

Remote Ready Manager Guide

Managing a remote team can be difficult and daunting if it's not something you've done before. There are many potential issues that could arise, which could be detrimental to the personal lives of employees or to the business, or both (as outlined in the Remote Ready Employee Guide).

This document provides some of the major tips and techniques used by managers of the most advanced and successful remote teams in the business world, as well as those discovered by our own team through our experiences (our business is fully distributed, and we have personally encountered both the positives and negatives of the practice).

Although the potential problems should be highlighted and addressed, as we will in this document, managing remote workers, and working remotely yourself, can be seen as an incredible opportunity to take your management and your own productivity skills to new levels. It's an opportunity to question and improve your own leadership methods, ideas about how work and life fit together and synergise, and to really strive for human-centred management practices.

This is not a step-by-step guide to implementing remote work, but rather a list of general considerations that make a significant difference when putting together a remote work strategy and trial (both of which are highly recommended).

Here are some tips and techniques for managing remote teams.

1. Provide information and training

We recommend that you provide resources and training on working remotely to build confidence and capability, particularly if this is a new way of working in your business. At FlexAgility we have provided training to over 1,000 leaders and managers and are able to deliver this online via Zoom.

It is good to provide this before having deeper conversations about any remote work trials, so that everyone has had a chance to build their own understanding and think about specific solutions to any issues.

Other information that would need to be provided:

- ✓ Process and passwords to log in to the system remotely,
- ✓ What people can and can't take from the office (laptops, phones, office supplies, etc.),
- ✓ Health and safety recommendations for setting up and working in home office,
- ✓ Ways to maintain information security, etc.

2. Have 'The Talk'

One of the most critical parts of implementing remote work, and one which is often left out of these types of guides or articles – probably because it seems too simple and unnecessary to raise – is having an open conversation with employees about remote work and flexibility.

‘The Talk’ allows a manager to let employees know the business is planning to trial remote working, and to clarify the overall goal (e.g., to be prepared for crises, or as a potential permanent practice). It also allows everyone on the team to share what they know about flexible and remote work, what it would mean for their work and personal lives to be able to work flexibly (e.g., avoid the commute), and any concerns they may have about the practice (e.g., that it might effect their chances of promotion in the future).

This is a great time to discover potential problems, and to start solving these as a group (many more good ideas will come out of this than trying to discover them individually). Another benefit to including everyone in this conversation is that employees will feel a sense of ownership in the process. They’ll feel that they’re respected, and like their opinion matters, so they’ll engage with the trial and do their best to make it work.

‘The Talk’ is a continuing conversation – it doesn’t happen once and then never again. Communication about the program or trial needs to be ongoing and consistent, both from managers and employees, to provide feedback and encourage continuous improvement.

3. Trial and give time

A trial is critical to the success of remote working. It gives workers time to get used to the practice; it allows feedback and solutions to any issues to be created; and it allows people (managers included) to see for themselves that it isn’t scary and does produce significant improvements in productivity and innovation (and health and wellbeing).

For a trial to be effective, it needs time. It can’t be a one-off event. Ideally, it should be at least two days per week, for several weeks or months. The exact length depends on your organisation and your flexible work strategy; for example, if the results are measured by researchers, they may need several months of data.

Another good tip for trialling remote work is to have everyone ‘work remotely’ from their office before attempting to work from home: get the team to communicate and collaborate through technology, even if they are sitting right next to each other, and have meetings over Skype or Zoom. This way, people can get used to new platforms if they haven’t used them before, and it can act as hands-on training where colleagues or managers can assist and trouble-shoot in person.

4. Role model and encourage

Managers need to be using remote work just as much as employees for it to be effective. This is important for a few reasons:

- ✓ Managers will develop a greater understanding of the practice, so they’ll be better at assisting others to work remotely effectively, but it also ensures empathy for workers who may be having trouble with the practice.
- ✓ It’s the strongest demonstration of support for the practice. Often there can be fear and guilt around accessing flexibility; but if a manager is using it, it shows that the practice is ‘normal’ and encouraged.
- ✓ If managers don’t work remotely but everyone else does, this can create an ‘us versus them’ situation where managers feel like police of the system and employees feel policed.

There also needs to be visible support from managers, including the CEO and executives. This can be in the form of announcements or meetings, or putting statements or commitments into the company's reports or overall strategy/plans.

5. Continuous improvement

The use of remote work (and indeed any flexible work) creates a perfect environment for finding and implementing business improvements; in fact, due to the incentive of being able to work remotely, or flexibly, employees in this situation tend to become process improvement specialists without even meaning to!

They want to find the best, most efficient ways of working, and to produce the highest quality work, because in doing so they know they increase their chances of continuing to benefit from the practice.

The manager's job is to get behind this and provide coaching and tools and ideas to help find improvements. Any issues that pop up are not problems, they're opportunities to improve a system or a process or a teaching method.

If your business already has a continuous improvement culture in place, this will find great use while implementing remote work. If not, the best continuous improvement tools are simple and easily accessible (for example, the website <https://leanopedia.com/lean-tools-for-root-cause-analysis/> provides information on PDCA, Pareto Charts, '5 whys' analysis, etc.).

6. Technology

Technology is tricky to talk about, because there are so many programs and devices out there that can be used to enable effective remote working, and they can sometimes be obsolete from one week to the next. A good summary for useful tools and apps can be found at <https://www.ceros.com/inspire/blog/remote-work-ultimate-guide-2020/>.

With the help of your internal IT team, or from an external service (such as itgenius.com), determine what your technology needs are and how to incorporate them into a productivity-enhancing package (as opposed overwhelming people with too many apps and things).

A big warning with technology is to make sure it isn't used – as much as you can help it – for surveillance and micromanagement. There are tools and programs that enable managers to track how every second of an employee's day is used on their computer; or a manager might be tempted to continuously check whether an employee is at their desk or not. This demonstrates distrust of employees, and they will be less encouraged to work productively. A great aspect of remote working is a feeling of autonomy and freedom; it's up to managers to foster that feeling, and to become coaches and mentors more than 'managers'.