

Hiring and Inspiring a Dispersed Team

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In many ways, creating a so-called “dispersed team” — where employees work out of a company’s satellite offices or from home — is not so different from traditional hiring. A good worker is a good worker, right? But certain traits, such as motivation level and ability to communicate, become more important when work gets done out of a manager’s sight. And in many cases, assembling a new virtual team means reassigning existing employees who were originally hired by other managers. Here’s how to get off on the right foot, whether you’re inheriting the talent or starting from scratch.

When you’re the one doing the hiring:

Do your homework. Interview potential hires by phone and check references ahead of a live meeting. Merrily Orsini, founder of Louisville, Kentucky-based marketing firm Corecubed, manages seven employees and 10 independent contractors around the country. She uses a popular personality assessment tool called the Predictive Index (piworldwide.com) before she meets with candidates to gain assurance about a person’s qualifications and cultural fit. Candidates take a survey online, and then Orsini calls on number-crunchers at the Oliver Group to interpret and analyze the results. The index helps Orsini identify prospects who are self-driven and can thrive on working independently. “The PI gives us insight into how a person really behaves versus how a person may adapt their behaviors in order to get a job,” she says.

Meet in person. Eye contact, gestures, and small talk provide a more complete picture of the candidate. Your gut feeling about whether this person is right for the job is stronger face to face, and you’ll establish a relationship more quickly than you would over the phone. If you can’t meet in person, set up a teleconference and be that much more diligent and comprehensive in the homework you do, such as checking references.

Ask questions about working independently. Whether your employee works at home or in an office with peers, you have to trust that they can get work done without your oversight. Organizational psychology expert Ben Dattner suggests asking questions that will help you identify independent workers, such as:

Can you describe a problem you solved on your own or an important decision you had to make alone?

What was a time when you completed a project start to finish without supervision or support?

Do you prefer a boss who provides lots of direction or gives you more leeway to do things your own way?

Ask questions about the virtual arrangement. It's easy to assume that everyone would rather have a boss who is out of sight and earshot. But not so for the person who needs daily guidance or has trouble making decisions. "Isolation is the hardest problem," Orsini says. "Introverts do well, as they like being alone and working things out independently." The following questions will get at personality and work habits:

Describe your working relationships. Would you say you're more energized by collaborating or by working alone?

What is most satisfying to you about work?

Can you tell me about a time when you reached out to team members or managers to offer or ask for help?

When you didn't do the hiring:

Get together, quickly. Don't forgo a face-to-face meeting just because your new team member transferred from within the organization, says Juliana Slye of architecture software firm Autodesk. Slye runs a division that serves government clients. Her reports are scattered throughout the East Coast, Colorado, and California, and many were originally hired by the directors of sales and marketing. "I prefer to get to a face-to-face meeting as soon as possible, so I can establish context for the things that I hear on the phone or see in an e-mail," she says. "For example, does this person have a dry sense of humor I need to get used to?"

Meeting in person serves as a starting point for a relationship in the context of the work to come. "Every first conversation starts with, 'It's going to take a while for us to get to know each other,'" says Dan Belmont, chief marketing officer of the Marketing Arm, which uses dispersed teams to manage event promotion. "It would be easy to say, 'You report to me now and all communication goes through me.' I choose to say, 'That relationship [with your prior supervisor] had value. Rather than replace it, let me add to it.'"

Do a "non-interview." If you didn't get to conduct an interview with the person, you won't have a sense of how their job fits in with the rest of their life — or where they want to go next. The disconnect is exacerbated if you're not in the same office, sharing personal news. When you meet, ask interview-type questions: the ones dealing with goals, aspirations, values, best skills, and talents. To keep it from feeling like a job interview, speak collegially and share some of your own goals and interests.

Address conflict in person. If there's an issue early on, try to discuss it in person, especially if you risk losing a good employee or client over the issue. Remember that remote employees are more inclined to keep quiet about a problem or play down its urgency, so as not to inconvenience you. You're more likely to get the whole story in person.

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