

Is Telecommuting or Working Remotely Right for Your Company?

Telecommuting or remote work arrangements could just be the answer to an employer's quest to hire and retain quality candidates. These options can be a win-win-win, for the employee, the employer, and the environment. The employee can work from home, save commuting costs, lunch money, and dry cleaning bills. The employer can translate fixed facilities costs to variable costs and can use telecommuting as a recruitment and retention tool.

Despite the positives, telecommuting or working remotely is not for everyone or every company. There are some considerations for employers and employees before they venture into telecommuting.

Considerations For Employees:

- Employees who work from home more than the office may miss out on the same camaraderie and support that on-site employees enjoy. Such isolation could have an effect on advancement potential as well.
- Working from home can blur the lines between work and family and impact productivity. At home, employees can be lured into spending time on personal and family needs.
- Alternately, remote work can make it difficult for employees to maintain an appropriate work-life balance. It gives an employee 24-hour access to work and can lead to overwork and burnout. This can lead to increased overtime costs for nonexempt employees if not properly managed.

Considerations For Employers:

- Remote work requires access to the company's IT system, which poses a security risk. Employees may unwittingly initiate data breaches.
- Potential safety hazards could lurk in employees' homes. Employers must provide employees with a safe work environment. At the same time, employers don't have much control over the environment.
- Some companies offering remote work typically pay for the home office equipment and may also pay for a cubicle or office for the employee at the company.

Telecommuting has many benefits and a number of pitfalls. Employers must consider whether it is right for their organization. If it is right, then employers must ask "How do we make it work?"

One of the most important factors is trust. The employer must be able to trust the employee will, with little supervision, continue to be a productive and ethical contributor. The employee must trust the employer will keep him or her in mind for important projects, promotions, and general company news. An organization should develop a policy when it decides to embrace remote work as a positive alternative for some employees.

At minimum, a remote work policy should answer these questions:

Eligibility

- What job titles or job characteristics are conducive to remote work?
- What are the employee eligibility criteria: length of service, performance history, those able to work independently?

Technology

- Who will supply the office equipment and furniture?
- What parameters must be set for use of company-provided technology?
- Can the company support virtual private network (VPN) software to allow access to the network?
- What measures must be taken to ensure safety and security of the network?
- How does the company ensure the return of company equipment upon ending the remote work agreement?
- Will internet usage or email accounts be electronically monitored?
- Will the company utilize login-tracker software to monitor remote worker activity?

Working Conditions and Security

- How will nonexempt employees record their hours worked?
- Will telecommuters be required to work certain hours or be available at certain times?
- Who is responsible for injuries or liability issues?
- What are the safety and hygiene requirements for the home office?
- How will office closures, snow days, and emergency conditions affect remote workers?
- How will the remote worker be accounted for in terms of office events, performance evaluations, and promotion opportunities?

Performance/Conduct Expectations

- How will the supervisor ensure that performance expectations are clear, specific, and measurable?
- How will the supervisor plan, assign, and review work and measure performance?
- What are the expectations for work/life balance and boundaries? For example, will remote workers with young children be expected to use childcare while working?
- Are telecommuters required to spend at least some time in the office on a regular basis?
- What is the required mode and frequency of communication between the remote worker and the supervisor and between the remote worker and the team?

Training

- What training and education will be provided for remote workers, as well as their managers and co-workers, to prepare?

Review of Remote Work Arrangements

- How often will the arrangement be reviewed to ensure feasibility?
- Under what conditions will the employer terminate or modify the telecommuting arrangement?

Request for Working Remote

Consider requiring a written employee request. Such a document helps the employee understand many of the key components involved in determining if remote work is a practical arrangement for that employee. The request form should include the employee's specific request in terms of hours of work, why the employee feels he or she is a suitable candidate for remote work, how the employee's job lends itself to working from home and how the employee will make arrangements at home to provide a productive at-home work environment. In signing the request, the employee acknowledges that he or she has read the remote work policy. Next steps could include the supervisor making an initial determination whether to allow the employee to remote work, with subsequent approval by the division head and HR.

Once it has been established the employee and the job are suitable for remote work, HR and the supervisor should come to a formal or informal remote work agreement with the employee. A written agreement clarifies the arrangement and ensures the parties know their rights and responsibilities. However, some employers prefer a less formal arrangement which provides more flexibility for the employer to change the arrangement.

Ergonomics and Injury

Both the employer and employee are responsible to ensure the employee's work environment, whether at the employer's office or the employee's home, is comfortable. Low noise levels, minimal distractions, adequate lighting, and proper ventilation are important so provide guidelines and expectations. Home office ergonomics should also be considered since an ergonomically correct office provides comfort and reduces the potential of repetitive motion injury and back strain.

Remote workers are covered by federal, state, and local safety and worker injury/illness laws. For telecommuters, work and home life blend together and so do the concepts of responsibility and liability. Providing home office safety guidelines that require employees to acknowledge understanding is a good first step to ensuring things like loose cords or uneven surfaces don't create potential hazards for injury.

Other Home Office Considerations

- Office supplies, equipment, and utilities—provide clear guidelines on who pays for what and specify that the supplies are for work-related use.
- Damage, loss, and theft of items—make it clear who is responsible if anything happens to company property.
- Insurance—determine whether the employer or the employee’s insurance will cover the employee-owned or employer-owned equipment and furniture in employees’ home offices.
- Employment law—the telecommuter should be provided with all required state and federal posters.
- Separation between work and personal time—consider whether the remote worker should have a separate phone line and post office box for work-related mail.

When establishing telecommuting programs, employers must consider all angles carefully prior to implementation. To ensure the best chance of success, managers, supervisors, HR, IT, safety experts and insurance carriers should be consulted and involved in the planning and implementation process.