



Leading virtual teams: A collective guide of qualitative best practices for post-pandemic leadership of newly virtual teams

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Abstract

Various nations across the globe plunged into an international pandemic during the first quarter of 2020. Millions of employees across every industry were thrust into new working arrangements as businesses attempted to cope with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and shelter in place orders. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has systemically changed the workplace of most businesses. Many employees started to work from home for the first time in 2020, and as the new year unfolds that reality could be the new norm. Business leaders face the challenge of ensuring their workforce is effective, efficient, and happy through a consistent corporate culture and support. The research will focus on how organizational leaders can continue to manage remote workers by focusing on motivation, communication, and job satisfaction in the new era of Zoom. Using a collective approach, this article provides insights into ways to manage virtual teams and increase job satisfaction of virtual employees as a way for businesses to maintain the competitive advantage achieved through superior workforce. This article will attempt to integrate various themes in literature published since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic providing recommended best practices for managing newly virtual employees and teams.

Keywords: Virtual teams, job satisfaction, leadership, work environment, performance, competitive advantage.

I. Introduction

The continued development of technology and the increasing presence of high-speed internet across the globe has expanded the infrastructure available for virtual work arrangements. Zoom has become a household name, instead of a feature available on most cell phones. Online or virtual meetings are more commonly a staple of the modern work environment as organizations in nearly every industry adapt to operational behaviour in the middle of a global pandemic. These arrangements can vary significantly across industries and countries, yet the demand for virtual work, or telework, became essential during the COVID-19 pandemic. Stay-at-home orders across the world necessitated the acceleration of virtual employment opportunities, and it is reasonable to question whether the “traditional 9-to-5 job” working 40 hours a week in an office building is a trend that firms will return to. Prior to the pandemic, research demonstrated employee’s willingness and desire to work virtually, albeit in a controlled environment with organizational structure and culture that supported such relationships. This is in contrast to the expedited arrangements that many employees experienced in early 2020.

As the multidimensional approach to job performance continues to redefine itself in 2021 for millions of employees, organizational success will be tied to a better understanding of how businesses lead their employees in an expanded virtual workplace environment. Even before the pandemic, the majority of employment arrangements today had “some non-traditional feature, and more educated workers are more likely to have flexible jobs” (Mas & Pallais, 2020). This paper will attempt to integrate various themes in literature published since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic providing recommended best practices for managing newly virtual employees and teams.

II. Literature Review

As the end of the first quarter in 2020 approached, the United States went into quarantine, forcing nearly every industry to adapt in some fashion. On March 13, 2020, the federal government declared COVID-19 a national emergency, and in the weeks following the presidential proclamation, states across the nation issued various stay-at-home orders (FedReg, 2020; Moreland et al., 2020). With office buildings shuttered, many organizations quickly transitioned into the world of virtual operation. Employees were forced to rapidly adapt to a new operational order, learning new technologies and scrambling to evolve efficiently and productively in order to lessen the learning curve.

As we surpass the one-year anniversary for the pandemic declaration, business practices are still evolving as millions of employees in the US workforce adapt to their new virtual workplace.

This recent exponential growth in the utilization of virtual teams has vastly outpaced theory and research on virtual teams, leaving frontline managers and leaders without an institutional or historical knowledge to guide their treatment of newly virtual employees and team members. Before the pandemic even began, most scholars agree that managing virtual teams can come with greater challenges than managing collocated in-person teams (Davis & Bryant, 2003; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). As organizations continue to widely adopt telework as an approach to structuring virtual teams, efforts must be made to help educate and enhance the approach to leading effective virtual teams within organizations. Therefore, the following sections will provide a brief overview of the advantages of a virtual workforce in the post-pandemic world, identify common challenges that may be present with newly virtual employees, and recommend best practices aimed at leading in the new ever-changing workplace landscape as businesses adapt to a possible new normal.

Advantages of Telework

Telework can be defined as work that is performed at a location other than that of a firm or organization's main offices, building, headquarters, or any other structured facility through a means of using modern technology, including the Internet and other virtual means of communication (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017). For the purpose of this paper the term telework and virtual will be used synonymously. A virtual team is a group of individuals dispersed geographically that work together towards a common goal (Mas & Pallais, 2017).

The option to work from home is an arrangement that employees indicate they value. In a labor market study of 7,000 applicants across 68 metro locations, Mas and Pallais (2017) found that "the average worker is willing to give up 20 percent of wages to avoid a schedule set by an employer on short notice, and eight percent for the option to work from home" (p. 3722). Although the respondents of the Mas and Pallais (2017) study indicated that they did not "value choosing the number of hours they work or choosing which hours these are, applicants do value working from home," and it was telling that "the estimates suggest that almost no workers are willing to accept a lower wage for the on-site option" (p. 3742). The research presented by He et al. (2019) provides similar findings for workers in China, where evidence demonstrates that job seekers are willing to accept lower pay for flexible jobs. Clearly, modern workers value job flexibility and prefer the option to work from home at such a valuable level that they are essentially willing to pay for it in the form of accepting lower salaries. The global pandemic has accelerated this option for millions of employees in the United States alone, as telework nearly doubled from March to May 2020 (Guyot & Sawhill, 2020).

The largest perceived advantage for teleworkers, and the reason that it may be valued so greatly by employees seeking the virtual work arrangement, has been the increase of perceived job satisfaction. For the past decade there have been studies that have shown that telecommuters remain more satisfied than those employees working a majority of their work week in a traditional office setting. A survey of 2,200 Americans revealed that more than 75 percent of employees believe that telework has improved their relationships with coworkers, and 50 percent of respondents indicated that telework has improved their productivity at work (Canva, 2021). A study of 1,000 employees over the age of 18 by Robert Half during the first quarter of 2021 indicated that employees coveted their telework arrangement so much that one in three were considering looking for a new job if their employer forced them back to the office full time (Popovic, 2021).

Being away from the stressors associated with a physical workplace also has a positive impact on the perceptions of teleworkers. Fonner and Roloff (2010) found there were significant perceived positive effects in decreased work-life conflict, lower reported stress from interruptions during working hours, and a perceived positive effect due to a lack of involvement in office politics. Gajendran and Harrison (2007) found that experience matters, as those employees who had been telecommuting for at least a year reported more of a beneficial relationship regarding the work-family dynamic. Working from home can result in a "better management of the work-life boundary, lower levels of stress due to interruptions, and less exposure to self-interested and unjust behaviors" (Fonner & Roloff, 2010, p. 353). Specifically, being away from the exposure to political behavior in the workplace leads to less work-place conflict for teleworkers, thus increasing their job satisfaction with a virtual work arrangement (Fonner & Roloff, 2010).

Working from home maybe be attractive for employers as well. The lack of a structured day in the office can result in increased production from those working at home. Research done at the beginning of 2021 indicated that telework had been perceived as successful from both ends of the pyramid. Of the 1,200 individuals surveyed by consulting firm PwC, 83 percent of employers indicated that the shift to remote work had been successful for their organization, and 52 percent of employers indicated that the virtual employees demonstrated increased productivity over a prolonged work-from-home period (Caglar et al., 2021).

During the estimated 60 million hours per workday that has been saved during the pandemic, researchers estimate that 35 percent of time savings is devoted to the workers' primary jobs (Barrero, Bloom, & Davis, 2020). As of mid-September 2020, that figure approaches ten billion hours of labor put back into the workweek (Barrero et al.,

2020), a figure that out of sheer size alone has a positive impact on the efficiency of the workforce for their respective organizations. While a large number of workers have indicated they receive positive messaging and support from their employer, the sentiment is lost if employers did not address workloads (Jacobs & Warwick-Ching, 2021).

Increased productivity is not the only factor for employers to consider when evaluating whether or not to call their employees back to the office in 2021 and beyond. While working from home can be embraced and even valued highly by the employee, there is also the aspect of cost savings to consider on behalf of the employer. Research identifies that a potential employer could lower the wages of a “flexible-schedule job or a work-from-home job at 11 percent or 14 percent below the market wage of a fixed-schedule job, respectively, and still attract at least 25 percent of the applicants who would have applied to the fixed-schedule job at the higher wage” (Mas & Pallais, 2017, p. 3756). The research clearly indicated that a large percentage of employees are willing to forgo salary for a virtual work arrangement, this can lead to possible monetary savings on behalf of employers that can capitalize on continuing the telework trend in the post-pandemic society.

Challenges of Telework

While there are numerous perceived benefits to working remotely, the complexities of transitioning to telework can be daunting, especially as the pandemic continues to take a heavy emotional toll. As winter approached in 2020, 22 percent of Americans surveyed reported that their family relationships had become strained or ended because of the coronavirus (Smith, 2020). The same survey also reported that 56 percent of American respondents indicated that COVID had a negative impact on their mental health (Smith, 2020). This section details the challenges associated with telework, which prevent employers from capturing the previously discussed benefits of a remote workforce.

Consider the added social externalities of learning to work remotely in the middle of a pandemic, and the prospect of managing the relationship with employees that have recently converted to telework becomes difficult. Social isolation and the lack of in-person interactions changes the dynamics of the employer-employee relationship. Without structured interactions within the office remote employees can feel decreased levels of support and trust from their manager, which can result in an increased level of stress for the employee (Newman & Ford, 2020). Working away from the traditional office setting can also make it difficult for organizations to impart their desired culture. Traditional organizational culture centres around in-person interactions, and virtual culture needs to move beyond basic interpersonal relationships to address isolation through increased organizational support.

Working remotely is not necessarily an ideal situation for every employee, even if it is an option their employer provides. Even within the group of those currently working remotely, not everyone wants to remain out of the office. Of the 56 percent of employees that are working remotely, Gallup found that the number of people who wanted to return to in-person work actually increased from 28 percent in July 2020 to 39 percent in February 2021 (Saad & Hickman, 2021). However, the number of employees who wanted to continue working remotely because they now prefer it also increased from 37 percent to 44 percent over the same seven-month time period (Saad & Hickman, 2021).

Stress has been one of the largest perceived negative effects from telecommute. Work related stress associated with meetings, information overload, and the inability to meet goals that were not communicated clearly can be the largest sources of anxiety for teleworkers (Fonner & Roloff, 2010). Then there is the negative effect of isolation. Any perceived gains in job satisfaction should be weighed against the negative impact of diminished social interaction for individuals that value the in-person co-worker interactions (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015). There is a perceived negative correlation related to the information exchange frequency, as employees report that they sometimes feel out of the loop and a lack of reciprocal information flow. These virtual employees report that information exchange occurs “less frequently than do office-based employees, indicating that remote work may inhibit connectedness or enable employees to disconnect purposefully” (Fonner & Roloff, 2010, p. 353).

While being away from organizational politics can be a positive effect associated with telework, isolation and unfair treatment ranks high on the perceived negative list for virtual employees. A survey of 1,153 employees (Grenny & Maxfield, 2017) found that teleworkers feel left out and when they do work with others there can be challenges. The study found that 65 percent of remote employees felt that their on-site colleagues or supervisors did not fight for their priorities, 45 percent of remote workers indicated that they felt things were said behind their back, and 35 percent of teleworkers felt that their colleagues lobbied against them (Grenny & Maxfield, 2017). Whether actual or perceived, employees’ feeling about trust and support with their manager and colleagues can often dictate how efficient the job is done. Organizational commitment from talented employees is essential. Therefore, it is vital for organizational success and stability that virtual employees are included and shown appreciation.

III. Recommendations

When examining the positive and negative perceived effects of telework on job satisfaction studies over the past decade, it was important to note that the majority of literature indicates that the manager plays a significant role in the outcome (both positive and negative) of these virtual relationships. In most instances, the work-life conflict of balancing professional responsibilities and obligations at home were resolved in positive supervisory relationship dyads (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Therefore, the most important aspect of managing teleworkers can be the manager themselves. There are three best practices that appear to have the greatest impact when adapting to the challenges of virtual work that many businesses were thrust in to during the first half of 2020. These best practices include efficient communication, supportive leadership, and establishing positive workplace relationships built on mutual trust (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). The majority of remote workers indicate that the best supervisors are the ones that check in frequently and consistently, which mitigated the feeling of being isolated and alone (Grenny & Maxfield, 2017).

Communication

The first step for any form of organizational change, pandemic induced or otherwise, should be to communicate. Stress and unfair treatment were previously indicated as possible negative effects from teleworkers that now felt isolated and disconnected due to the virtual work arrangements. These can be mitigated through communication, emotional intelligence, and the generation of trust. Building relationships with employees is essential and active listening without judgement can often lead to mutual trust (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Continued transparency is imperative throughout the duration of the relationship with employees. Transparency can alleviate stress by being open and honest about the process of managing the change to virtual employment, helping reinforce the role and communicate where everyone stands, and ongoing meetings with your virtual employees reinforcing the importance of your team in achieving organizational goals. If the direction of the conversation is just one way, a manager may not be aware of the negative impact a virtual arrangement is having on employees, making the manager's active listening skills essential. Leaders should seek to "first establish and explain the new reality" in order to "establish and maintain a culture of trust" (Newman & Ford, 2020, p. 2). Cultivating employee trust in a virtual environment means structuring new interactions, working to establish the new interpersonal dynamics, and effective communication becomes the bedrock of this new virtual dynamic.

Organizational trust is established through purposeful communication, and as discussed in the next sections, communication is also integral to the leadership and relationship steps. Exemplary communication skills stemming from managers being good listeners resulted in trust, respect, and fairness for those employees working at home (Grenny & Maxfield, 2017). Trust in an organization is developed through purposeful policies and procedures that consider the unique needs of the virtual employees (Newman & Ford, 2020). Effective leaders need to learn how to embrace situational leadership, adapting their communication approach to respond to the needs of each employee more effectively. Beginning with communication, leaders must learn to listen as well as they speak. Managing virtual employees is the basic approach to daily accommodations, and leading employees involves overcoming the situational struggles of each organization as it navigates the pandemic. Leading virtual employees requires understanding emotional intelligence, catching the nuances in communication that may not be as apparent as they were during physical interactions.

In order to be a successful manager, whether it be remote or in-person, communication is essential when taking a targeted approach to building genuine relationships. The means to effectively communicate is a set of skills that are typically developed over time and through practice. Effective managers are not simply born; "it is important to remember that communication skill is not something you are born with; there are a lot of people who fail to communicate their needs, opinions and ideas to others" (Nickolayev et al., 2015, p. 163). Therefore, having employees work out of the office should not be an insurmountable hurdle, it just requires an adjustment to the management approach. The best managers are described as "are crystal clear about expectations and priorities, give meaningful feedback, hold themselves and others accountable, and make sure workers have opportunities to learn and grow" (Hickman, 2021). Communication is essential to guiding job performance and having virtual employees can create an opportunity for managers to hone their message through purposeful communication. A targeted approach to building genuine relationships in a virtual environment is recommended.

The essential component of communication within the workplace is not just talking; what is said is vastly more important than how often a conversation is held. Coaching the team is generally a more accepted and appreciated approach to leading in the workplace than the manager who communicates by dictating orders through a myriad of emails. It can take time for leaders to develop the skills necessary to coach their teams within a new dynamic, but there is "an evidence-based approach to program design and solid alignment with the organization's goals, values and language are essential foundations for the process of embedding coaching skills" (Grant & Hartley, 2013, p. 102). It is also important to remember that within any organization there is a wide spectrum of intellectual abilities and learning style preferences, so any approach to leadership should be situational in nature, customized for the individual or small group to increase chances of success.

Consider Priestley's Paradox regarding communication that states the sheer volume and quantity of communications in the workplace and our personal lives may actually have an inverse effect on the quality of our communication (Eunson, 2012). Put simply in today's terms, it is not the number of emails that are sent to employees, rather the importance of the communication lies within the message and personalization of the communication. It is also vital to consider several axioms put forth by Finnish communication scholar Osmo Wiio:

1. If communication can fail, it will.
2. If a message can be understood in different ways, it will be understood in just that way which does the most harm.
3. There is always somebody who knows better than you what you meant by your message.
4. The more communication there is, the more difficult it is for communication to succeed (Nickolayev et al., 2015, p. 162).

Leadership

Communication is just the first step to leading virtual employees beyond the status quo. The second step in leading employees that are working outside of the office involves evolving from managing employees to leading employees. This step relies on spreading and reinforcing organizational culture. The behaviour of leaders can set the tone for the development and perpetuation of organizational culture. The leaders' behaviour establishes culture through written, verbal, and physical communication. The goal of this step is to reinforce culture through values that build on the traditions set forth in the first step (communication). Supporting teleworkers as they develop during their time at home becomes essential. Effective leaders should also focus on honouring accomplishments and celebrating milestones.

The celebration component contained within this leadership step is perhaps the most vital. Remind your virtual employees of the importance of celebrating milestones, both personal and professional, to reinforce the positive relationships necessary in establishing a positive culture. Leading virtual teams can require two different approaches to leadership: functional leaders and visionary leaders (Eseryel, Crowston, & Heckman, 2020). Functional leaders reinforce and support existing operations within expected performance norms. To facilitate and nurture newly virtual teams pushed out of the office by the pandemic, managers must move beyond being a functional facilitator to becoming visionary leaders. Leaders must embrace the aforementioned communication methods, and "help other team members make sense of the world in different ways and to develop new norms of behaviour and new mental models to match changing needs" (Eseryel, Crowston, & Heckman, 2020, p. 26).

Leadership can also be spread out among employees, giving opportunities to nearly everyone who works virtually to play a role in the perpetuation of this new methodically constructive approach to culture. A shared leadership approach can start at the top of the organizational pyramid and then be dispersed throughout the organization by effective communication (step one) and collaboration. Communication is essential in the form of open dialogue with employees that can centre around job performance and potential hurdles. This can be done by asking employees for input, adjusting processes based on that input where it is feasible, and then holding employees accountable through shared responsibilities to meet organizational goals. This shared leadership approach can also allay one of the greatest fears that newest managers have when presented with the possibility of virtual employees: loss of accountability. Shared leadership presents a new dynamic that offsets the formal supervision and performance monitoring of a traditional office space. Teleworkers with a vested interest in the outcome of goals through shared leadership can also lead to more engaged employees, quickly exposing team members who are unable or unwilling to participate at an acceptable level (Newman & Ford, 2020). Shared leadership essentially shifts the responsibility for teamwork and communication to a team-based approach.

Connections & Relationships

The last component to effectively leading virtual employees is establishing and developing significant connections. Millions of employees were suddenly shifted to virtual arrangements during the pandemic as businesses learned to cope with changes in the global market. Change means uncertainty, and the leader should access all the tools available for managing change for employees that have been used successfully in the past. Virtual arrangements do not have to be a barrier for positive relationships at work. Leveraging digital tools can lead to positive connections, increased morale, and increased productivity in the workplace (Sandvik et al., 2020).

The challenge with virtual workers is that if they are out of sight, they can often be out of mind (Grenny & Maxfield, 2017). Relationships are crucial to effective leadership and having the trust of your employees can help mitigate negative aspects of the isolation associated with telework, as the successful leader works to manage the change and transition to organizational culture. This new reality represents a change and all the fears and anxieties that people feel in the face of change will be addressed by the leader. The research of Grenny and Maxwell (2017) demonstrated that sparse personal interactions with employees inhibited the development of trust and meaningful

connections with colleagues. Being outside of an established physical meeting place can lead to a breakdown in communication or knowledge sharing, which can create awkwardness or embarrassment for co-workers who are too intimidated to ask for assistance (Sandvik et al., 2020). But interactions that are both intentional and thoughtful can improve workplace relationships in virtual arrangements, embracing new technologies can possibly lead to more significant interactions with teleworkers (Sandvik et al., 2020).

In a highly virtual work environment where the opportunities for physical interaction and socialization are markedly diminished, the difference between symbolic organizational culture and pragmatic reality can be bridged through dialogue (Asatiani et al., 2021). Organizational culture is constantly evolving, and the cornerstone of any culture are the employees. Therefore, successful interaction with the employees that leverages all of the steps outlined henceforth can lead to positive organizational culture and increased efficiencies through an effective employer-employee relationship. Remote workers indicate that the best managers are the ones who prioritize the relationship, reaching out to inquire about their personal life, and celebrate both personal and professional milestones (Grenny & Maxfield, 2017). Continued transparency is vital, it will help alleviate stress by being open and honest about the process, discovering where everyone stands, and reinforcing the importance of the team in achieving organizational goals.

IV. Conclusion

With the mass adaption of a virtual approach to job performance that became prevalent in 2020, the return to a traditional work environment seems less and less likely with each passing day. However, that is not to say that the “traditional” 9-to-5 job is dead, this is hardly the case. Instead, firms must adapt to the new multidimensional approach to job performance. There will always be a need for certain employees in specific roles to have a physical presence within the workplace. Rather, this research focuses on leading the sector of the workforce that can perform their responsibilities within a virtual framework. Employees, regardless of their arrangements to work virtual or in the office, still have essential needs that include the need for ongoing feedback, transparency, clearly set goals and priorities, and opportunities for growth and advancement.

The research outlined above demonstrates that employees value flexible work arrangements at such a high level that they are willing to take a reduced salary to work within a virtual environment. The goal of this paper is to outline the best practices required to embrace and lead virtual employees and teams working in a virtual setting. A recommended three-pronged approach to managing virtual employees and virtual teams that involves communication, leadership and connection. Creating an environment in which the employee is empowered to perform at maximum efficiency is essential to firms having a competitive advantage within the marketplace. The pandemic accelerated the telework trend, and the research demonstrates that there are certainly advantages for both the employee and employer. Organizations need to focus on “initiatives promoting positive arrangements (such as telecommuting or flexible scheduling)” (Mas & Pallais, 2020, p. 26) in order to attract valuable employees, and create an organizational culture empowering these virtual employees to flourish so that the firm may reap the efficiencies associated with positive production.

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