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# “Work from Home” a Credible Alternative?

The traditional five-day, 40-hour workweek has long been regarded as the “standard” for operational efficiency and consistency. However, the advancement of technology in the workplace has provided the opportunity for scheduling flexibility and “work from home” options. Consequently, employers must now weigh the merits of a flexible workplace environment.

As a Human Resources and Employment Law firm, we work with various employers with mindsets ranging from traditional to progressive as we explore new trends and find creative solutions that fit their workplace. Here is what we are hearing and seeing.

## The Research

According to a survey by Gallup, 43 per cent of employees now work remotely at least some of the time, and 20 per cent work remotely all the time.<sup>1</sup> The option to work from home is highly valued by staff, 34 per cent willing to go as far as taking a 5 per cent pay cut to be able to work remotely.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, employers who provide this alternative gain a significant competitive advantage.

Remote work options enhance the organization’s image as an accommodating workplace, attracting top global talent and contributing to the retention of valued employees. In fact, resignations drop by 50 per cent when employees are allowed to work from home.<sup>3</sup> Remote work options are also good for the bottom line. A Global Workplace Analytics report found that organizations can reduce their costs by an average of \$11,000 annually per person by permitting employees to work from home even half of the time.<sup>4</sup>

## Common Employer Concerns

The question remains about why employers still push back on remote work options. The common concerns we hear from our clients are as follows.

- ▶ **Productivity issues:** Employers are concerned that, without direct supervision, employees will not be productive. What if they use their new-found freedom to “slack off”?

In reality, remote workers tend to be more productive. A two-year Stanford study found that remote workers were 13 per cent more productive than those working in the office, as they are more likely to work their allotted hours and have fewer distractions.<sup>5</sup> In short, people know when and where they work best, and providing the freedom to choose increases productivity.

- ▶ **Isolation and disengagement:** Another major concern is that remote workers will feel isolated, disconnected from their team and ultimately disengaged from their work. This can be an expensive issue, as each actively disengaged employee costs their organization approximately 34 per cent of their salary.<sup>6</sup>

Missing out on casual conversations with colleagues, connection to organizational culture and work-related events can pose a challenge for engaging remote workers. However, we have found that employees can be engaged at a distance through frequent and consistent communication using a variety of tools, active inclusion efforts and opportunities for relationship building with colleagues. We recommend the use of engagement

surveys to keep a pulse on how engaged your team is feeling and make the process your own based on your team's unique needs.

- ▶ **Privacy and security issues:** Some employers are concerned that allowing employees to work remotely means that data is being shared online, additional software is being utilized and devices with confidential data are being stored outside of the office. They are worried that these practices expose online vulnerabilities and additional security concerns.

Organizations with remote workers can address this concern by establishing a cybersecurity policy that outlines all protocols for working remotely and provide security awareness training to employees.

- ▶ **Employees not unplugging:** We value that employees need balance between work and personal life. According to Buffer's annual report, *The State of Remote Work*, the biggest challenge remote workers identified was unplugging after work.<sup>7</sup> When an employee has 24/7 access to work, it can be difficult to set boundaries and they are more likely to experience burnout. Employers will be left with less productive workers and increased absenteeism.

Emphasizing the importance of unplugging after work and discouraging overworking will allow employees to achieve work-life synergy.

Taking the time to establish the details of the remote work arrangements prior to implementation will prepare your organization to navigate and overcome the common challenges listed above.

## Best Practices

Once the decision has been made to implement remote work arrangements, we suggest a number of best practices, as outlined below.

- ▶ **Starting the switch to remote work:** It is essential to ensure your organization has clear job descriptions to identify which positions are remote friendly. Consider piloting remote work practices, perhaps within a single department, and solicit feedback from your employees to assess what is working for your organization. Start the conversation early regarding the upcoming changes and ensure your messaging is consistent across the organization.

- ▶ **Establishing the right policies:** It is essential to align policies with your organization's culture and needs. Consider including policies such as hours and scheduling, internet usage, workplace requirements for remote work eligibility, communication processes, and security and confidentiality. Given that it is the employer's responsibility to create a respectful workplace, a cyberbullying policy outlining unacceptable online behaviour, and the consequences for those who engage in it, is necessary. It is essential that employees read and sign the employee handbook to demonstrate their understanding and commitment to the policies within it.

- ▶ **Leveraging the right technology:** One of the biggest challenge's remote workers report, especially in hybrid workplaces, is IT issues during meetings.<sup>8</sup> It is important to leverage the right technology to set your employees up for success, and in our digital world, there are many tools available to facilitate this. Some of the most useful tools for online group collaboration include video calling, instant messaging, screen sharing and project management systems. HR software and performance management systems are also available with employee self-service features that can make managing the employee-employer relationship simple.

As technology methods are chosen, it is essential to build a communication strategy that outlines the appropriate use for each tool and sets expectations for the frequency and timeliness of communications.

- ▶ **Getting manager buy-in:** One of the top contributors to the success of remote work arrangements is manager buy-in. An employee's manager accounts for up to 70 per cent of the variance in employee engagement scores and we know engagement is linked to productivity.<sup>9</sup> Managers need to be willing to adapt their leadership style to support remote workers, learn and use new technology, and take the initiative to make the experience positive for their team. Both managers and remote workers have a shared responsibility to be involved, responsive and committed to making the experience work.

- ▶ **Ensuring clear and consistent performance management:** It is commonly thought that the employee sitting at their desk the longest is the most productive. However, does it really matter where or when employees get the work done if the end results are the same?

The success of remote work arrangements hinges on the emphasis of output. Instead of asking employees to prove how they are spending their time, consider using various project management tools to track progress on projects and output of tangible work. Performance evaluations should be aligned with the employee's ability to produce results. Ensure the expectations are measurable and the process is clear so that employees are confident that success is achievable. Regular check-ins and feedback from the manager also help keep everyone on track. If performance does begin to derail, do not assume that it is because they are working remotely. Similar to in-office workers, take the time to find out the root cause of the challenges the employee is facing.

The number of people telecommuting has increased 173 per cent since 2005<sup>10</sup> and the popularity of remote work is not slowing down. Upwork predicts that by 2028, 73 per cent of all teams will have remote workers.<sup>11</sup> With an up-and-coming generation of workers looking for this flexibility, offering remote work is a competitive advantage that will help your organization attract and retain top talent.

If your organization is thinking about implementing remote work arrangements, understand that the road can be challenging, but with the right tools and support, it can also be a great success. ■

*Julie Ruben Rodney is Founder and CEO of MaxPeople ([maxpeoplehr.com](http://maxpeoplehr.com)). As an HR and Employment Law firm, MaxPeople helps clients ensure their people are happier, healthier and more productive in life and in work. Contact them to find out how they can help build your HR framework and implement remote work arrangements in your organization.*

<sup>7</sup><https://www.gallup.com/workplace/238085/state-american-workplace-report-2017.aspx>

<sup>8</sup><https://www.owllabs.com/state-of-remote-work/2019>

<sup>9</sup><https://tedx.stanford.edu/lineup/nicholas-bloom>

<sup>10</sup><https://globalworkplaceanalytics.com/telecommuting-statistics>

<sup>11</sup><https://tedx.stanford.edu/lineup/nicholas-bloom>

<sup>6</sup><https://learning.linkedin.com/blog/engaging-your-workforce/how-to-calculate-the-cost-of-employee-disengagement>

<sup>7</sup><https://buffer.com/state-of-remote-work-2019>

<sup>8</sup><https://www.owllabs.com/state-of-remote-work/2019>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.gallup.com/workplace/263510/manage-remote-employees.aspx>

<sup>10</sup><https://globalworkplaceanalytics.com/telecommuting-statistics>

<sup>11</sup><https://www.upwork.com/press/2019/03/05/third-annual-future-workforce-report/>