



Managing a Remote Workforce

Resources for Managing a Virtual Workforce

Given the cost-savings and flexibility of employing remote workers, virtual teams are guaranteed to be a feature of the business landscape for years to come. Still, that doesn't make it any easier on those who must manage a team of employees spread out across a state, country or even the globe. Working outside the office presents a special set of challenges, as well. Your GuidanceResources Employee Assistance Program understands this and is available to help you and your employees, at work and at home, to be happier and more productive. This resource guide explains how the EAP can assist with supervising and being a part of a virtual team and offers HelpSheetsSM, flyers and posters of varying length to help those involved understand and work through their challenges.

Resources Available Through Your ComPsych® GuidanceResources Program

Your GuidanceResources program has been designed to give you and your colleagues simple, fast, direct access to confidential services 24 hours a day, seven days a week by phone, online or via our mobile site. To help you better understand how your Employee Assistance Program works, below is an overview of typical services offered by an EAP.

Confidential Counseling

Life can be stressful. The EAP offers relief with short-term counseling services for employees and their dependents to help them handle concerns constructively, before they become issues. They can call anytime about marital, relationship and family problems; stress, anxiety and depression; grief and loss; job pressures or substance abuse. Their call will be answered by our highly trained GuidanceConsultantsSM, clinicians who will listen to their concerns and guide them to the resources they need.

Work-Life Solutions

Too much to do, and too little time to get it all done? Work-life specialists at ComPsych do the research and provide qualified referrals and customized resources for child and elder care, moving, pet care, college planning, home repair, buying a car, planning an event, selling a house and more.

Legal Support

With GuidanceResources, your employees have an attorney on call. They can speak with an expert about divorce, custody, adoption, real estate, debt and bankruptcy, landlord/tenant issues, civil and criminal actions and other legal issues. If they require representation, they can be referred to a qualified attorney for a free 30-minute consultation and will be given a 25 percent reduction in customary legal fees thereafter.

Financial Information

Everyone has financial questions. With GuidanceResources, your employees can get answers about budgeting, debt management, tax issues and other money concerns from on-staff CPAs, Certified Financial Planners® and other financial experts, simply by calling the toll-free number.

GuidanceResources® Online

Guidanceresources.com and the mobile app, GuidanceNowSM, allow anytime, anywhere access to expert information on thousands of topics, including relationships, work, school, children, wellness, legal, financial and free time. They can search for qualified child and elder care, attorneys and financial planners, as well as ask questions, take self-assessments and more.

How the GuidanceResources Program Can Help

Work-Life Balance

- Moving and relocation resources
- Support groups and community resources
- Child or elder care arrangements
- Finding pet sitters or groomers
- Education and professional training resources

Financial Issues

- Credit card debt and liability
- Identity theft
- Retirement planning
- Income tax questions
- Budgeting help
- Insurance issues

Legal Concerns

- Landlord-tenant issues
- Divorce and separation
- Wills and estate planning
- Criminal and civil issues
- Bankruptcy filing

Encouraging a Healthier, Happier, Better-educated Workforce

Your EAP is more than a response to crises or personal issues. It is a tool to promote a healthier, more productive and more cohesive workforce. As such, we regularly provide educational materials on thousands of health, well-being and life topics. These materials, along with the GuidanceResources Online website and GuidanceNow mobile site, are designed to encourage easy distribution.

The following materials are examples of what is provided and can be used to educate and inform your colleagues. New materials are produced regularly, so talk with your internal benefits manager about what else may be available to you.

For more resources and tools, access the Working from Home/Remote Resource Guide on guidanceresources.com at www.guidanceresources.com/groWeb/s/alert.xhtml?nodeId=813872.

Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.

Resources for Managers

HelpSheets

- Managing Virtual Teams
- How to Provide Effective Feedback
- How Can I Improve My Communication Skills?

Managing Virtual Teams

As much as managers may hate to admit it, virtual teams are a permanent feature of the business landscape. Last decade's financial meltdown and the recent spate of blizzards and hurricanes, which shut many East Coast offices for days, have served only to reinforce the cost-savings and flexibility of remote employees. Still, that doesn't make it any easier on those who must manage a team of employees spread out across a state, country or even the globe.

In a recent survey, 61 percent of managers of virtual employees reported having misinterpreted co-workers through email, according to the Mobile Work Exchange, a public-private partnership that supports telework efforts. Another 32 percent rated face-to-face contact as the No. 1 telework communication challenge. But communication issues are only the start of the headache. Add in technological glitches, the lack of face-to-face interaction and a reduced amount of control over the people and work you manage and you have a recipe for a daily migraine.

There are positives, however, to managing virtual employees. They tend to be less stressed, more satisfied and more flexible than office-based employees, according to several studies. They also may be more talented, due to the fact that without geographical limits, the pool of job candidates can be considerably wider. With those benefits in mind, here are some tips from business management experts on how to organize and direct virtual teams:

Get them off to a good start. As much as possible, ensure virtual employees have access to the communication tools, software and bandwidth needed to get the job done. Nothing halts workflow or creates frustration faster than lacking the proper tools. Also, work with your employees to ensure that the space they have created for themselves at home or wherever else they may be is suitable. A comfortable, quiet place, clear of distractions and separate from living or family space is important to foster the concentration needed to focus on work.

Make it simple and clear. Set clear, easily understood expectations for your employees. In an office, norms are reinforced via company culture and peer pressure. Those cues do not exist for virtual employees. That makes it imperative that managers express as clearly and thoroughly as possible their expectations for:

- Deadlines and goals
- Team interaction
- Managing conflict
- Electronic etiquette
- Definition of roles
- Evaluation of progress
- Rules for communicating, whether via phone, email or online conference

"While co-located teams often benefit most from a leader who acts as a facilitator, virtual teams need a manager who provides clearly-defined direction and removes all ambiguity from the process," writes Erin Meyer, an adjunct professor of organizational behavior at the French business school INSEAD.

Over-communicate to avoid misunderstandings. Without daily personal interaction, it can be difficult for managers to establish a rapport with employees. Email and online chat are great tools, but remember that they can lead to misunderstandings. Reach out to your employees often and talk with them one-on-one or in a group as much as possible. Encourage them to do the same with their co-workers. Verbal clues to meaning and personality are much more apparent in conversation than in written communication.

Foster a team atmosphere. A chief complaint of virtual teams is the lack of rapport with and trust in their teammates. You can blame this on the absence of an office canteen and water cooler. Casual workday interactions can be vital to team-building, problem-solving and innovation. To give virtual teams similar opportunities, managers need to create virtual canteens. Skype, team chat rooms and especially group teleconferencing services like GoToMeeting are ideal substitutes. Be sure when gathering in these spaces that the atmosphere is casual enough to allow for the free flow of information, whether the chat is about sports, the latest TV shows or the work at hand.

Get it together. No matter how competent a manager of offsite employees you are, or how satisfied those employees may be with their work, you need to meet face-to-face from time to time. This is especially true when managing virtual teams. If possible, find a time, such as a project kickoff, to bring everyone into the office. Better yet, set up a lunch or dinner to give everyone a chance to interact socially. The personal connections that result will help smooth over the inevitable conflicts that arise on any project.

Build a rhythm. Offices function on monthly, quarterly or annual cycles, allowing employees to gauge the pace of their work and to set meaningful deadlines. Create the same rhythms for your team, scheduling online and face-to-face meetings, deadlines and updates from management at regular intervals.

Empower your team. Give virtual employees the autonomy to do what they think needs to get done and the information they need to know what that is. Help them “understand the larger organizational picture and how the team is aligned with the strategy of the organization,” advises Martha Maznevski, a professor at IMB, a prestigious Switzerland-based business school, in a recent article. Also, post profiles of team members on an online directory so that everyone understands each other’s area of expertise and how they each fit into the organization as a whole.

Manage outcomes, not day-to-day activities. Use goals to focus and direct employee behavior towards achieving specific outcomes,” writes Megan Arens, a human resources consultant with the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, on the Mobile Work Exchange website. “This approach will help employees stay on task when teleworking, and will help teleworkers avoid being distracted in their home office environments.” She adds that it also helps ensure supervisors don’t fall into the “out of sight, out of mind” trap: overlooking remote employees for developmental or advancement opportunities.

Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.

How to Provide Effective Feedback

Providing effective feedback is essential when dealing with virtual teams. So whether you are supervising a large team or simply guiding a single work-from-home employee, knowing how to provide effective and helpful feedback is important. Useful, well-presented feedback helps others to improve and grow professionally.

Before Providing Feedback

It is important to understand exactly what the term feedback means before giving anyone feedback. Feedback refers to any information regarding an individual's efforts and progress toward reaching a certain goal. Effective feedback is clear, reasonable and accepted by the recipient. Keep this in mind as you plan out the feedback you will give someone.

Timing

Remember that you should give someone feedback at an appropriate time when it will be well-received and understood. Consider the following tips:

- Give feedback in a timely fashion. Waiting too long to address the individual's behavior or performance during a certain instance will make what you have to say less important and helpful to the receiver.
- Refrain from addressing very old instances unless you are discussing a pattern in the individual's behavior.
- Avoid bringing up negative feedback at a time when the individual is extremely overwhelmed by work or personal problems. Doing so may further distress him or her.
- Maintain privacy by providing feedback to the individual when he or she is alone.

Content

Ensure that the content of your feedback is as valuable and helpful as possible by following these guidelines:

- Be specific. Refer to certain instances and suggest steps the individual can take to improve.
- Be clear. Provide a thorough explanation for the feedback and encourage the individual to ask questions if they do not understand.
- Be realistic. Comment on the individual's behavior, performance and skills rather than his or her personality traits which cannot be changed.

Presentation

Having good content is only half of the feedback process. Along with content, you should also consider the way in which you present your feedback. Consider the following tips:

- Be gentle and sensitive. If the feedback is negative, avoid sounding angry and remain calm. In addition, do not make the individual feel like he or she is in competition with anyone else.
- Use "I" and "you" statements rather than third-person pronouns. This allows you to have a more direct and open discussion. Using third-person pronouns can cause your feedback to sound vague and impersonal.
- If speaking in person or on video feed, make sure that your verbal statements and nonverbal actions are congruent. Nonverbal actions include eye contact, head nodding and shaking, hand gestures, and any other movements. Avoid fidgeting and hold strong eye contact, as this will prevent the individual from getting distracted while you speak.
- If speaking over the phone, make an extra effort to be as clear as possible, given that you cannot convey meaning through nonverbal cues as you would normally.
- Avoid overwhelming the individual with feedback, especially if your comments are mostly negative. If you have a lot of items to address, choose the most relevant and time-sensitive ones and bring the rest up at a later time.

After Providing Feedback

After you have communicated the feedback, your task is not over just yet. Close off your discussion by doing the following:

- Direct the individual to any other resources which may help him or her to further understand your feedback and improve their work or behavior.
- Encourage him or her to reflect on your conversation.
- Remind him or her that you are always available to answer any questions.
- Remember that providing feedback should be an ongoing activity. The more consistent your feedback is, the more prepared the individual will be to receive and absorb it.

Resources

- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development: www.ascd.org

How can I improve my communication skills?

People have conversations every day. Sometimes these conversations are about the big issues of race, religion, gender and politics. But more often than not, they are about common everyday concerns.

At work, conversations involving feedback regarding performance issues are difficult for both managers and employees. In families, conversations about disciplining children and sharing of household chores are often difficult.

Neighbors get into damaging arguments about dogs, noise and parking problems. Most people wish they could avoid conversations about money with their spouse, children, parents and siblings.

You may put these conversations off for as long as you can because you know they are likely to involve a heated argument, blame, accusations or end up in an emotional outburst of tears or anger.

You might think that you would make a fool of yourself, damage a relationship, or make it impossible to have a positive relationship with the individual in the future. At the same time, you probably realize that swinging from a stony silence into an emotional rage is not good in any relationship.

Start to improve your communication skills by recognizing four of the most common mistakes you are likely to make that will make communication difficult:

- **You talk too much.** When you talk about something that is sensitive, personal and difficult, you may talk around the subject, avoid being specific, try to be polite and hope the other person will somehow understand what you want to say. Think about what you need to say, and then choose the simplest way of saying it. The fewer words you use to open a conversation and explain the problem as you see it, the easier the conversation will proceed.
- **You think you know everything.** When you feel strongly about something, you are usually convinced that you have all the facts available to you. You are also quite sure that you are right. Thus, when you initiate the conversation, you primarily want the other person to agree with you. However, the reality is that no one ever knows all the facts and you are not always right. Start your conversations by being willing to listen and consider other viewpoints.
- **You blame everyone except yourself.** It is tempting to see every problem as being someone else's fault. If the other person always performed to your standards or rules, then there would be no problems. The fact is that if you are a part of the situation, you are in some way also a part of the problem. Are you sure you made your ideas clear? Did you clarify priorities? Did you set clear standards? Did you get commitment to accept those standards? You need to remember that you may be equally a part of the problem, just as anyone else is.
- **You go straight to action.** It is tempting to offer an immediate solution to the problem, so you can end the conversation abruptly. Avoid this temptation and slow down. Open yourself up to listen to all points of view and acknowledge the other person (or people) involved so they know that their opinions have been heard and considered. If you push too quickly for your own solution, it is likely that others will not be committed to the outcome. You will think you have solved the problem only to find that nothing changed and that you have not resolved the situation.

If you can avoid these four mistakes, you will find that your communication skills will improve noticeably.

Resources

- The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): www.nimh.nih.gov
- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): www.samhsa.gov