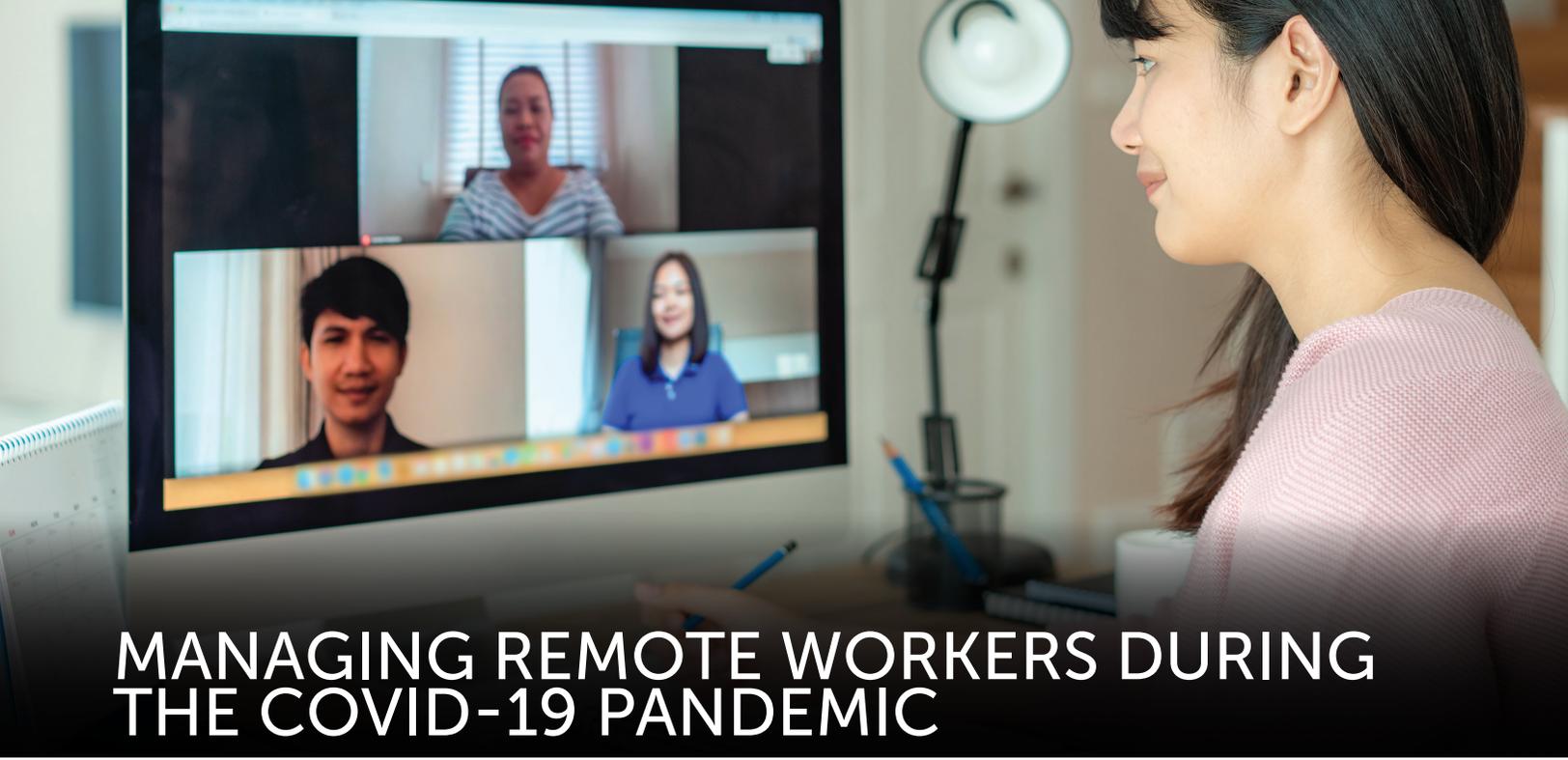




MANAGING REMOTE WORKERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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WORKING REMOTELY

When 2020 began, the average manager may have supervised a handful of remote workers. Now, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many companies are having some or all of their employees work from home for the foreseeable future.

Working remotely, also known as working from home or telecommuting, is performing work at a location other than an "official duty station." With laptops, high-speed telecommunications links, and ever-present pocket communications devices, many employees can work almost anywhere at least some of the time.

Telecommuting provides benefits for both employers and employees. Research shows that remote work can improve the quality of work/life and job performance (i.e., reduces office overcrowding and provides a distraction-free environment for reading, thinking, and writing). Studies have also found an improvement in retention, leave usage, and productivity.

Employing remote workers also creates flexibility in hiring. If the company is restricted by location, it can hire the best and the brightest individuals from just about anywhere.

MAINTAINING SUPERVISION

Remote workers pose unique challenges. For example, how does the company make sure remote workers are on task, on schedule, and performing up to par? These types of issues almost always come down to communication.

Before allowing an employee to work remotely, there are a number of questions to consider. How will they contact supervisors and coworkers? How frequently should such communication occur? When are remote workers expected to be available? When contacted, how quickly are



TIPS FOR MANAGING TELECOMMUTERS

- ✓ PROVIDE AUTONOMY
- ✓ PICK THE RIGHT JOBS
- ✓ SELECT THE RIGHT EMPLOYEES
- ✓ MAKE REMOTE WORKERS PART OF THE TEAM
- ✓ MAINTAIN APPROPRIATE RECORDS
- ✓ TREAT REMOTE WORKERS THE SAME AS ONSITE EMPLOYEES

remote workers expected to respond? Addressing these questions at the start of a remote relationship will make sure everyone is on the same page.

Since remote workers may be in different time zones, everyone may need to be flexible about meeting times. Establishing a routine for communicating with remote workers can help. For example, a weekly phone conference may keep everyone in sync, even if it's just to check in.

Initially, the company may set up frequent times for a new remote employee to check in, but consider reducing this frequency as the individual proves that he can stay on task without hand-holding. If the company can't trust an employee enough to give him some freedom, he may not be a good candidate for remote work; he'll likely spend much of his work time reporting on what he is doing rather than actually doing the work.

Remain flexible and when new issues arise, work with employees to find appropriate solutions. Though remote workers can pose some challenges, careful planning and an open mind can help an organization utilize these workers to their full potential.

If the company adopts a telecommuting program, the challenge will be to manage employees from a distance. Here are some tips for managing telecommuters:

- 1.** Provide autonomy. Supervisors can't be micromanagers and expect to be good telemanagers. They need to be able to trust employees, delegate responsibility, and communicate well.
- 2.** Pick the right jobs. Jobs that are best suited for telecommuting are those that require independent work, need little face-to-face interaction, and can be managed by results, not time.
- 3.** Select the right employees. The best candidates for working remotely are those who need little direct supervision, work well on their own, take initiative, and communicate well.
- 4.** Make remote workers part of the team. Include off-site employees in staff meetings and teambuilding events by conference call. Don't let them become invisible.
- 5.** Maintain appropriate records. If telecommuters are nonexempt, they must be paid overtime, so appropriate records must be kept.
- 6.** Treat remote workers the same as onsite employees. Make sure they understand they are eligible for promotion, training, and recognition, and include them in special assignments.

TELECOMMUTING POLICY

Telecommuting should not be implemented casually. If the company wants to reap the benefits telecommuting offers, the first step is to put a telecommuting policy in place. Needless to say, top management support is critical. Before drafting a policy, consider the following:

- **WHICH POSITIONS ARE SUITABLE?** Both exempt and nonexempt positions may be appropriate for telecommuting. The best potential telecommuting positions are those that require individuals to work independently, have little need for face-to-face interaction, entail concentration, and can be managed by output, not time spent on the job.
- **WHO IS ELIGIBLE?** Policies often dictate how long employees must be in a job before becoming eligible, as well as how well they must perform to maintain the privilege.
- **HOW WILL EMPLOYEES BE SELECTED?** If a number of individuals express interest in telecommuting but only a limited number can be accommodated, the policy should outline the selection criteria, taking into account non-discrimination laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- **WHAT KIND OF SCHEDULE WILL TELECOMMUTERS KEEP?** Some policies allow for telecommuting only on certain days of the week and require employees to be available during core business hours.
- **HOW WILL TIMEKEEPING BE DONE?** The requirements of the Fair Labor Standards Act (as it pertains to overtime, for example) apply to nonexempt telecommuters.
- **WHO WILL PROVIDE EQUIPMENT?** The policy should address whether the company will provide a computer, for example, or pay for Internet service.
- **HOW WILL THE EMPLOYEE SAFEGUARD COMPANY INFORMATION?** Security - electronic and physical (locked filing cabinets) - is critical for any off-site location.
- **HOW WILL TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT BE PROVIDED?** The policy should address what type of technical support (if any) the company will provide to offsite employees.



**MANAGERS PLAY
A KEY ROLE
IN THE SUCCESS OF
TELECOMMUTING**

GOOD MANAGERS

An often-overlooked facet of telecommuting is the selection of supervisors. Not every supervisor makes a good remote manager. A micromanager, for example, probably would not be a good candidate to supervise remote workers, and it may be necessary to have a telecommuter report to a different manager, or at least clarify the expectations to the original manager. Look for managers who trust their employees, delegate responsibilities, communicate well, and manage by results rather than details.

Once the company has identified eligible job criteria and potential supervisors, be sure to train supervisors so that they understand the telecommuting policy and how to put it into practice. With a good policy in place and properly selected and trained supervisors, both employees and the company can start enjoying the benefits of remote work.

GOOD CANDIDATES FOR TELECOMMUTING

Workers will usually need to continue to live in a location which enables them to come in to their official duty station on a regularly scheduled basis, and on an as-needed basis for meetings and other special activities.

As examples, telecommuting is feasible for work that requires:

- **THINKING AND WRITING** - such as data analysis, reviewing grants or cases, writing decisions or reports.
- **TELEPHONE-INTENSIVE TASKS** - such as setting up a conference, obtaining information, following up on participants in a study.
- **COMPUTER-ORIENTED TASKS** - such as programming, web page design, data entry, and word processing.

Telecommuting is not suitable for employees who need to be in the office to learn the organization, who require on-the-job training, who need close supervision, or who thrive on interaction with coworkers and would suffer from the isolation of working alone.

To be a successful telecommuter, workers should be organized, disciplined, and conscientious self-starters who require minimal supervision.

Telecommuting should not adversely affect either the worker's own performance or that of coworkers. Thus, if a job involves frequent interaction with coworkers or customers, remote workers must be expected to be available via email or the telephone at the same times as they would otherwise be at work for this interaction.

Although remote work will give some employees more time for their family responsibilities, duty time must not be used for providing dependent care or any purpose other than official duties. If a company allows remote work, it must ensure that the offsite workplace is safe and adequate. The site must also be free from interruptions and provide the necessary level of security and protection for company property.

TELECOMMUTING RISKS AND REWARDS

Negative aspects of telecommuting include a lack of employer supervision, a potential loss of productivity due to distractions at home, security of company information at the home office, the lack of "face time" with other personnel from the company, the difficulty holding meetings, and safety and legal issues.



TO HAVE AN EFFECTIVE TELECOMMUTING PROGRAM, CERTAIN GUIDELINES ARE HELPFUL:

- Have the employee designate a particular area in the home as the "home office";
- Have the employee complete regular time cards as a record of the hours worked;
- Have the employee be mindful of ergonomic issues in the home work area;
- Consider implementing formal agreements with telecommuters stating the hours that will be worked and the expectations.

CERTAIN PROBLEMS THAT CAN CROP UP INCLUDE:

- Employees who use most of their day to attend to personal matters and don't actually get much work done;
- On the flip side, employees who don't know when to "turn it off" and end up working more than 40 hours because the office is right there, and create obligations to pay overtime; and
- Employees who injure themselves at home and claim it was a work-related injury (with no witnesses).



IT'S THE EMPLOYERS RESPONSIBILITY TO KNOW OSHA'S POLICY ON **INJURIES IN HOME OFFICES.**

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issued a policy on home offices on February 25, 2000. The policy indicates that employers are not responsible for inspecting an employee's home to be sure it is safe, that employers aren't liable for employees' home offices, and that OSHA will not inspect home offices. However, employers are still responsible for the safety of employees who work at home, and it is possible that an employee will sustain a recordable injury in the home office that arises out of his or her employment.

For workers' compensation purposes, a home office is considered a satellite worksite, and courts look at certain factors to determine whether an injury occurred while the employee was actually engaged in work. Those factors include whether there is business equipment at the home office, how regularly the employee performs work there, whether the injury occurred in the specific area of the home designated as the home office, and if it occurred during the employee's normal work hours.

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL REMOTE WORK

ESTABLISH A ROUTINE: Once employees start working remotely, they will have 24-hour access to work. They may be tempted to work longer hours. However, working too much can cause stress and stress-related illness. Knowing when to stop is essential for effective performance. One way to get around overwork is to implement specific business hours. Set

firm starting and stopping times and communicate these to managers. At the office, there are routines that structure workers' time. If workers are at home, it may help to establish their own routine, so they don't overwork.

ESTABLISH GOALS: Ensure employees develop a list of goals and assignments for the days they work. Have them report their progress on these goals at reasonable intervals.

SET DEADLINES: Follow the same rules for deadlines as if workers were in the office.

AVOID DISTRACTIONS: If possible, encourage telecommuters to avoid working remotely on days when there may be distractions at home. If workers have an elderly family member, an infant, or a toddler needing care, it may be difficult to complete any work. Working from home is not a substitute for childcare or eldercare.

MAINTAIN REGULAR COMMUNICATION WITH WORKERS: Supervisors need to be in frequent communication with remote workers. Both sides need to keep the other informed of the status of work, progress, difficulties, and so on. Don't forget that remote workers are still part of the team.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

With many more employees working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, it's important to understand the cornerstones of managing them:

- Maintain proper supervision,
- Establish a telecommunication policy,
- Identify good managers and good candidates for remote working,
- Understand the risks and rewards, and
- Follow tips for successful remote work.

Even after the COVID-19 pandemic ends, employers may find that more employees will want to work full-time from home. And, some companies may decide to encourage telecommuting to free up office space to promote effective social distancing.



SETTING RULES & GUIDELINES

WILL HELP TO HAVE
SUCCESSFUL REMOTE
WORK SITUATIONS

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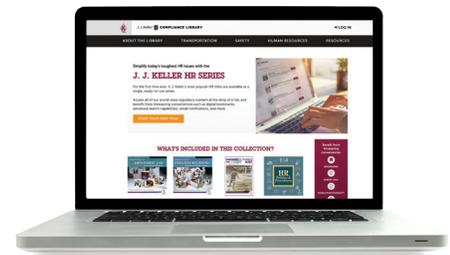
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANN POTRATZ, J. J. KELLER & ASSOCIATES, INC.

Ann joined J.J. Keller & Associates, Inc. in 2018. As an Editor on the Human Resources Publishing Team, she specializes in employment law issues such as discrimination, sexual harassment, background checks, terminations, and security.

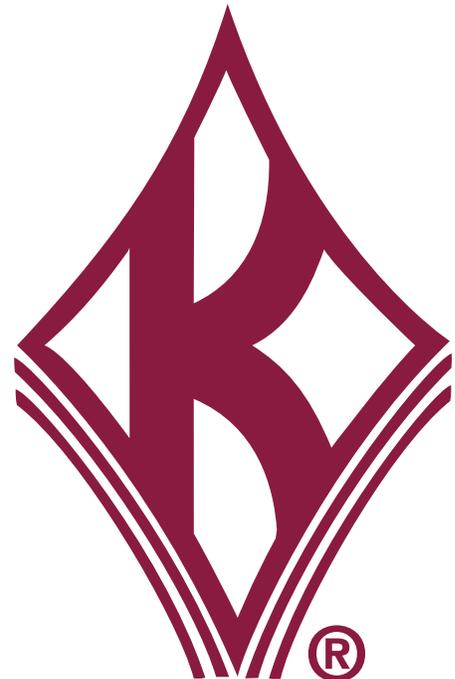
Ann researches and creates content for a variety of employment-related subject matters and contributes to a number of Human Resource products, including the Essentials of Employment Law manual and Employment Law & Regulatory Alert newsletter.



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