CONNECTING
in a
VIRTUAL
WORLD

By Kim Holloway and Bella DiFranzo

While some institutions converted to a hybrid model in the aftermath of the COVID-19 de-densification of campuses (a model in which employees are locally sourced and come into the office a couple of days a week) more and more institutions are hiring nationally or even internationally, allowing their teams to work fully remotely and in some instances, across time zones. While working remote has brought institutions and employees many benefits including reduced commuting time, lower real estate costs and better work-life balance, it also brings unique challenges that compel us to find new ways to foster meaningful connections and ensure continued professional career development and enterprise growth of the research support workforce.

Be intentional about interactions

Both institutions and employees need to be intentional about hybrid or remote work situations. For institutions, making sure activities and programs are inclusive, from both human resources and operational perspectives, to ensure no remote workers are left behind or aside, is critical. Successful programs might include targeted mentoring programs in which established mentors are specifically assigned to mentees to help answer questions and work on joint projects together. Depending on the situation and input needed from participants, small consistent virtual group interactions often work better than larger virtual meetings. Providing people opportunities or encouraging them to communicate one on one or in small groups may also help people open up in larger group meetings. Whatever the response from the institution, the programs need to be intentional, and regularly revamped to ensure employees are satisfied. For employees, try investing in all kinds of work relationships, both within and outside your immediate sphere, where finding connections can be particularly fruitful in terms of personal and professional growth. Recognizing colleagues' personal updates, career milestones, and "wins" will generate the social connective threads a virtual workplace might lack. Taking every opportunity to meet in person whenever possible, for example at conferences, is also critical.

Social connections are important

We are social creatures, regardless of whether we are introverts or extroverts.

When we are in the same physical office, we run into each other in the hallway and get into "watercooler conversations" naturally. We build trust when we know each other on both a personal and professional level. During an in-person group meeting, we tend to start chatting with each other before a meeting begins; in a virtual group meeting, we tend to mute ourselves and wait for the meeting to begin and there is little to no personal conversation. To counteract this, meeting facilitators can try some fun check-in questions before diving into business topics to start the virtual meeting with a personal connection. Often the pre-meeting can generate some fun conversations and important work-related information can bubble up at the same time. Or during meetings, allow folks to go "off agenda" from time to time, if needed, to help generate a strong camaraderie between teammates. If time is limited for a large group meeting, start the meeting with a two-word check-in to allow everyone to articulate something that is on their mind in that moment. Meaningful engagements outside of the immediate workspace are also important to the mental health of the remote workforce. For example, by volunteering to raise guide dog puppies, joining a parent/infant group, or engaging in community civic organizations, workers can ensure they get their social interactions met outside the office when they're not having face to face contact during the workday.

Getting to know each other on a personal level will help lighten the mood of a physical or virtual room and improves our communications and connections. Personal matters affect our business selves. Our lives can't be completely and clearly divided into work and personal. We want to feel comfortable bringing our whole selves to the workplace, sharing exciting personal news and updates, and releasing the pressure value on a strained mind in a safe space when needed. Social communications help us connect, focus, and achieve our highest potential at work.

Investment in tools and infrastructure is key

Technology (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, Slack to name few) has enabled institutions to offer employees more flexibility at work so that we can meet, chat, and collaborate, no matter where we are in the world. It is important to ensure that these tools are used most effectively in remote working

situations, and coupled with other communication software, such as virtual whiteboards or other tools, so that everyone feels like they can contribute to a meeting, whether they are remote or in person.

While software is contributing to our connectiveness, having a safe, comfortable, and ergonomic setup in the home office can increase productivity. Investing in infrastructure for employees' home offices may be a new obstacle for institutions and creates both financial and logistic challenges. However, helping employees to have the most productive setup can go a long way in increasing employee appreciation and work productivity, and can also ensure savings on physical work locations for the institution. Other operational considerations for the remote world include metrics and productivity reports, maintaining security and confidentiality for remote employees and their data, and HIPPA or other confidential research requirements.

Productivity increased - how to measure using metrics

What should productivity look like in a virtual job? People in their seats in front of the computer between 8-5, or getting the work done efficiently and effectively without a prescribed, fixed working schedule? The answer certainly would be "it depends." It depends on the role and the institution's culture and operational needs. But flexibility should be afforded when it can be, to give employees the ownership of their time, set their goals and how they'd like to get the work done. For those who would like to engage in real time communications without messaging delays or scheduling a formal meeting, managers might try setting up a few hours in a day or week as open office hours during which people can reach out. Metrics and performance assessments might need to change, adapt, and reflect the changing work environment. It is important to remind ourselves of our ultimate goals in supporting researchers in securing research funding to advance science and technology while not being bogged down by prescribed methods and manmade metrics in assessing job performances.

Leadership sets the tone

Managing in person and virtually are different. While the demand for working remotely has been increasing, some managers are struggling in managing virtually because we can't simply see whether someone is in their office working or not during the office hour. However, this is where trust and setting the tone from the outset comes in. Employees who perform at a high level in traditional office settings will find ways to adapt and perform well virtually. Have the trust in people, come up with goals and metrics that will keep people on track in terms of performance and share the expectations for remote work clearly. This is a dramatically changed workforce and will need new ways of leading. ◼

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