

The Workplace Revolution:

Six Steps to Build a Successful Virtual Workforce

RIGHT VIEWPOINT™

The workplace is going virtual. In our 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. While possibilities for working outside of traditional centralized offices have been around at least since the advent of the post office, dizzying innovations in technology are making working virtually a new opportunity and a new reality. Employees are spending more and more time working from home or on the road, at the airport or in the back of a cab. New, more effective ways of communicating, exchanging information and collaborating mean that you no longer need to get work done by sharing the same physical space with other members of your team. Three questions present themselves: Why should organizations encourage working virtually? What are the challenges involved? And how do you create an effective virtual workplace?

MICHAEL HAID

“Working virtually means working differently and requires a unique set of skills and competencies.”

WORKING VIRTUALLY—WHY IT MAKES SENSE

Drive down costs. Virtual work offers organizations manifold advantages, beginning with simple cost. Looking to hire part-time or temporary staff or even to expand your permanent workforce? Enabling employees to work virtually reduces the need to acquire additional office space and equipment. In fact, as leases expire and as equipment becomes fully amortized, organizations have a real opportunity to reduce their overall office footprint and drive down the cost of operations by embracing virtual work. The more employees work off-site, the more organizations are likely to save.

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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. Our global research shows that it is precisely when employees are empowered—when they are encouraged to take ownership of their work and given the authority to succeed—that they are most engaged. Accordingly, virtual work—when it can be authentically presented and implemented as an extension of workforce empowerment—can be a significant driver of engagement and productivity.

Attract and retain valuable talent. According to our 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.

In the virtual workplace, employees have greater control over how they manage their time and balance their work commitments and their personal lives. 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.

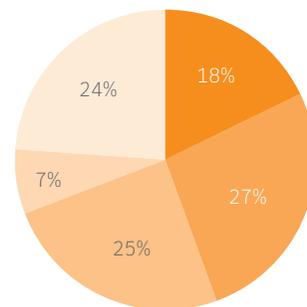
Encourage creativity and innovation. In a fully virtual work environment, the workforce is borderless. Geographic restrictions on who can work together in teams or what stretch assignments an individual can accept no longer apply. Creativity and innovation have a much better chance of thriving when organizations 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.

REAL ROADBLOCKS TO VIRTUAL SUCCESS

While the virtual workplace offers many advantages, it also faces significant obstacles that have to be carefully negotiated if your initiative is to succeed. At a minimum, jobs must be evaluated to determine which can be done virtually (e.g., sales or accounting) and which cannot (e.g., manufacturing). Since some jobs can be done virtually in part, when does it make sense to allow people to work virtually at least part of the time?

OVER THE NEXT 12 MONTHS, WHAT CHANGE DO YOU ANTICIPATE IN THE NUMBER OF VIRTUAL WORKERS IN YOUR ORGANIZATION?



- Significant increase.....18%
- Increase.....27%
- Stay about the same.....25%
- Decrease.....7%
- We don't have any virtual workers 24%

Source: Right Management online poll of 331 organizations conducted in September 2010.

And when those people are working off-site, how can there be certainty that they are working in an environment conducive to high performance? In other words, what are the infrastructure needs of working virtually? From here, the questions only proliferate.

Leadership. The most pressing questions concern leadership. How do you lead a team that is geographically dispersed across a region, a continent or even the globe? How do you drive accountability among each individual member? How do you foster team spirit among people who may never see one another?

Leading virtually means leading differently. Leaders will have to develop new skills. With little face-to-face contact with their team, they will have to listen more deeply, communicate more clearly and interpret more sensitively if they are to determine, for example, how engaged an employee is or detect what is being left unsaid in an e-mail.

Focus. To succeed, a team has to be focused on the task at hand. But out of sight can often mean out of mind. How does a team maintain its focus when its members may never meet in person? How do plans and projects stay on track, especially if individuals are also burdened with other, more immediate responsibilities? To avoid drift, the virtual team has to work within a framework that is more structured than the frameworks within which conventional teams operate. Goals, deadlines and accountabilities must all be clearly defined as never before.

Fit. Is everyone equally skilled at working virtually? Some people are less independent than others. They are simply more productive working in a traditional work environment and with the immediate support of colleagues and supervisors. How do you identify such people and how do you train them or deploy them when your office goes virtual?

Sociability. We are all social creatures. Since working virtually can be lonely for some, will creativity and productivity suffer? How do you ensure that virtual employees remain connected? How do you create opportunities for those informal exchanges that often lead to the most productive ideas?

Change. Going virtual entails big changes. For a start, the organization and its people have to make the transition to results-oriented modes of work that are now dependent upon new protocols and technologies. How capable is your organization of managing this change?

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BUILDING THE VIRTUAL WORKPLACE – SIX ESSENTIAL STEPS

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—the qualities, in short, of the 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. Leaders, no less than employees, must be assessed for gaps in skills and behaviors. To thrive in a virtual environment, they must either develop or already possess advanced communication skills. In the absence of face-to-face contact with team members, they must be able to listen deeply and interpret subtle verbal cues, communicate their vision, praise and inspire the team, empathize with workers, build trust and, above all, drive accountability.

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. The prospect of communicating with others should energize them. 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.

SIX ESSENTIAL STEPS TO A VIRTUAL WORKPLACE

1

Assess the suitability of existing and prospective employees for working virtually

2

Evaluate the work environment to ensure that individuals have the space and tools to thrive

3

Focus on leadership to ensure the success of the virtual team

4

Provide strong structural support to keep the team on track

5

Stay connected by leveraging the full array of communication technology

6

Ensure that technology serves as an enabler, not as a collar

5. Stay connected. Leveraging the full array of communication 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—yet 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. They must guard against burnout by checking in with individuals regularly. They must negotiate and define the rules of engagement with employees to ensure that a proper balance can be maintained.

A REVOLUTION IN THE WORKPLACE

Not all work can be performed virtually, but in the age of the laptop and the Blackberry, of Wi-Fi and Skype, of file sharing and video conferencing, a wide range of knowledge-based work no longer needs to be tied to a physical office space. 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. As people and organizations increasingly embrace these benefits, how we define the workplace will never be the same.

About the Author

Michael Haid, Senior Vice President for Global Solutions, oversees the firm's Talent Assessment solutions portfolio, responsible for designing global, scalable individual, team and organizational assessment solutions delivered to meet critical and emerging business needs. Michael has more than 15 years of extensive consulting and leadership experience in the areas of selection, assessment and leadership development.

About Right Management

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