MAKING WORK-AT-HOME WORK FOR YOUR COMPANY

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"Work-at-home" or "telecommuting" used to evoke images of people wearing their pajamas and working in front of the television. With more than 17.2 million people reporting that they work occasionally from home, this is no longer the case.

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Numerous studies have found that work-at-home employees have higher morale, increased job satisfaction and save companies money. A study from The Telework Research Network found that for each employee that works from home half of the time, a business can save $10,000. That, along with increased productivity and reduced absenteeism, provides a significant value proposition for a company. Work-at-home employees also report reduced stress and improved family life – resulting in lower job turnover.

Maybe you already have employees that work at home or maybe you are just starting to warm up to the idea. While there are widespread benefits to a telecommuting program, it also comes with its share of challenges. How can your company adjust to the new age of telecommuting? And how can you ensure success for both the employee and the business?

WHAT IS THE IDEAL WORK-AT-HOME SITUATION?

PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS

When considering someone for work-at-home opportunities, ask yourself, "Is this person independent and motivated?" Some people are motivated by the possibility of their boss dropping by at any moment. Work-at-home employees must be dependable and trustworthy, able to monitor their productivity and motivation independently, as well as able to stay organized and on top of their tasks. Other noteworthy characteristics include a low need for social interaction, excellent communication skills and comfort with technology.

WORK HISTORY

Someone who does not perform well in the office will not perform well at home. Telecommuting is a privilege. Work-at-home employees should consistently receive above average performance reviews. They should be knowledgeable about their job responsibilities and the industry in which they work, as well as demonstrate their ability to effectively and independently manage and lead projects.

JOB CHARACTERISTICS

Not all jobs can be accomplished at home. A position that requires a lot of concentration and independence is ideal, while one that requires a great deal of face-to-face interaction is best performed in the office. While it is essential that employees still meet all of their job responsibilities, also consider what the impact on the rest of the company and your clients will be.

IS A FORMAL WORK-AT-HOME POLICY NECESSARY?

It is not enough to merely identify which employees and job functions are best for work-at-home situations. A successful work-at-home program starts with an official work-at-home policy. Without a formal policy, your organization is left open to liabilities ranging from workplace injuries and discrimination lawsuits to the confidentiality of client information. This policy can be broken down into several parts:

GUIDELINES AND EXPECTATIONS

Communicate that telecommuting is a privilege that is earned, not given. With that in mind, make sure standards of selection are uniform and all requests go through the same evaluation procedure. It is important that the entire company culture, especially the executive management level, be supportive of the idea; so be open about telecommuting and address all concerns.

Before an employee begins working from home, expectations and requirements for both the employee and manager should be put in writing. Be sure to discuss short-term versus long-term objectives, as well as individual and team responsibilities. An employee who does not work in the office is still part of the team and company goals.

Standards should include hours available to managers, other employees and clients, and acceptable processes for vacation and

sick days. Expectations of when the manager will be available to the employee should also be put in place. Provide work-at-home employees with the same access to training, manuals and technology as on-site employees. Additionally, consider offering specific work-at-home training to the employee and the manager.

In order to guarantee that your work-at-home employees continue to grow within their positions and careers, set clear measurement standards and guidelines for their progress. It is especially important in work-at-home situations to evaluate employees on their performance and output, not where a project was completed or how long it took. Be sure to clearly communicate the consequences of not meeting goals and responsibilities. As a company, it is also important to monitor the ROI of your work-at-home employees.

COMMUNICATION

In the world of work-at-home, it is easy to become reliant on email. Get in the habit of discussing more complicated questions over the phone, as well as utilizing chat software such as IM. For face-to-face interaction, Skype or web conferencing can be ideal. Video conference tools are also great for team meetings. Scheduling regular meetings helps ensure ongoing communication, completion of projects, and discussion of obstacles and challenges. Try to organize face-to-face meetings at least once per year.

TECHNOLOGY

Require that your work-at-home employees have a designated office space with a laptop or desktop computer, appropriate software, printer, office supplies, high speed internet and some type of voiceover IP software. Work-at-home employees should have access to the same company software, data and files as on-site employees. A server that can be accessed remotely and, of course, access to remote technical support is ideal.

SECURITY

One of the biggest concerns companies have with employees working off-site is the security of their and their clients' data. There are many things you can do to ensure that your company data remains secure and confidential. Inform and train your work-at-home employees on regulatory and compliance concerns. Set up passwords that automatically and frequently change; and require the use of a secure server and encryption software. It may be

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necessary to restrict or prohibit personal use on work computers. For particularly confidential information, configure a computer without print capabilities. Depending on your business, initial and periodic at-home office visits may be needed.

HOW CAN YOU KEEP YOUR WORK-AT-HOME STAFF ENGAGED?

A successful program depends on your ability to keep your work-at-home employees feeling like they are "part of the team." Encourage teamwork and collaboration by mixing and varying project teams. Include work-at-home employees in on-site perks. For example, if you have an employee appreciation lunch, send work-at-home employees a gift card. Encourage employees to attend company outings and parties. If this is not cost effective, consider giving work-at-home employees the day off while on-site employees are enjoying an outing.

Career development is also integral to employee satisfaction. Establish mentors and create a career development plan with each work-at-home employee. Be sure to set dates to visit and evaluate career goals – ideally in person. Encourage employees to take advantage of local opportunities to expand their skills and knowledge. This can be in the form of continuing education classes, seminars or conferences. Webinars and online courses are also great options.

If you still are not convinced that a work-at-home program is right for your organization, implement a pilot program. It is important to remember that telecommuting and flexible schedules do not work for everyone. Be flexible and open to trial and error; and most importantly, remember that telecommuting not only benefits the employee – it benefits your business.

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