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WELCOME TO
THE VIRTUAL OFFICE

Just a few weeks ago, only 5.2% of US employees reported working from home all of the time and another 43% said they did so occassionally. By now, that figure has skyrocketed. Most of us are probably juggling cats on keyboards, sharing office hours (and bandwidth) with our spouses and children, and coordinating Zoom meetings rather than carpools. (In fact, Zoom reports their usage is up 649% in the last month!) For some people, this has been a rude awakening. Others are hoping this is a sign of things to come.

THE NEW RULES

Mike Murphy (2020) notes that when employees are remote, you have to stop the "body-in-seat mentality," the assumption that when employees are present, they are productive. Instead, research indicates that freelancers, who have worked remotely for years, are able to work intensely for dedicated blocks of time, while staying in contact via email, Slack, and scheduled team meetings.

- **Communicate clearly and be decisive.** Define the expectations and priorities and communicate them to the staff. If job functions or assignments have changed due to the crisis, let the employee know what is expected of them now.

- **Lead by example.** If you expect your employees to use technology with clients, be sure you are using it as well. If you expect them to be available during certain hours, let them know. Make sure all of your employees are following the established rules for work-from-home.

FOR WORKERS

The rules are pretty basic:

Get up; get dressed; maintain a schedule; if possible, follow your typical in-the-office-workday; create and work from a dedicated workspace; become proficient with email; learn to use the right tools and software; be social with your colleagues; and take a break away from the desk for lunch or to take a quick walk outdoors. (A list of tools and resources follows this blog.)

FOR MANAGERS

The rules are a bit more ambiguous:

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- **Be flexible.** This is an unusual time with offices, schools, and day cares closed. Suddenly, one or two parents are teachers, housekeepers, and full-time employees, who are also dealing with anxiety about the health of family members or the economy. Try to make adjustments as needed.

- **Adjust work expectations.** You might need to change how the work is spread out as employees work from home. Some may suddenly have too little to do; others might be overwhelmed. Watch out for those employees who might suddenly become a workhorse because they are afraid you won't think they are doing enough. You might need to use a software package or chat room to manage individual work groups or projects. (A list of tools and resources follows this blog). Watch out for those who might be cracking under the stress of the crisis.

- **Rethink meetings.** There are plenty of options from Skype and FaceTime, to Zoom or WebEx for keeping in touch. But, back-to-back conference calls and meetings can be exhausting. The simplest way to trim the time spent on meetings is to move to email or chat room type messaging. (See the information on Slack and Google Hangout Chats in the resource list linked below). Sometimes an informal phone call can be helpful and reduce the social isolation that many remote workers might feel.

- **Communicate and provide social outlets.** Set up regular times for chats, a weekly catch-up call, or establish a private Facebook page or chat room. Encourage communication between workers.

- **Provide the tools and resources your employees need.** Do they need software, a new monitor, or a headset? Employers want to avoid unexpected claims down the line (new desks, printers, etc.), so clarify at the start that new equipment must be approved by a supervisor before they procure it (Bernick, 2020).

- **This goes for information security as well.** Make sure the employee understands that work information must remain secure and provide necessary software and guidance as needed. You may want the employee to sign off saying they understand these conditions. (The Bernick, 2020 article listed in the bibliography provides other legal and personnel policy issues for employer review).

It will be tough for employees and employers to go back to traditional office work once these days are over. According to Murphy (2020), those who work from home are 87% more likely to love their job compared to 24% of those who work strictly from an office. Data indicates that these remote workers are not skyping in their pajamas!

Many employers may be willing to embrace a new, hybrid way of remote working in return for more engaged, happier, and productive workers.

A variety of resources, including software and articles on managing your virtual workplace, can be found **here.**

To learn more about best practices for managing remote workers, don't hesitate to reach out to a SBTDC counselor and schedule a virtual counseling appointment.

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