Strategizing Flex Work

Managing the Remote Worker Experience

To ensure remote workers continue to remain engaged and productive, organizations must effectively manage the remote-worker experience. To do so, leaders should:

1. Evolve the organizational culture
2. Foster organizational community
3. Maintain work quality
4. Support physical and mental health
5. Provide feedback and appreciation

① Evolve the Organizational Culture

- Facilitate a mindset shift from a culture that supports flex work to a culture that treats flex work as normal.
- Leader role modeling — where leaders and managers at all levels understand and demonstrate organizational values…this not only mitigates undesirable behaviors but also improves employee engagement and performance.

② Foster Organizational Community

Create a sense of community that supports collaboration between remote and non-remote workers. Four key segments make up a remote worker's community:

Managers

- Be a "connector." Give targeted feedback in their own areas of expertise or "connect" employees with others on the team or elsewhere in the organization who are better suited to the task. Remote workers who might not know their peers as well as their office-going counterparts will find this technique extremely valuable.
- Keep remote employees in the loop on all team communications, even if they don't concern them.
- Regularly highlight remote workers' positives instead of constantly calling out their flaws. While fully remote and never-remote employees receive comparable performance evaluation ratings, research shows employees working fully remote are twice as likely to receive corrective feedback. Remote workers, who may already battle feelings of not measuring up to the team, appreciate managers who invest the time and effort to build them up.

Team Members

- Ensure team members connect regularly (both formally and informally).
- Encourage everyone on the team to know each other's areas of expertise and who they can reach out to for advice… work-related or otherwise.

Peers

- Encourage peers to set up informal conversations with remote workers they don't know (or) those on other teams.
- Consider giving small projects to teams of two and step back to see what they produce together while you provide advice but not control.

Maintain Work Quality

Despite having higher levels of productivity overall, remote workers are at risk of experiencing more pronounced spikes and drops in productivity compared to non-remote workers. This pattern can likely be attributed to the combined effects of the unpredictable nature of working remotely and workflow designs that may not be sufficiently flexible. For instance, remote workers who have to take care of family members might want to start work later in the day, but because everyone else in the office works fixed hours, they can't flex their schedules. As a result, their productivity drops because they cannot fully concentrate on work. To compensate, remote workers tend to work longer hours on days when they have no additional responsibilities, which in turn causes productivity spikes. Neither working while distracted or working overtime are ideal and both situations can result in less-than-optimal work quality.

To prevent this pattern of overwork and underutilization, managers should ensure remote workers receive a steady stream of work (on par with that of their office-based colleagues). Allowing remote workers the freedom to create their own schedules and timelines can also help them better manage their work days and project timelines. In fact, a 2019 Gartner survey indicated the percentage of remote employees seeking self-directed work is 41% higher than those who never work remotely.

Leaders and managers should overcome their fear of remote workers not being as responsive or effective as office-based workers and offer remote workers the same opportunity for additional responsibilities as their office-based peers. Managers should also set ground rules for what "normal work" and "emergency stretches" look like to prevent remote worker burnout.

Another often overlooked aspect of remote work and work quality is employees' work environment. Workplace design, lighting, noise conditions and air quality can make or break employee performance and productivity. Consequently, organizations must ensure their remote workers have the best work environment possible by making foundational investments in tools and technology that help them actively collaborate with other team members.

(4) **Support Physical and Mental Health**

The lines between work and life are often blurred for remote workers because their homes often double as office spaces. As a result, remote workers may struggle to "switch off" from work. The lack of travel, limited movement and fixed schedules also take a toll on the body of a remote worker. In fact, one of the major downsides of remote work is wellness-related.

- Encourage healthy behaviors, bodies and minds through Healthy UC Davis activities and resources.
- Allow for flex-time to provide some autonomy in managing work-life conflict.
- Encourage use of ASAP and OMBUDS resources
- Practical and easy solutions include setting remote-friendly meeting schedules, limiting virtual meetings to 30-45 minutes and using the delayed send option when sending emails to remote workers outside their scheduled work hours.

(5) **Provide feedback and appreciation**

Keep all feedback constructive and specific. Not all feedback can be positive, but it's important to note that negative feedback has a much bigger impact on any worker. As managers, we tend to be busy and often don't take the time to reach out until there's a problem. However, this type of intermittent and negatively-weighted communication will leave remote workers frustrated and less productive.

When you're providing negative feedback to remote workers, use the sandwich method. Start with a positive, then give the negative, and then end with another positive. The key is to not end the conversation with the worker dwelling on the negative.

For every one "negative" aim for 10 positives. Think of ways this particular employee makes your life easier and communicate that appreciation. Point out and focus on their individual strengths and provide gratitude for what they bring to the team as well as what the bring to their work... the more specific the better. This enables them to shine and know where you want them to focus.