



# **Managing a Virtual Workforce:** Using data to drive success in a distributed workforce

# The impact of COVID-19 on remote work provided by [Global Workplace Analytics](#) (GWA)

Approximately 56% of the U.S. workforce holds a job that's compatible (at least partially) with remote work. Currently, only 3.6% of the employee workforce works at home half-time or more, but GWA estimates that 25%-30% of the workforce will be working at home multiple days per week within the next two years.

COVID-19 has accelerated the virtual work timeline for the following reasons:

- Ongoing efforts to stay home to slow the spread of the virus
- Increased pressure among executives for disaster preparedness
- Halted business travel

If there's a silver lining during these unprecedented times, it's that working from home will save U.S. employers over \$30 billion a day in productivity otherwise lost due to COVID-19 office closures.

## Overview

A company's workforce is its most valuable asset and typically its biggest expense. Attracting and retaining the right talent continues to be a foremost concern for managers. With many organizations employing remote workers or moving toward a virtual environment, this has become more complex. Managers must understand the unique challenges and characteristics of remote teams, whose members rarely or never see one another in person and communicate primarily virtually.

This e-book explores some of the trends contributing to the rise of the virtual workforce. It also examines the major challenges related to

remote team management and outlines the key principles that'll help managers achieve success with virtual teams.

### **Adapting to the challenges of remote team management**

As companies become more flexible to stay competitive, the pressure is on top executives and managers to oversee teams that work efficiently, effectively, and collaboratively.

The main challenges for virtual teams include:

- Building team cohesion and trust
- Understanding team dynamics
- Finding a shared sense of purpose

### **The Issue of trust**

The relationship between worker and manager can have a positive impact on motivation, loyalty, and overall job satisfaction—all basic contributors to strong retention rates. When an employee leaves their company for a new job, a weak relationship with their manager/colleagues likely contributed to the decision. Opportunities to connect are a primary consideration for managers who want to build virtual teams that last.

One of the key characteristics of successful remote team management is a strong sense of shared trust between managers and employees. In essence, managers of virtual teams must trust that team members will:

- Prioritize action items effectively
- Follow through on daily activities required to meet long-term goals
- Share information with one another

- Remain motivated to reach the finish line
- Raise any concerns as they develop

In a remote working environment, it can be difficult to monitor each of these tasks to ensure the team is on track to reach its collective goals. To foster the trust needed to succeed, it's crucial that a manager adapts their management style based on the working styles and behavioral drives of their team members.

### **Uncovering team characteristics with people data**

One way companies are developing more trust-based relationships with their virtual teams is through the use of people data.

People data helps managers:

- Uncover natural behavioral strengths—and gaps—of team members
- Make strategic decisions about how to assign workflows
- Identify preferred modes/styles of communication
- Gain insight into how to support, coach, and motivate the team

### **Building trust by establishing a shared sense of purpose**

To achieve their goals, team members must align on strategy, communicate effectively, and collaborate openly. Foremost on any manager's mind is how to build successful working relationships among team members—and how to establish and increase productivity as the team works to meet its collective goals.

Many leadership experts recommend managers work with their teams to establish a team charter that outlines a mission statement, shared values, and guidelines for interaction. A physical document crystallizes expectations and fosters shared agreement about the way the team will work together.

This type of document can be especially helpful for teams that work remotely. Managers of virtual teams need to pay special attention to how they communicate how decisions are made, how and when team members should be in contact (either individually or as a group), and how goals will be measured.

Having a shared team purpose also means having a shared sense of responsibility. Experts recommend defining three essential components of team interaction:

**1. Timeliness.** What constitutes a timely reply to an email? Do emails with certain subject lines get priority over others? What's the definition of "end of the business day" for teams that work in different time zones? Establishing answers to these questions will help the team benchmark its communication performance. The end goal is to have teams trust that each individual teammate will respond in a timely fashion to emails, voicemails, and deadlines.

**2. Completeness.** Do responses and replies fully answer the questions at hand? Team members must understand the components of a complete request or question. This could include any of the following elements: deadlines, accountable parties, next steps, specific instructions for follow up, etc. Be sure to craft some sample statements or responses team members can use in cases where they feel replies or responses are inadequate.

**3. Consistency.** Consistency in the quality, timing, and style of interaction builds a bridge to trust with virtual teams. Teams work best when they know they can count on other members to deliver similar levels of performance from project to project.

## Conclusion

A company's biggest asset is its people. Its biggest challenge is empowering managers with the skills to coach, mentor, and develop the talent critical to the productivity and longevity of the business.

To gain a better foothold in the market for talent, companies must be prepared to embrace and sustain remote teams. They must also work to engage workers who understand how to work together successfully in a virtual environment.

Managers who are skilled at navigating the unique challenges of a remote team will be in high demand as virtual workforces continue to expand. These skills will help guide their teams and their companies to greater success.