to keep your employees engaged in a remote work setting

Our world is rapidly changing, and along with it, the workplace. The steady forces of digitalization and globalization continue to make the world a more connected place, while the Covid-19 crisis has shaken the world to its foundations, having an immense impact on our working lives.

Working remotely has been met with mixed reviews. Some people say they never want to go back to the office, while others feel the walls of their homes are closing in on them. As most of us do not have much of a choice, this article outlines how to make most out of this turbulent period for company members. We expect that, even after the Covid-19 dust has settled, the demand for time and location flexibility in the workplace will remain and new technologies will continue to open up possibilities for remote working.

Tremendous changes in work relations

The new normal has led to three tremendous changes in the way we work. Firstly, leadership in organizations has been largely affected. For those managers who were used to practicing their management styles in a face-to-face environment, the new working settings can lead to the feeling of having diminished influence. Leaders have to translate their charismatic leadership styles into their virtual communication, which can be a challenge.

Another consequence of working remotely, is the access to information. Employees must increasingly make use of condensed information through the intranet and internet. Turning the loads of accessible information into useful knowledge is important to help employees to work more productive and prevents them from reinventing the wheel.

The third significant change is the altered way companies provide professional development to their employees. Offering proper training and development options to your employees through e-learning programs and distance education is essential. Research says, around 40 percent of employees who receive poor job training leave their positions within the first year.

Instead of the formerly lifelong careers at the same company, changes in work environments have led to a new “psychological contract”, where short-term employment relationships with the exchange of benefits and contributions are built. The developing employer-employee relationship is characterized by “the social exchange theory”, that approaches the relationship as a series of interactions between individuals that generates obligations towards each other, to balance their relationship. This social exchange gains trust, engagement and loyalty. Frequent sent and received recognition has the biggest impact on employee engagement. Additionally, recognition can be advocated by investing in the development of employees. As a result, the employee will compensate this by being more loyal to the organization. This enforces “organizational citizenship” behavior: the amount of effort an employee performs for the betterment of the organization without gaining any form of monetary incentive in return (Yadav & Rangnekar, 2016).

Employee engagement during Covid: a social exchange

Organization science literature says univocally engagement means that employees are feeling a strong connection to the organization’s goals and they feel empowered to reach them. Additionally, corporate values need to correspond intensely to employees’ personal values. Employee engagement is connected to factors like objectives and feedback, coaching, development & learning and recognition, all based on underlying trust and empowerment. Mone and London (2009) have analyzed a path showing eight performance management-predictors that relate to improved engagement. The most impacting activities are: setting performance and development goals, providing ongoing feedback and recognition, managing employee development and building a climate of trust and empowerment.

To encourage these performance activities, organizations need to be aware of the importance of internal communication in building a culture of transparency between

management and employees, as a way to engage in the organization's priorities. A study of A.B. Carroll (2006) p.33, states that people want to work in an environment where they can "trust the people they work for, have pride in what they do and enjoy the people they work with". These workplaces are commonly going together with open communication. Employees perform better when they feel trusted and when they trust their managers and co-workers. As leadership is the backbone of organizational engagement, managers need to focus on enforcing cultural alignment between employees' activities and the company values. Proper corporate communication fosters strategic alignment between long-term objectives and daily practices.

As an employer, what can you do?

Several studies show that having a choice in the use of flexible working conditions is related to higher levels of job satisfaction among employees. However, in case of Covid-19, most of the times people have no choice but to work fulltime from home. To make remote working a success while cultivating maximum engagement, we recommend taking the following guidelines into account:

1. Make sure your strategic corporate communication is aligned with employees' goals and daily activities;
2. Implement effective goalsetting - feedback cycles and rituals in all layers of the organization to maintain trust and transparency;
3. Determine clear responsibilities with individuals, line managers, and HR in line with the remote working policies;
4. As a company leader, communicate your recognition to your employees on a regular and personal basis;
5. Implement a clear process for managing remote work and information, with effective use of available online tools like Trello, Slack, Zoom etc.;
6. Communicate the options and facilities available to employees for working from home comfortably;
7. Make clear communication arrangements – for instance by daily or weekly check-in;
8. Offer professional development options for employees to invest in their career advancement and keeping them enthusiastic about working for you;
9. As a leader, communicate company updates regularly and in a personal way using video calling;
10. Encourage flexible and remote working in your culture and share success stories and business benefits;
11. Measure, evaluate and improve the remote working conditions and policy, by asking employees' opinions frequently.

For more specific advice for your company's situation, contact one of BlinkLane's consulting experts.

References

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