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Six Steps to Building a Successful Virtual Workforce

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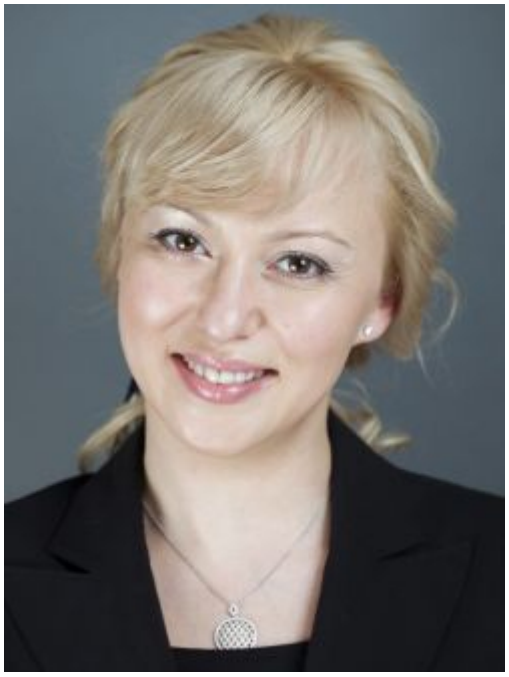

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The workplace is going virtual. In ManpowerGroup's latest poll, while less than a quarter of employers are not conducting work virtually, over 40% will be doing more and more of it soon.

Virtual work presents organizations and their workforces with new and exciting ways of getting work done and meeting business goals. When carefully managed, the virtual workplace offers real benefits, from greater freedom and flexibility to lower costs and higher productivity.

Working Virtually — Why It Makes Sense

Reduce costs. Virtual work offers organizations manifold advantages, beginning with simple costs. Enabling employees to work virtually reduces the need to acquire additional office space and equipment. The more employees work off-site, the more organizations are likely to save.

Increase engagement and productivity. Cost containment and reduction is not the only reason, nor even the principal one, for preferring virtual work. The essential point is that working virtually means working differently and requires a unique set of skills and competencies. Working outside the traditional office offers employees greater freedom and, inevitably, greater responsibility. They have to be able to self-manage. They have to develop the self-reliance to overcome obstacles, the confidence to solve problems, the self-discipline to ensure that work gets done on time and the commitment to contribute at a high level.

Attract and retain valuable talent. According to ManpowerGroup research, employees are increasingly seeking greater flexibility in their terms of work. By offering options for working virtually, an organization will be better able to attract and retain highly talented people who

place a premium on flexibility. They are also liberated from the constraints of geography: They can work where they are needed, but live where they like. The organization, meanwhile, is equally empowered. It can now recruit valuable talent wherever that talent resides.

Encourage creativity and innovation. In a fully virtual work environment, the workforce is borderless. Geographic restrictions on who can work together in teams or what stretch assignments an individual can accept no longer apply. Creativity and innovation have a much better chance of thriving when organizations not only build teams by leveraging their entire global talent pool, but also develop talent by exposing individuals to a global range of challenges and perspectives.

Build a more responsive organization. In the virtual workplace, work is no longer confined to traditional time periods. Employees, who themselves value the flexibility of working virtually, are more willing and able to work or make themselves available outside of office hours. Organizations are better able to respond to fast-changing developments and coordinate work among business units in different time zones.

Reaping the rewards and overcoming the challenges of the virtual workplace requires careful planning. There are a number of steps that organizations can take to ensure success.

1. Assess. Assessing the suitability of existing and prospective employees for working virtually is essential. Nothing sinks a virtual team faster than weak links who can't or won't contribute responsibly. Assessment can be used to identify gaps in skills and behaviors that might impede team success. Training and development can then be offered to strengthen adaptability, autonomy, decisiveness, dependability, stress tolerance and resourcefulness — in short, the qualities of a successful virtual worker.

2. Evaluate the work environment. Your team may no longer occupy an actual office, but your responsibility to ensure that individuals have the space and the tools to thrive remains. Make sure that your people have the right technology to support virtual work and that they work in secure environments with minimal distractions.

3. Focus on leadership. No virtual team can succeed without sound leadership, and no virtual leader can succeed without enhanced capabilities addressing the specific needs of the virtual team. To thrive in a virtual environment, they must either develop or already possess advanced communication skills. The special behaviors or traits a virtual leader must cultivate include a tolerance of ambiguity, a tolerance for change and a willingness to lead in a more extroverted way than in a traditional workplace setting. Virtual leaders need to reach out and connect with people. They simply cannot afford to be reserved and aloof.

4. Give it structure. With its emphasis on results, along with high levels of accountability and less social interaction, working in a virtual environment can often be more difficult than working in a traditional environment. In the virtual workplace, therefore, providing strong structural support is even more important for keeping the team on track. At a minimum, expectations have to be even more clearly defined, check-ins more frequent and team meetings more regular.

5. Stay connected. Leveraging the full array of communications technology is essential to ensuring that the team builds cohesion and the individual avoids isolation. Instant

messaging and wikis, for example, can be useful ways for team members to share thoughts informally. Similarly, "webinars" on topics outside the immediate work stream of team members but related to their professional development can help stimulate inter-team thought, discussion and creativity.

6. Don't overdo it. Just as working virtually can support a better work-life balance, it can also upset a healthy work-life balance. The very technology that enables virtual work can also be used by the organization or by individuals themselves to create a relentless 24/7 work culture — with inevitably unfortunate consequences for engagement, productivity and retention. Organizations and leaders must ensure that technology serves as an enabler, not as a collar.

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