

Using a Research Approach in Human Resources

Report Title: How to effectively manage remote workers / teams.

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Date: 09/07/2021

Word count (maximum of 2250 words) : 2233

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Executive summary

This research report aims to provide line managers with information on how to effectively manage virtual workers / teams.

The methodology included gathering of secondary data by a literature review, which identifies elements of best practice and current trends along with a critical analysis of research literature. Primary qualitative data was collected through a focus group of employees.

The survey sample size was 56, these were identified as the 56 long term agency workers contracted to Dow Silicones by Adecco recruitment working off site and being managed remotely by Dow line managers, the total number of agency workers are 106, but with 50 being production employees who are not managed remotely

they were not relevant or included. The focus groups were split into 10/11 employees per zoom meeting and focused on several questions drawn up based on the literature review (Doc.1) Answers can be found in the appendices (Doc.2)

Findings from the research were the need for high levels of communication from line managers and the team, the need for support and social chats to create an office culture. To be able to trust the team and be trusted by their manager to do their job well and to understand the wider team's capacity, with many employees mentioning daily catch-up meetings would be helpful. The importance of the right technology was highlighted in the literature review, feedback from the focus group was that this is already in place which is a positive.

Based on the above it was clear that an improvement needed to be made in the management of remote workers to promote wellbeing. Communication needs to be increased and better managed to help with trust, team cohesion, information sharing, to ensure communication is not just transactional and to build good relationships.

Recommendations discussed include:

- Managers need to discuss, agree on timings / frequency and set up regular meetings with employees / teams to update each other, check team capacity, agree on timeframes (CIPD, 2020b) and make time for social chats, so that people can get to know each other as people and engage socially (Rescuetime,2019). They need to aim to over communicate (Forbes, 2020). Setting up a daily virtual huddle to keep connected as a team on each other's wellbeing and keep workflow on track (CIPD,2020d)
- Regular one to one meetings need to be arranged between managers and employees to build rapport, set expectations, provide feedback and talk about ad hoc issues. During these 1-1s managers need to have physiologically supportive conversations (CIPD,2020a) to be on the lookout for any signs of distress and get employees to open up about any problems, support and care for them and involve occupational health, EAP programs, healthcare and HR if needed. (Gartner,2021). Managers need to understand the unique circumstances of each employee and show flexibility (Forbes, 2020).
- Managers need to vary the channels of communication, using video as much as possible to make it personal (HBR,2020) but consider conducting some outside by walking and talking. (Unmind,2020)
- Managers need to lead by example regarding wellbeing by having and encouraging employees to have healthy routines, set boundaries and conditions to their work. Agree on a set of ground rules and champion your teams' rules for well-being (Gartner, 2021)
- Managers need to build trust with employees by mentoring rather than managing by clearly defining goals and desired results, then allowing employees to execute (Forbes 2020). Trust your team to do their job without micromanaging, focusing on results rather than activity (CIPD, 2020d) Encouraging shared leadership amongst the team and support collaborative ways of working to develop cohesive, interpersonal relationships. (CIPD, 2020c)

The report also identifies the research and analysis does have limitations. During the focus groups some employees did remain silent or quiet and not voice their opinions, whilst some did dominate which could have led to the feedback not being a full picture. Additionally, as the focus group was unstructured, it made it more difficult to analyse the data.

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1. Introduction

Adecco UK are the world's largest recruitment agency, operating in 60 countries, 500 locations and having an average of 70,000 workers out each day (Adecco, 2021) with a turnover of £653,968 (Companies house, 2020). As part of Adecco's global partnership with Dow Silicones, we supply long term agency workers to their Manufacturing site in Barry, South Wales. There is a total of 106 agency workers in various roles including production, engineering, planning, IT, administration and warehouse, working alongside DOW's permanent workforce of 800 employees based at the site. Agency workers play a key role in the business and DOW are keen to ensure these employees are managed well, treated equally, and are retained in the business long term, with some agency workers with over 10 years' service. Historically all current agency workers were based onsite, however during Covid19 crisis a decision was made that non-essential staff onsite would move to home

working, with only production, warehouse and maintenance roles staying onsite. This resulted in 56 of Adecco's employees moving to home working, being overseen by Adecco's account manager for DOW, but being managed by DOW's line manager as they would be if they were onsite. Feedback will be given, and recommendations made to the key stakeholders which are Adecco's account manager, DOW HR, DOW line managers and the agency staff.

Aim.

The aim of this research is to provide those line managers with information on how to effectively manage virtual workers / teams.

Objectives:

To critically evaluate the existing literature on managing virtual teams effectively.

To identify and critically analyse the feedback from current Adecco employees on what they feel is needed to be managed effectively remotely.

To make recommendations to improve the management of virtual workers and teams of Adecco employees at DOW.

2. Literature Review

Literature from a range of reliable sources was analysed with several key themes became apparent:

2.1 Wellbeing

A study of 3,500 remote workers by Buffer (2020) showed 20% cited loneliness as their biggest struggle with working remotely, managers need to do all they can to engage them socially with the rest of the team (Lighthouse, 2021) and make time for social conversation to build rapport and ease communication between people who may not meet often (CIPD, 2020d). They also need have the confidence to have a psychological supportive conversation, to get employees to open up about what is really going on with them and if managers can show vulnerability and open up themselves about how they feel it can build up trust (CIPD, 2020a) Being on the lookout for signs of distress in employees and making it clear that they support and care for them, offering help and involving occupational health, EAP programs, healthcare and HR if needed. (Gartner, 2021). Managers need to understand the unique circumstances of each employee and show flexibility. (Forbes, 2020)

The well-being of your team members is critical to their engagement. Encourage employees to have healthy routines, set boundaries and conditions to their work, to ensure good mental and physical health and lead by example by agreeing on a set of ground rules as a team and build the routines that will keep your people sane in the long run, champion your team's rules for well-being (Gartner, 2021)

2.2 Trust

According to CIPD (2020b) Virtual teams high in trust outperform teams where trust is low and also share more information, are more committed to the organisation, and

collectively learn more. Leaders need to build trust with employees and role model cultural norms (CIPD,2020c) as well as set expectations, be clear about mutual expectations and trust your team to get on without micromanaging, focusing on results rather than activity (CIPD, 2020d) Mentoring more than managing by clearly defining the goals and desired results, then allowing employees to execute. (Forbes,2020). Building trust can drive innovation (Deloitte,2020)

2.3 Technology

Equip employees with the technology they need to be successful (Gartner 2021) Synchronise work schedules as far as possible and encourage the use of rich media for communication such as using video conferencing, which gives participants many of the visual cues that they would have if they were face-to-face, helps reduce the sense of isolation among teams and is useful for complex or sensitive conversations, as it feels more personal than written or audio-only communication. (HBR,2020)

2.4 Communication

Designing an effective structure for good communication and being ready to recognise what isn't working and changing it fast is key (McKinsey,2020) Managers should help virtual teams set rules for communication. In a team session, team members can decide to have weekly update meetings, agree on set time frames for responses to team messages, or to be as transparent as possible in their messages and feedback, without fear of hurting the expectations of other teammates. (CIPD, 2020b) also asking employees for their preferred times for meetings, questions, or calls can help them feel respected and acknowledged as well as showing them what you are working on. (Rescuetime,2019)

Managers should share information such as appropriate updates or learnings from other meetings and projects and invite their team to do the same (CIPD,2020d) and build a culture of adding people on calls, if you are in a virtual meeting and think x should be involved, and if you were in the office, you would just nip and get them, do this virtually there and then if they are available. (Lighthouse,2021a)

Getting to know each other as people is key, as it is easy for communication to be transactional when working remotely. Make time to let people talk and get to know each other, and chat about non work related things. Google's people analytics manager Veronica Gilrane writes "Instead of jumping right into an agenda, allow some time at the top of the meeting for an open-ended question, like 'what did you do this weekend?' It's an easy way to build remote connections and establish a rapport." (Rescuetime,2019)

Have regular one to ones and make these longer as there are no moments in the office to build rapport and talk about ad hoc issue. Try to avoid cancelling a one to one as this can build resentment and make employees feel unimportant. (Lighthouse,2021a)

Finding the right balance of communication as a manager is key, tailoring feedback and communications by considering that people can be more sensitive if they are feeling anxious or isolated. Communicating regularly not just when things go wrong (CIPD, 2020d) and Forbes (2020) suggests over communicating is imperative when

it comes to teams' tasks, duties, responsibilities and desired outcomes as well as setting clear expectations and requesting feedback to ensure alignment, not simply assuming the team understands where they need to focus. Using simple pulse surveys to ask specific questions or track output to collect data can be effective (Gartner, 2021)

Carrie-Ann Odium, HR Operations manager at Freshfields suggests varying communication channels and consider conducting 1-1 calls outside by walking and talking. (Unmind,2020)

2.5 Tracking capacity & progress

Awareness of your team's individual and collective capacity and having a continuous overview of task progression is key to engagement and productivity. Managers can help employees prioritise existing and new tasks, continuously update capacity to know who can support on what and when, maintain a shared overview of tasks. (Deloitte, 2020)

2.6 Team Cohesion

Managers should set direction, help employees work effectively and focus on energising the team and providing psychological safety by reiterating a shared purpose, encouraging levity and informal video get togethers, and get to know one another as people (McKinsey, 2020) They should agree on ways of working and make sure every team member is clear about how they will work together remotely, how to keep each other updated and how frequently, and have a daily virtual huddle to keep connected as a team on each other's wellbeing and keep workflow on track (CIPD,2020d)

Managers need to empower employees and promote self leadership, as well as embrace failure and learn from it. (Deloitte,2020)

3. Methodology

The methodology included gathering of secondary and primary data. Firstly secondary data was captured in the literature review where numerous reliable sources of varied literature were reviewed to find key trends and best practice. From the findings of the literature review, primary qualitative data was collected through a focus group of employees, using an interpretivist philosophical approach. I chose the questions for this focus group based on themes that arose during the literature review (Doc.1) Anderson (2013) and Bryman and Bell 2015 cited in Taylor and Woodham 2016 p.99) focus group method is good for promoting dialogue and discussion and allows researchers to find out about a range of attitudes and opinions however there is always a risk that one or two individuals might dominate the discussions. I did also consider conducting interviews as it would allow me to gather a wealth of knowledge however decided against it due to it being time consuming to organise, administer and analyse the output (Anderson (2013) and Bryman and Bell 2015 cited in Taylor and Woodham 2016 p.99). I chose the sample of participants by including all employees that were working remotely (56 in total), to gain as much knowledge as possible. I took into account ethical considerations, such as the focus

group being voluntary and where I felt that some sessions were being dominated by one or two employees by being aware of this, I was able to try and increase interaction from others. During the focus groups I wrote write down the employee's answers to the questions asked during our conversations and made time after all focus groups were completed to review the feedback and summarise (Doc 2).

4. Findings/Discussion

On the whole, the findings from the primary research mirrored the recommendations found in the secondary research with employees voicing the importance of high levels of communication from line managers and the team, many employees stated “*Daily or weekly update meetings as a team would be really useful, as well as one to ones, non work related communication and not just communicating when thing go wrong*”. (Doc.2) Many emphasised the need for support and social chats to create an office culture “*There is no office culture or anyone to chat to as there is in the office, this can be lonely*” (Doc.2) To be able to trust their team and be trusted by their manager to do their job well and to understand the wider team's capacity, with many mentioning daily catch-up meetings would be helpful. The importance of the right technology was highlighted in the literature review, feedback from the focus group was that this is already in place which is a positive.

5. Conclusions

- It is clear from the literature review and focus group that there needs to be an improvement in the management of remote workers to promote wellbeing and increase engagement. Managers need to discuss, agree on timings / frequency and set up regular meetings with employees / teams to update each other, check team capacity, agree on timeframes (CIPD, 2020b) and make time for social chats, so that people can get to know each other as people and engage socially (Rescuetime,2019). They need to aim to over communicate. (Forbes, 2020) Setting up a daily virtual huddle to keep connected as a team on each other's wellbeing and keep workflow on track (CIPD,2020d). Regular one to one meetings need to be arranged between managers and employees to build rapport, set expectations, provide feedback and talk about ad hoc issues. During these 1-1s managers need to have physiologically supportive conversations (CIPD,2020a) to be on the lookout for any signs of distress and get employees to open up about any problems, support and care for them and involve occupational health, EAP programs, healthcare and HR if needed. (Gartner,2021). Managers need to understand the unique circumstances of each employee and show flexibility (Forbes, 2020). They need to vary the channels of communication, using video as much as possible to make it personal (HBR,2020) but consider conducting some outside by walking and talking. (Unmind,2020) Managers also need to lead by example regarding wellbeing by having and encouraging employees to have healthy routines, set boundaries and conditions to their work. Agree on a set of ground rules and champion your teams' rules for well-being

(Gartner, 2021). They need to build trust with employees by mentoring rather than managing by clearly defining goals and desired results, then allowing employees to execute (Forbes 2020). Trust your team to do their job without micromanaging, focusing on results rather than activity (CIPD, 2020d) Encouraging shared leadership amongst the team and support collaborative ways of working to develop cohesive, interpersonal relationships. (CIPD, 2020c)

6. Recommendations for change

Based on the findings from the literature review and the primary research the following recommendations are made:

- Managers need to set up a daily virtual huddle to keep connected to the team, their wellbeing and workflow.
- Managers need to set up regular 1-1s to have physiologically supportive conversations, build rapport, set expectations and provide feedback.
- Managers need to vary the channels of communication.
- Managers need to lead by example on wellbeing.
- Managers need to build trust with employees by mentoring rather than managing.

7.Limitations

During the focus groups some employees did remain silent or quiet and not voice their opinions, whilst some did dominate which could have led to the feedback not being a full picture. Additionally, as the focus group was unstructured, it made it more difficult to analyse the data.

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Appendix

Doc.1

Questions for focus group

- Do you feel working remotely has had a negative or positive affect on your well-being?
- How can managers support your [well being](#)?
- Do you feel you have been provided with the right technology to carry out your work remotely?
- On a scale of 1-10 (1 being poor, 10 being excellent) how well do you feel management have communicated with you while working remotely?
- How can this be improved on?
- On a scale of 1-10 (1 being poor, 10 being excellent) how well do you think your team works together?
- How do you feel this can be improved on?
- As a team how well do you feel you have managed your time during remote work?
- How do you feel this can be improved on?

Doc.2

Main points from 5 x focus groups with 56 attendees in total held from daily from 3rd to 7th May 2021.

Questions below along with summarised answers.

- **Do you feel working remotely has had a negative or positive affect on your well-being?**

Both, working remotely has increased family time due to less time travelling so has allowed time for quality family activities such as walks, this coupled with not rushing around and being forced to slow down has increased wellbeing to some extend for those that do live with family.

However, on the flip side it has had a negative impact as it is very lonely, there is no office culture or anyone to chat to as there is in the office. Those living alone expressed finding this especially lonely.

- **How can managers support your [well being](#)?**

Check ins, virtual social engagement with the team, managers being approachable and sharing how they feel. Feeling understood. Have trust in us and our work.

- **Do you feel you have been provided with the right technology to carry out your work remotely?**

Yes – most were set up to work remotely if needed prior to the pandemic so systems were already in place.

- **On a scale of 1-10 how well do you feel management have communicated with you while working remotely?**

6

- **How can this be improved on?**

Daily or weekly update meetings. Being asked what days/times are suitable for a meeting instead of it just getting added to the Calander. Information sharing, providing updates from projects, meetings or other things going on within the organisation, One to Ones. Regular communication not just when things are wrong. More team communication (non work related)

- **On a scale of 1-10 how well do you think your team works together?**

7

- **How do you feel this can be improved on?**

Informal video get togethers, agree on ways of working and ensure everyone is clear on what is expected of them, agree how the team will communicate and when. Daily huddles. Managers promoting self leadership to support collaborative working. Trust in each other as individuals in a team and management trusting us to do our job well.

- **As a team how well do you feel you have managed your time during remote work?**

Mainly well. Although some sometimes feel as though there is no work life balance due to lack of routine and not really having anything else to need to finish work for, often leads to working longer hours leading to feeling of burn out.

- **How do you feel this can be improved on?**

Management being aware of each team members workload and capacity and a shared team overview of tasks, so it's easy to see who can support on what and when.