

# Pass the Remote! The Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs of Telecommuting Teams



By

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## Remote Work: Benefit or Burden?

“You should be able to work from anywhere.” A former boss of mine said that a lot and it sounded great. If an employee asked to work from home, my boss would agree with that announcement and leave the second level managers to implement a telecommute solution. Second level managers were inevitably left with a few questions, such as:

- How will one person’s remote work affect those not working remotely?
- Will remote work change employee relationships with stakeholders?
- How will work hours be tracked?
- How can I ensure that my team’s morale remains high?
- How will we handle remote employee training, supervision, performance management, and retention?
- How will I recognize and when should I address signs that remote work is disrupting a team’s work?

According to *The 2017 State of Telecommuting in the U.S. Employee Workforce Report*—published by FlexJobs and Global Workplace Analytics—in 2017, 3.9 million U.S. employees worked from home at least half the time, a whopping 155% increase from 1.8 million remote workers in 2005. If you’ve ever wasted what felt like a lifetime battling rush hour traffic, you’re probably not surprised to know that, “In more than half of the top U.S. metro areas telecommuting exceeds public transportation as the commute option of choice.”

Though remote work has increased significantly in the U.S., many employers remain reluctant to offer flexible commute and schedule options to employees. Reluctance may come from a fear of change, uncertainty about the logistical questions shared above, deep concern about potential negative impacts to organizations and staff morale, or frustration with telecommuting trials and test-runs.

Myths and stigmas aside, one key question remains unanswered: are remote workers more or less productive than their in-office peers? Some research studies and case studies strongly favor remote work as the more productive option, such as Traitify CEO Dan Sines’ experience, explained in his piece “[Hiring Remote Workers Made My Entire Team More Productive](#)” (*Fast Company*, January 2018). Corporate leaders aren’t the only ones reporting positive telecommuting outcomes; a UK-wide charity shared its “[Advantages of Remote Working](#)” on KnowhowNonprofit.org. Larry Alton, writer of a 2017 *Forbes* article, “[Are Remote Workers More Productive Than In-Office Workers?](#)” points out that remote work has great potential to increase employee productivity, but employer policy and implementation determine the success of remote arrangements.

## It Takes a Village to Telecommute

Sitting in offices or cubes, conference rooms, huddle rooms or even hallways—our coworkers are a mixed bag of how work gets done. Some need a lot of social time but work long hours, some like to keep quiet, buckle down and clock out right on time. Work style varies greatly from employee to employee.

Recognize any of these colleagues from your flexible workplace?

### *The Baby Napper*

A parent is ready to go back to work but is having a hard time finding childcare. The employee intends to work when the baby naps. They also offer to work late or weekends to make up for any lost time. Problem: babies don't nap on schedule, and even a stellar employee is not at their best after sleep deprivation. Of course, this employee has the best of intentions, and in some cases the arrangement may even work out.

### *The Peace Lover*

This one has frustrated me and is very popular in the age of open office space and shared work spaces. Here's the pitch: "I really need to work at home, so I can just concentrate and not have to deal with people coming by my desk and asking questions or chatting." This request is often followed by something such as: "I also get much more done when I work at home!" Okay, I think. Greater productivity sounds great. But like The Baby Napper and the fine print on a statement from your retirement provider, past performance in a competitive office environment is not necessarily an indicator of future performance.

### *The Errand Runner*

So, you're calling someone working remotely and can't reach them. They return your call and say, "Sorry I missed you; I was quickly running an errand." It's true that employees at the office run errands too, but a remote one is not only away from their desk, they have disappeared from your radar screen. Got trust?

### *The Camera Avoider*

They hate seeing themselves on video chat. For some reason, their camera is never working. Fairness, anyone? Interacting in-person or through a video conference helps create and foster trusting teams. Unfortunately, out of sight too often means out of the loop.

Do any of these remote workers sound familiar? No workforce—remote, onsite or a blend of both—consists of worker clones. In fact, advancing your nonprofit's mission requires a wide spectrum of perspectives and personalities, which means different work styles can and ideally should be a valuable asset. But it's the rare team that triumphs in a vacuum, and all workers need direction, and the occasional correction. Consider the strategies below to nurture, leverage and maximize the diverse talents and workstyles of your on-site and remote teams.

## Unmasking Remote Worker Risk

Research on health issues in the workplace cites flexible workplaces (flex time, remote work options, etc.) as a driver of employee engagement and satisfaction. But as risk champions are well aware, bountiful opportunities may obscure unintended consequences and downside risks. Some of the risks that arise when one or more workers telecommute include:

- *Divisive versus cohesive culture* - The NRMC team tells me that staff teams they encounter during Risk Assessments can be divisive instead of cohesive for a number of reasons, and it's not uncommon to encounter team members who feel or perceive that certain colleagues are more valued than others. Feelings of resentment fester over time, and may lead to lowered productivity and declining engagement at best, and sabotage or deliberate performance slow-downs at worst. Remote workers may be at the greatest risk of feeling—and being—left out when it comes to co-worker camaraderie. A *Harvard Business Review* article from November 2017 noted a wide range of challenges facing remote workers, from greater difficulty resolving workplace conflict, to a sense of being left out of changes in process and projects, as well as feeling mistrusted and disrespected by their on-site peers. The authors write that "remote workers, and the managers tasked with keeping them focused and engaged, face inherent challenges that cannot be ignored."
- *Faint feedback* - Research on motivation in the workplace indicates that employees value feedback far more than financial rewards. In his book *Payoff*, Dan Ariely explains that the quickest path to workplace demotivation is ignoring a colleague's contribution, and that most managers consistently underestimate the motivating value of praise and overestimate the lesser value of monetary rewards. Employees who work from home are more likely to miss opportunities for occasional, informal feedback. Over time, this lack of feedback and positive reinforcement can lead to founded or unfounded fears about performance quality or social perception.
- *Inability to Temperature-Check* - Experienced supervisors check in with their direct reports to guide,

support, redirect and also gauge staff satisfaction. As an experienced leader of a team that included multiple remote workers, I've found that it's harder to sense frustration on the part of remote teams. At any time your staff may be frustrated about an assignment, a task, organizational policies, and more. A nearby report may cross the threshold of your cubicle or office to vent about these issues, while remote staff may be reluctant to dial in with similar concerns. In their HBR article, authors Grenny and Maxfield note that a manager's *availability* is a highly valued quality among remote workers, adding that "successful managers are available during remote employees' working hours, no matter their time zone." A team working across time zones led by a manager who 'clocks out' at 5 pm is probably destined to go off the rails and experience low levels of satisfaction.

- **Productivity Perception** - While telecommuters may profess to being more productive on days they avoid the commute to and from work, the perception of others may be slightly or substantially different. It's easy to observe a co-worker taking calls, rifling through paperwork, or busily typing on their keyboard. Not so when a colleague works from the privacy of their own home. And remote workers may not be aware of the negative perceptions of their peers and superiors.

## Seven Strategies to Triumph with Telecommuting Teams

1. **Choose Remote Options with Care** - When you're writing a new position description, consider if the job really can be done remotely, and also whether the position's supervisor is truly available to provide the support the position needs. Think about how remote (near enough to come in for impromptu meetings, or only rare ones?) the position should or could be. Be brutally honest—first with yourself—before opening the door to disaster by promoting a fully flexible workplace on the job description. For example:
  - Will a new hire be immediately eligible to work from home, or only after they complete an introductory period on site?
  - Is an applicant who wants to work 100% from home eligible for the position?
  - Does "working from home" mean sticking to regular office hours, or may the employee sign in and out and work the hours s/he finds convenient?
  - Are travel costs—for truly distant workers—in your approved budget, or is a distant worker expected to cover those costs, just as nearby staff cover their public transportation, gas and other commuting costs?
  - What lessons have you learned from supervising other remote workers? Your new position description is a chance to get it 'right' from the get go.
2. **Tune in and Probe Perceptions During Interviews** - During interviews with candidates for positions with 'work-from-home' options, remember to inquire about the candidate's experience as a telecommuter and how they envision doing so at your nonprofit. Resist the tendency to ask leading questions, and resolve to listen earnestly and wholly to their answers. Putting a prospective employee in a box immediately can result in tension and unintended consequences down the road, so it's best to acquire a whole understanding upfront.
3. **Build a Durable On-Ramp for Remote Workers** - After hiring a staffer who will work remotely, invest in the employee's success by taking the time to set up the remote working relationship properly and clarify the rules of staying off the road. Consider developing a checklist or written agreement about your expectations for remote work. Discuss it. Make it specific. Revise it. What do you need? What won't work? An important goal at this stage is to anticipate bumps in the road before they send you into a dangerous ditch. You're trying to avoid the need to modify or revoke a remote status setup down the road.
4. **Use Multiple Tech Tools without Excuses** - The popularity of remote working means lots of tools. Services and software for video conferencing, real time messaging, and team project management. My personal mantra has been: if someone wants to work remotely, they need to commit to learning the technology to do it well. Even if that means how to contact a help desk! Your organization funds the tech and training, the employee learns and retains the information, uses the technology on a regular basis, and gets extra help as needed.

Keeping with the tech theme, good audio is still underrated for meetings and general remote communication. Find or research the best tech minds for what works and help diagnose what doesn't. Use messaging tools to help employees feel connected. A group chat with video (like Google Hangouts) can even be used as a real time virtual office.

I saw Google Hangouts used very successfully with a six-person, all-remote team. Everyone logged into the hangout in the AM and worked all day at their remote spaces. They'd move away from camera when needed (like someone would in an actual office) or use mute, but they could also chat with each other spontaneously. They'd log off at the end of the day. It took getting used to and there were assorted tech glitches at first. But in the end, the remote team was more close-knit and collaborative than any in-person team in the larger group.

5. **Make Wise Investments for Remote Team Success** – Don't forget the financial investment needed to support remote teams (video service subscriptions, headsets, cameras, etc.). Keep in mind that many options are available for trial periods or with limited membership, so you can test drive them before making a full-on commitment. Evaluate your investments periodically, and invite everyone to weigh in on the pros and cons of the equipment, software and systems used to support your high functioning team.
6. **Leverage Remote Workforce Benefits** – Although the potential benefits of telecommuting are often considered *employee* benefits, telecommuting positives accrue to employers, as well employees. Ultimately, it's up to your organization to manage remote worker downsides, and leverage the positives. For example, according to *The State of Telecommuting* report, employers who triumph with telecommuting enjoy access to an expanded (think global) talent pool.
7. **Strive for Equity and Squash Stereotypes** – Some people believe that telecommuting is trendiest amongst the youngest generations, but in fact, the majority of telecommuters are Baby Boomers. In SHRM's article, "[Telecommuting Cuts Across Gender, Generations](#)," Families and Work Institute CEO and President Ellen Galinsky shares that employees from all generations desire flexible work. The *State of Telecommuting* report also clarifies that both men and women enjoy telecommuting, and they telecommute almost equally.

### **Review and Adjust as Needed**

Don't continue with a tool or process that doesn't work. Schedule a review of remote work practices every 60 days, 90 day, or twice a year. Don't let the quieter personality types fade away and don't get complacent or fall victim to the "Fallacy of Centrality": if something was wrong, I'd know about it; since I haven't heard anything everything must be fine. Check in with remote workers *more often* if you're not hearing from them. And remember that workplace trust is built on relationships, which require time to form and must be nurtured along a team's journey in the workplace.

### **Resources**

- The 2017 State of Telecommuting in the U.S. Employee Workforce Report, FlexJobs - [flexjobs.com/2017-State-of-Telecommuting-US/](https://flexjobs.com/2017-State-of-Telecommuting-US/)
- "[A Study of 1,100 Employees Found That Remote Workers Feel Shunned and Left Out](#)," by Joseph Grenny and David Maxfield, *Harvard Business Review*, November 2017

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