How to Manage Remote Workers

With a global customer base, eMazzanti Technologies positions engineers and project managers in various locations worldwide to support that reach. As a technology service provider, the company also designs remote connectivity solutions for clients who are looking to expand their remote workforce. Based on 10+ years of experience, here's our take on how to manage remote workers.

Job Functions that Fit Remote Work

Certain job functions provide a more natural fit for remote workers. In general, we have had greater success with client facing positions (sales, network engineers and project managers) than back office employees (administrative, bookkeeping, HR) working remotely.

Administrative staff need to collaborate with each other frequently and that makes working remotely less practical. Their jobs also turn out to be the most repetitive, task based and "paper heavy" of the firm. Accountability for those employees becomes difficult as we track individual tasks differently for them than for technical staff.

Problems with Remote Workers

We've had a few problems with remote employees in our company and with clients. Here are some of the highlights (or lowlights):

- Taking on a full-time job locally and claiming both salaries
- Directly competing with their employer in their local market
- Not performing job functions
- Refusing to communicate or take responsibility
- Cozying up to clients and discounting their work to the detriment of their employer
- Doing side work for clients
- Working on unsecured technology which exposes clients or their employer

Fostering Good Communication

If both parties establish expectations up front and employ good technology to support those expectations, communication should function well. We use Microsoft Teams to ensure an open line of communication. We also deploy Teams for our clients.

We also maintain defined work hours in each geography. Established protocols for handing off work to the next logical geography ensure round the clock coverage where needed. Further, we embrace a client-centric philosophy where all conversations with staff are framed around the needs of the client.

- Are they managing deliverables in a timely manner?
- Are they responsive to the client?
- Is the client satisfied with the quality of their work?

They also know that we gather feedback about their interactions with in-office staff and work to maintain those relationships as well.

How to Give Criticism/Negative Feedback

First, hire people who can handle an open dialogue. Our hiring process usually involves multiple onsite visits and meeting a lot of our team. Personality weighs as heavily in the process as technical skill.

We also plan regular onsite meetings in our office in Hoboken to reinforce the fact that we need to keep on a mutual path. At those meetings we set goals, review how expectations are being met and address any technology needs that will help us to work together more effectively.

Those meetings normally include training on new communication platforms, conveying any new equipment they may need to perform their job, and introducing them to new onsite staff. If we feel a topic may be more sensitive, we address it during an onsite meeting.

There is always a danger that someone might rebuff criticism. But we find that if we bring the conversation back to addressing the needs of the client and ask them to adjust their behavior to suit those needs, it externalizes the issue in a way that allows for cooler heads to prevail.

How to Track Output/Productivity

The key to maintaining high utilization rates with remote staff is being completely upfront about expectations, hard goals or performance metrics you expect them to meet.

We use internal management software that has built-in accountability to the client and escalates notifications to management when the process doesn't move forward as expected. We track things like client feedback scores, time spent working on particular requests and who is accountable at each step of the process.

We calculate things like utilization vs. client satisfaction to figure out if a staff member is as effective when they are busy or when they devote more time to one client. We go over that information during periodic reviews.

The biggest challenge, to that end, is ensuring that the staff understand the importance of working within the established systems and with a high degree of accuracy and detail.

We constantly repeat the mantra, "If it didn't happen in the system, it didn't happen".

They work with the understanding that their metrics are penalized if the data isn't there, but we still must keep on them to enter their time and update service tickets.

We also enforce our expectations with an effective Acceptable Use Policy and a well written Employee Handbook. The importance of those two items in managing remote staff cannot be overstated.

Technology to Manage Remote Workers

The same technology which you employ to make remote connectivity possible can have a lot of benefits for your central office location as well. It can make your office more flexible to movement within the space, hoteling, using conference spaces, etc.

Remote technology makes a company more agile by easing the transition of moving to a new office or opening a new branch. It allows office employees to work seamlessly on the road using that same investment.

We use the very technology and services originally installed to support and manage remote workers to allow our in-office staff to work during the current crisis. It's also been indispensable in the wake of hurricanes and on occasions when needed to help clients to resume operations after damage or loss of their physical office.

Culture of Accountability and Inclusion

The most important role of the business owner in maintaining a remote workforce is creating a culture of accountability. Equally important is always making yourself and company resources available to your team in the field. It's very frustrating to be outside of the office and feel shut out.

We include our remote workers in our staff parties and client events wherever possible to make them feel like a part of the team. Every month, we celebrate all the staff birthdays for that month on one planned day. Our remote workers call in to a video chat so they can sing Happy Birthday along with everyone else.

Sometimes we have five countries and five states represented on that screen and I never feel more proud of what we've built than in those moments.