

WORKING FROM HOME BEST PRACTICES:

An essential guide for creating a positive experience for your employees

As federal and provincial recommendations continue to encourage social distancing, many organizations are responding by implementing work from home strategies for their workforce. The suddenness of the need for these policies, however, can be daunting. If this is your organization's first time allowing employees to work from home, you may have questions about the technology and policy requirements that need to be put in place immediately, while all organizations currently seeing a surge in the number of their employees who are working from home may have broader concerns about maintaining productivity and engagement, especially when we don't know how long our new reality will last.

To alleviate some of these concerns, we've gathered a list of working from home best practices that can help your organization provide a positive experience for your employees while maintaining business continuity.

First time implementing a work from home policy? Here's what you need to do immediately.

- **Make sure your employees have the resources they need to work from home.**

This is specific to your organization but generally includes ensuring your employees have items such as a laptop, VOIP headset, and other hardware and peripherals they will need. Also ensure that employees have the collaboration tools they'll need: messaging apps, conferencing tools, online file storage etc.

- **Establish an IT infrastructure that supports remote work.**

Can employees access their email and shared drives remotely and securely? Is IT support easily available for employees who need it?

- **Encourage a security mindset.**

Remind employees that they share responsibility for the company's security and the protection of its data. Discourage use of public Wi-Fi and working in a public setting. An obvious tool to facilitate a secure connection to your network is to set up a virtual private network (VPN) for employees.

- **Make and communicate plans for in-person tasks.**

Most offices have a variety of in-person tasks that support business functions. Gather a list of these tasks and ensure that each is addressed in your new work model. Ensure that you know how mail will be received and opened (and provide gloves, masks and cleaning supplies for those who are doing so). Cancel any regularly-scheduled shipments of supplies if possible.

When transitioning a large portion of your workforce to remote work, it's inevitable that you will have to change the way you work together. Some things to consider:

- **Set expectations.**

Even if it's not your first time working with a remote team, re-establishing expectations with your employees for this particular situation can help set the tone for the way you work together in the weeks and months ahead. It includes setting basic guidelines for hours of work, giving hourly employees instructions for timekeeping, reiterating vacation and personal day policies, etc.

- **Establish your communication plan.**

Once the flurry of activity to get your employees set up remotely subsides, it's helpful to think about the situation from your employees' perspective. Especially for those individuals who haven't worked remotely before, fears of isolation and disengagement from their team and the company can be very real. Since this is everyone's new reality for the foreseeable future, it's important to address some of those concerns through a clear communication plan.

You should start by ensuring that your team has a thorough understanding of the communication tools available to them and outlining the preferred modes of communication. Next, convert any regular meetings to their online equivalents by, for example, sending conference call information to participants ahead of time. You may even want to run a test meeting if some of your employees are new to the online tools you will be using. Lastly, make sure you set expectations regarding response times and after-hours communication protocols.

- **Increase the frequency of check-ins.**

Another way to alleviate any fears of isolation that your team may have is by increasing the number of check-ins. This can mean holding daily virtual huddles or starting an online project tracker, but it also means making an effort to informally catch up with your team. Making yourself available to your employees encourages open communication and can help quickly address any concerns they have.

Truly successful work from home policies re-orient corporate culture to support teamwork and collaboration. Some things to think about include:

- **Set expectations, broadly.**

Switching to a remote workforce likely isn't the only change your organization will be making in the coming weeks. It's important to remember that your employees need to be kept informed about changing company priorities both as reassurance and so that they can continue contributing meaningfully to your business.

- **Make communication routine.**

Teamwork, collaboration and communication are the basis of a team's success — no matter where your team is located. While the tools we use to do so will likely look different, the necessity of working together hasn't gone away. Encourage communication and collaboration as a regular part of each team

member's day; establishing a routine that supports connection, collaboration, productivity and well-being can help bring a semblance of normality to our new working situation while also giving you an opportunity to communicate your appreciation.

Lastly, as difficult as it might be to look ahead right now, you can also use this time as an opportunity to re-evaluate your operational procedures around remote working policies in the long term.

- **Re-evaluate your policy.**

You won't have a perfect remote working policy right off the bat. It's imperative to evaluate what's working and what isn't so that you can make adjustments as you go along. This will help improve your team's productivity in the short term and give you a viable remote work policy in the long term.

- **Improve the digital skills of your employees.**

Your new working situation may not have been an easy transition for some of your employees. This is a good opportunity to evaluate where your employees may need some re-skilling and to look into ways to help get them training.

For your employees, working from home poses its own challenges. Below, we've provided a few tips you can share with your employees to help make their transition easier.

An employee's guide to working from home

Whether it's your first time working remotely or you're looking for a refresher, consider these tips to make sure you stay productive, engaged and healthy while working from home.

- **Establish your workspace.**

This is so fundamental that you should consider it a rule: designate your workspace, however that looks for you. You may have a home office or the space to create a work station. If not, consider designating a specific area of your home as your work space; a specific chair at the kitchen table or a low-traffic corner of the common room can be good options.

- **Ensure your workspace is ready.**

Prepare your workspace for your specific needs. Make sure you have a reliable Internet connection (and you know how to join it on your work devices). Set up your laptop and other work devices at your work station. Ensure you have the peripherals you need and make sure you can charge the devices easily.

- **Let other people in your household know that you will be working from home.**

Whether it's your family or roommates, letting everyone who shares your living space know that you will be working from home and asking them to limit their contact with you is a useful measure to take at the beginning. It sets the

expectations about your limited availability to them. Purchasing noise-cancelling headphones can also help you avoid distractions while signaling that you are unavailable.

- **Communication is a shared responsibility.**

Once your workspace is set up and you're back to work, remember that communication is a two-way street. Punctual responses are important, of course, but reaching out proactively to your manager and team members is the best way to keep teamwork and collaboration going forward.

- **Establish a personal routine.**

Because your physical world has likely grown smaller as we practice social distancing and stay at home more, keeping to a personal routine can help bring some structure to your life. One recommendation is to continue your work-life routine as normal: start and end your work day at the same times that you used to, eat the same snacks, take lunch at the same time. If that's not possible (and it might not be feasible while you and your employer adjust to the new normal), create a new personal routine that will help you face your day. This might include making sure you have breakfast every morning, getting dressed before work, taking the dog out at the same time every day, and taking a full lunch break to step away from your desk.

- **Take breaks.**

Make an effort to give yourself time for breaks. Think about it: when you were in the office, you likely had some go-to ways to break up your day, whether it was stepping away from your desk to go to the washroom or lunchroom, chatting with a coworker for a few minutes about your weekend plans, or taking meetings in a meeting room away from your desk. Now that you're potentially only steps away from the washroom and kitchen and the meeting rooms are all online, give yourself permission to take short breaks to reset.

- **Stay active.**

You will probably find that you are less physically active while working from home, as even incidental activity (commuting, going to get that 2 pm coffee) will be lessened. Make an effort to get active! Exercise classes and instructional videos are widely available online and in app form. And as the weather gets better, getting outside for a short walk can help clear your mind and expand your world so you're ready to be more productive when you get back to your desk.

- **Stay in touch.**

We're social creatures. Staying in your home for an extended period of time can exacerbate feelings of isolation. But social distancing doesn't mean you have to give up on your social contacts. Reach out to your friends and family through the phone or messaging apps; they're likely also feeling isolation set in and will be happy to hear from you!