

How to Manage Employees in Remote Locations

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Thanks to technology and globalization, more and more business teams are working together across state lines and international borders. Many corporations employ “dispersed teams,” where a manager in New York may communicate daily with colleagues in Boston, Los Angeles, and Singapore.

But even with an array of new Web-based collaboration tools at their disposal, most managers find handling remote teams extremely challenging. In order to get the best out of your far-flung employees, you need to establish a clear communication routine, take extra steps to build trust, and review processes often to make sure they’re working for everyone. Whether your employees are in other company offices, working from home, or a little bit of both, these tips will help keep your team running smoothly.

Things you will need:

- **Travel budget:** Plan to see employees at least a few times a year. **Technology budget:** Don’t fall for every fad, but plan to add new tools as they gain traction.
- Set aside time for regular travel, update calls, and to be available for people in different time zones.
- **Technology:** Research the technologies that best connect people for the types of work they do. See [Ten Tools for Remote Teams](#) for ideas.
- **Routine:** Consistency in your work process — quarterly gatherings, weekly phone meetings — provides structure and prevents gaps in communication.
- **Drive:** Members of dispersed teams need to work well on their own. Their managers need to sustain the group’s energy, be available at odd hours, travel a lot, and initiate communication.
- **Chatter:** It gets a bad rap, but chit-chat builds a team. Let remote employees in on tidbits like promotions, births and weddings, and inside jokes.

step 1

Build a Strong Team, Starting with You

Goal: Make sure you’re up for the task of managing remotely.

Managers who run dispersed teams successfully share several traits. They work a lot, they travel — some more than half the time — and they thrive on their work and the culture they’ve created. “Remote managers need more energy, because a lot of what you have to do is transfer that energy to your team,” says Juliana Slye, who manages remote employees as director of the government division at software maker Autodesk, based in San Rafael, California. The successful remote manager has the following traits:

Passion. A remote set-up won't work unless your employees are motivated and running in sync — collaborating, asking each other for help, sharing ideas. That energy has to start with you. You don't need to start each day smiling from ear to ear, but if you're annoyed every time an IM breaks your train of thought or you're not good about remembering to check in with people, running remote teams probably isn't for you.

Availability. Good remote communication requires extra effort. You need to go out of your way to address issues that would come up naturally and spontaneously if you all worked in one place. When your staff is spread across a number of time zones, they need to feel comfortable calling you at odd hours — even if it's dinner hour. Beyond the guidance or answers you can provide, which allows them to move forward with their work, your availability shows support, which helps strengthen your relationships with everyone. That said, establish reasonable guidelines about when to call.

Patience. A two-hour dinner with an employee across the country may take up two days with travel time. And it may take two hours instead of 10 minutes to schedule a conference call. The lesson here? Budget extra time for common group tasks. This doesn't necessarily hurt productivity. For instance, conference calls are usually shorter and more to the point than a meeting in person, where members of the group are bound to do more small talk.

Reliability. By doing what you say you'll do — whether it's helping solve a problem or sending a new laptop — you foster trust. Your reliability shows respect for what your workers are doing. Without that, they'll quit asking for help, and you'll fall out of the loop. "Trust is particularly important in distance relationships," says management consultant Debra Dinnocenzo, author of "How to Lead from a Distance." "You build trust through actions that demonstrate reliability, integrity, and familiarity."

Checklist

Five Ways to Build Trust

Asked how he makes sure his team is keeping him in the loop, remote manager Dan Belmont, chief marketing officer of the Marketing Arm, a Dallas-based agency that promotes sports and entertainment events, says he makes himself part of their "network" by working beside them. "If you're in the trenches doing the work," he says, "you're not just perceived as someone who is managing people and processes." Belmont makes himself available to brainstorm or solve problems and typically spends an hour a week on the phone with each of his 14 employees.

Here are more ways to build trust:

1. Be available. Don't let employee calls go to voicemail. When you absolutely can't be reached, reply ASAP.
2. Beware of using sarcasm and teasing in distance interactions, like email and conference calls, where signals can easily get crossed.
3. Handle sensitive issues with discretion. One team member might tell Belmont that another is having a bad day. He'll immediately call the person having the bad day, without exposing the colleague who told him.

4. Communicate in a variety of ways (email, phone, in person, etc) and often.
5. Visit employees on their turf. It shows respect for their time and interest in their life outside the job.



step 2

Gather the Right People

Goal: Build a team that can work well at a distance.

A dispersed team depends on people who can be productive without a boss roaming the hallways or a trusted co-worker sitting nearby. Team members should be motivated, disciplined, and flexible with their time, allowing them to connect with clients or co-workers in different time zones. “People who like to quit at 5 p.m. aren’t the people who work well remotely,” says Michelle LaBrosse, CEO of Cheetah Learning, a project-management training company based in Carson City, Nevada. They also need to communicate clearly in writing (since e-mail and instant messaging are the new standard for daily communication) and should be willing to suggest ideas, ask for and offer help, make decisions, and collaborate.

Below are a few suggestions for setting up a remote work arrangement. For more tips, see [Hiring and Inspiring a Dispersed Team](#).

Match people to the work. Extroverts and idea people tend to like tasks that require frequent and ongoing communication. Make sure they’re in an office with teammates they can collaborate with. Introverts and people confident making decisions can work more easily at home or on solo projects.

Match work to the time zone. If some employees are working while others sleep, try to avoid assigning work that leaves team members perpetually in the hurry-up-and-wait cycle, as their counterparts half a world away complete their part of a project.

Assign backups. For the most critical tasks, make sure you or someone else in your group can fill in on a moment’s notice, like when someone is ill or quits. (And make sure you can access a remote worker’s files and contacts from afar.)

Sign an agreement. Specify when and how much a person may need to work, times they need to be available, performance objectives, and frequency of in-person meetings. This codifies expectations and provides something tangible for your employee to refer back to.

Assess. At least a few times a year, ask what’s working and what’s not, then make changes if necessary. Withdrawal is a common sign of a problem. Even if a person is meeting deadlines and producing quality work, they may be unhappy if you hear from them less and less.

Big Idea

Connecting the Dots

After studying dozens of virtual teams, including groups at BP, Nokia, and Ogilvy & Mather, researchers at the London Business School recommend the following:

Recruit volunteers. Look within the company for volunteers to lead a new committee or research a new opportunity, rather than just assigning such tasks. “Virtual teams appear to thrive when they include volunteers with valuable skills — people whose proof of commitment is their willingness to join the team on their own,” writes Lynda Gratton, a professor of management with the school, in a 2007 Wall Street Journal article.

Add “boundary spanners” to each virtual team. “Boundary spanners are people who, as a result of their personality, skills, or work history, have lots of connections to useful people outside the team,” Gratton writes. They play a strong networking role, keeping the team and its accomplishments visible within the company. Nokia cultivates boundary spanners by introducing each new hire to at least 10 people both inside and outside their department. Read the full article at [The Wall Street Journal Online](#).

step 3

Put Technology to Work

Goal: Find tools that fit both the job and the people who use them.

When it comes to technology, there’s only one clear-cut prescriptive: Let the work dictate the tool. Don’t invest in the latest whiz-bang technology and *then* try to figure out how it will be useful. Phone, email, instant messaging, a company intranet, and a broadband connection are a good starting point. You can add collaboration software later and unify your communications if the investment seems worthwhile. For the low-down on new and popular business technology, see [Ten Tools for Remote Teams](#). Below are a few guidelines for making the most of your existing equipment:

Be tech savvy. Beyond the platforms and software your company uses, you need to continually research the newest tools for the sake of efficiency and collaboration — often to keep up with what your savvier team members are already using. Maybe they use IM all day long and you like the phone. Yes, you call the shots, but ask yourself what will make your people most productive and satisfied. Maybe it’s time you started using IM, too. Ask your peers what they like and what they don’t. You can go online to test drive some tools, like Microsoft’s SharePoint collaboration software.

Get creative with basic technology. Louisville, Kentucky-based PR firm Corecubed records conference-call brainstorming sessions so that participants can truly free-flow their thoughts. “No one’s taking notes, everyone’s being creative, so it’s great to have that follow-up,” says Corecubed managing director Merrily Orsini. She paid \$150 at Radio Shack for a digital voice recorder that connects to her handset. Her admin downloads the recordings to Corecubed’s intranet site, then transcribes them.

Employees refer back to the sessions to refresh their memories on a topic or check who's responsible for which tasks.

Set up support systems. Know who will take responsibility for technical problems on the remote end. This applies particularly to home-based employees and contractors. At Alpine Access, a Denver-based virtual call center, technical help has been streamlined for its home-based agents. "We have a technical support desk that's able to fix 90 to 95 percent of computer problems over the Internet," says CEO Chris Carrington. For problems that can't be fixed virtually, Alpine will FedEx a new thin-client computer to the agent's home. Carrington says he'd rather retain the best workers than require, as some companies do, that their remote workers live within a short drive of company headquarters.

For Example

Craft Your Own Tool

The Marketing Arm, a marketing agency focusing on sports, entertainment, and promotions, launched an internal website, IdeaLink, to tap the creativity of its more than 1,100 workers around the world. Anyone from accountants to administrative assistants can log on to read a creative brief for a campaign and then chime in with ideas. "Some of the quietest people here — who would never come to a creative meeting — are first to respond," says creative manager Stu Hill. To encourage participation, the company rewards the strongest ideas with cash and other prizes, like roundtrip airline tickets. The IdeaLink site also fosters community through an idea blog and an employee directory, complete with pictures, hobbies, and interests.



step 4

Master the Art of Communication

Goal: Keep you and your employees connected in a meaningful way.

Lack of communication and the frequency of misinterpretation are perpetual sore subjects in most workplaces. Add in distance and the challenges are only amplified. Communicating well encompasses much more than the tools you use. It's about how often you use them, what you say, and how you say it. Here's how to be deliberate in communicating with the troops.

Start with Standard Ops

Decide what five or so communications guidelines are most important for your type of work, drive those home, and let the little stuff go. For example, most managers want

to hear about a sensitive or complex issue over the phone, instead of email, to avoid misunderstandings.

Doc Parghi, senior vice president of sales at software-testing firm App Labs, works in the company's Philadelphia headquarters and has eight direct reports in Utah, India, and the United Kingdom. "In email, one of the things we've never tolerated is the one-line response," he says. Company guidelines dictate that in each email message, the subject line needs to specify the topic and the primary recipients need to be addressed in the greeting, so that people who are CC'ed know that they do not need to take any action.

Establish a Routine

It may feel unnatural or overly prescribed, but meeting agendas and weekly update emails can save you lots of grief when it comes to communicating with remote teams. Slye of Autodesk says that when one employee admitted she found their weekly one-on-one phone meetings confusing, the two created a structure to help their conversations stay on topic. They now spend a half hour on tactical items, like roles and responsibilities, deadlines, or problems with a current marketing effort. "Then we close our laptops and go into brainstorming mode," Slye says. "In an office environment, you see someone's face switching from something general to specific. There are cues we take from body language." That's not the case when all you have is a voice. Slye and her employee now divide any correspondence that way, including email and face-to-face meetings.

Allow for Personal Preferences

When people work from afar, the greatest risk you run is that they won't reach out to you enough, leaving you out of the loop. As the manager, you need to encourage them to communicate in the way that's most effective and comfortable for them. For example, if you want details from an employee who's a slow typist, call her. By contrast, you may use email more often with a shy employee who would rather type than talk.

Know Your Limits

Workplace consultant Ben Dattner will tell you that most dispersed teams are not involved in the kind of work that requires constant collaboration. Creative teams that spend the day brainstorming and building on each other's ideas, for example, typically still work inside the same four walls. Understand what kind of tasks can be done remotely, and what is still best accomplished by a localized team. For example, ideas can be generated on a chat room or other collaboration tool, but refining or improving upon them may require the kind of give and take that only happens in a live meeting.

Hot Tip

Handling Hard Days

“Remote employees are very conscious of managing your perception of them,” Slye says. “They don’t bring a problem to you until it has really escalated, because they don’t want to burden you or take up your time.” Without clues like a heavy sigh or a frustrated look on someone’s face, it’s hard to know when workers need support. “You have to be disciplined as a manager to get out of the email thread,” Slye says. “You have to pick up the phone.”

When she checks in with employees each week, Slye stays away from vague questions, like ‘How’s it going?’ and simply assumes that there are always some problems. “I ask, ‘What kind of challenges are you having?’” she says. “Nine times out of 10 that’s going to kick up something.” Rather than try to resolve the issue herself, she keeps employees focused on their own capacity to solve problems, asking, “What would you like to see happen in a perfect world? Are any of those things achievable? How could you achieve them? What could you do *today*?”

step 5

Build a Sense of “We”

Goal: Establish strong relationships to fuel motivation, collaboration, and productivity.

Recent research from the Gallup Organization’s Tom Rath shows that people with strong friendships at work are more motivated, loyal, collaborative, and productive. In a typical office, those relationships form naturally. Across remote locations, you need to foster not just your connection to your employees, but their connections to each other.

Face Time

To build relationships, there’s no substitute for meeting face to face. In person, your employees are more likely to tell you about what’s not working. You’ll better understand their work style, too — how they make decisions and which types of tasks they’re best suited for. There’s no set equation for how often to meet, but twice a year is a good rule of thumb. Many remote managers schedule one-on-ones around hiring and performance reviews. Team meetings should be scheduled around planning and decision-making. LaBrosse of Cheetah Learning says her teams meet in person to kick off a project and again when the project is finished.

Teambuilding gets mixed reviews in the corporate world, but it takes on greater meaning for people who rarely see one another. Each year the Corecubed staff converges at Orsini’s home in Louisville, Kentucky, for Derby weekend. “People stay at each other’s houses, so they get to know them better,” she says. “You see pictures of

the kids and you get to meet the dog. It reinforces our need to make certain that each of us succeeds.” If you plan a team gathering, make the time count. Find something everyone will appreciate, schedule it at a time that won’t impact people getting their work done, and if someone doesn’t want to participate in social events, don’t force it.

Rewards and Recognition

The pats on the back that happen informally around the office don’t come as easily in the virtual world. Remote colleagues need to make greater effort to recognize each other’s accomplishments, LaBrosse says. Her employees at Cheetah Learning can hand out 2,000 “Cheetah Points” to each other every month. When one co-worker helps another solve a difficult problem, the first may give the second 200 points. At the end of the month, LaBrosse gives away \$500, \$300, and \$200 worth of gift certificates to the three people with the most points. “People are happier,” she says. “We have virtually no turnover.”

Turnover is also low for Alpine Access, which outsources call-center services using a workforce of entirely home-based agents. A ticker runs at the bottom of every agent’s computer screen, carrying messages specific to their team or the client they serve, like J. Crew or 1-800-Flowers. Team supervisors listen in on calls and immediately transmit messages such as, “Tina just had a huge sale!” across the network. Then congratulations pile in from other agents, says Carrington. “You transfer that excitement to the other agents,” he says. “That can be an immediate energy pick-me-up. People think. ‘I can do that, too.’”

Nitty Gritty

Connecting Through Technology

The tools your employees use to work remotely can also build rapport. Here are a few ways that technology can foster virtual community.

1. Start an email newsletter. Profile articles can put a face on co-workers, especially when they give kudos for work- or community-related accomplishments.
2. Set up a chat capability on your website and create internal forums based on what your team wants, be it topics affiliated with work or socializing. Alpine Access holds a “virtual happy hour” every Thursday afternoon, off the clock. Employees share everything from weekend plans to recipes.
3. Host a blogging network. At Sun Microsystems, CEO Jonathan Schwartz blogs extensively several times a month. Employees pose questions and he answers them, making him highly visible and accessible.
4. Use PowerPoint for introductions. Three or four times a year, Slye’s Autodesk team holds a web conference where each employee gives a personal PowerPoint presentation, including what they’re responsible for, what they really do, what motivates them, what bugs them, their personal interests, and their goals. “The

questions are designed to be intimate,” she says. “We’re engineering entry points for personal conversation.”

step 6

Manage by Results

Goal: Focus on the quality of your employees’ work, not their style of doing it.

The nuances of how people work, and when, become more pronounced when you’re remote, but they’re not a good basis for performance evaluation. Forget points of style — how long it takes an employee to reply to emails, for example — and focus on the results: both tangible and intangible. Tangible results might include the proposal an employee submits for next quarter’s operating plan and whether it’s comprehensive, on target, and on time. The intangibles are just as important: whether she collaborates well, makes decisions on her own, delivers what she promises, anticipates problems before they happen, generates ideas, communicates clearly, takes responsibility for her work, and goes beyond the call of duty, say to help a new co-worker get up to speed on a client.

Set goals and expectations. Set and revisit expectations and goals, and put them in writing. Lay out requirements for the job and the relative importance to you and the company of meeting deadlines versus producing quality work, or giving a client what he wants versus the cost to your organization of giving it to him.

Take notes. Jot quick anecdotes about each employee’s performance, positive and negative, every few weeks. Your notes become a starting point for the next performance review.

Require reports. When work has a lot of variables (clients, contact with the media, etc.), reports give you a glimpse of how workers are spending their time. Orsini of Corecubed doesn’t expect people to be at their desks 9 to 5, but since her company bills clients for time, she asks employees to track their hours and estimate percentages of time spent on types of tasks.

Ask detailed questions. The more you talk to *everyone*, the better sense you’ll get for whether each person on the team is playing the role they need to. Don’t ask Eric if Andrea is doing her job well. That puts him on the spot. Ask specific questions about the project they’re both working on — which tasks he and she are working on this week, and what challenges they’re having — to get clues about her role.

Danger! Danger! Danger!

Avoiding Burnout

While a results approach to managing frees workers from a set shift, some forget to look at the clock entirely, and that can lead to burnout. For remote managers, the trick is recognizing that an employee is losing steam before the person quits or drop the ball on a project. "Burnout is usually exhibited by people not completing deliverables because they have too many other things on their plate," LaBrosse says. "The more emails that are going out, the higher the chance for burnout."

To keep employees engaged but not overtaxed, LaBrosse requires them to finish a project — or at least accomplish a significant aspect — within three months. If someone is burning out, she'll switch them to another project. Another option is to rotate people and jobs when possible. "An important factor is having the right people for the work," says Bradley Starr, chief people officer of marketing firm MRM. "One person can be happy in another person's burnout role."

Other ways to fight burnout:

- Suggest that the employee take a vacation
- Promote the employee, if it's fitting
- Reward/recognize the employee
- Reduce the amount on the employee's plate, if reasonable
- Ask the employee what would make their job more satisfying and less stressful