

Tips for Managers Supporting Remote and Flexible Employees

Remote work and flexible work arrangements come with unique challenges. As many teams, schools, and departments continue to work remotely and flexibly during the COVID-19 pandemic, it may be helpful to refresh our thinking about ways to support employees during this time.

Key Takeaways:

- Be mindful of when meetings are scheduled to ensure that they do not spill over into personal time (e.g. evening hours or lunch time).
- Create a culture that is respectful of personal time by labeling emails sent during non-traditional work hours with expected response times (e.g. “For tomorrow” or “For Monday”).
- Reassess goals and priorities frequently to ensure that the needs of the school/department are being met and that employees’ workloads are manageable.
- Encourage staff to take breaks throughout the day and to use Paid Time Off to support overall well-being.

Please read the full recommendations below to help manage ongoing remote and flexibly working employees.

Continued Communication is Key

As a manager, being accessible to all of your team members is vital to their success and the success of the team, school, or department. Continue regular one-to-one check-ins using video conferencing, in addition to other phone calls and emails, as needed. Reassess the meetings that were set at the start of the pandemic to ensure that the schedule still works for your staff. For example, lunch hour meetings may be problematic for staff with young children who are home doing remote schooling. As always, it is best practice to avoid scheduling meetings during non-work hours, unless discussed and approved by all meeting participants.

Continue using video conference tools like Zoom to keep individuals from feeling isolated and to maintain communication among your team. However, while face-to-face connections can support collaboration, it is also important to occasionally take a break from the camera. Consider making some meetings camera-free to lessen fatigue.

Email and Phone Culture

Working remotely and flexibly allows for work to be done during non-traditional work times. While working outside of “regular” work time may work well for some, it is important to clearly state expectations of workflow. For example, if a manager prefers to work late in the evenings or on weekends, it is helpful to include a note stating “For tomorrow” or “For Monday” at the start of the subject line so that employees do not feel that they need to step away from

personal time to reply. Certain email systems also allow for message delivery to be scheduled so that you can draft an email to be sent during the regular work day.

Calling employees outside of work hours should be avoided whenever possible, unless previously discussed.

These practices will help to create a culture of respect for the separation of work and personal time.

Assess and Re-Set Expectations as Needed

Understanding that distance and alternative schedules may lead to uncertainty among flexible and remote employees, it is helpful for the manager to provide a sense of structure through clear roles and responsibilities, precise objectives, and performance measures.

As remote work continues, reconnect with your employees to make sure that the current flexible schedule is allowing them to manage their home and work roles and responsibilities.

Have ongoing conversations about goal setting and project prioritization to help employees manage their work and monitor their own performance. As work and personal situations continue to evolve with the pandemic, expectations, priorities, and timelines may need to be adjusted.

Be Understanding and Flexible

While it is a good idea to maintain formal work schedules as much as possible, being flexible with employees is essential for their success and the success of the whole unit. As employees continue to work remotely, it is important to remember that they may have various living situations such as living in multigenerational households, with roommates, and in spaces that may be small with little privacy. Additionally, depending on caregiving responsibilities, it may be best for the employee to work early in the morning or later in the evening, so it is helpful to be flexible on both ends of the day. As noted above, the best practice is to clearly communicate work and life needs and, if work is being done outside of traditional hours, to be mindful of expectations around response times.

Provide Regular Feedback and Inspiration

To maintain motivation and engagement, employees should be recognized and rewarded for their successes, both individually and publicly. Remember to let employees know how their work is important to the bigger picture - how it contributes to the success of the team, school, department, and/or the broader university. Make these celebrations part of the team's culture by acknowledging individual and team wins during larger virtual meetings and gathering.

Encourage Work/Life Integration Strategies

Many remote and flexible employees have very fluid boundaries between their personal and professional lives because their office is now in their home. Encourage employees to stick to a schedule with allocated work blocks throughout the day and week. Maintain communication about the employee's work schedule, keeping in mind it may change on a daily and weekly basis. Share the schedule with other team members who may rely on the employee for meetings and other collaborative work. Encourage your employees to take lunch and other breaks throughout the day to maintain overall well-being and avoid burnout. Employees should also feel like they are able to "shut work off" to rest and recharge at the end of the day, whenever that may be. Remind employees to utilize COVID-Absence Days or other Paid Time Off when needed to rest or to manage other responsibilities.

Flexibility Supports Columbia's Sustainability Plan

The uptake of Flexible Work Arrangements supports the [University's Sustainability Plan](#) and its subsequent commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from commute travel and peak-hour congestion as a result of university operations.

Questions?

Contact the Office of Work/Life at worklife@columbia.edu

*Adapted from

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