

How to Keep Remote Workers Inspired and Engaged

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Like all kinds of firms, family businesses have undergone a culture shock because of the pandemic. After starting out in the pandemic's early days as a survival mechanism, remote work is now mainstream and many employees prefer it. In fact, a [2021 survey](https://www.goodhire.com/resources/articles/state-of-remote-work-survey/) (<https://www.goodhire.com/resources/articles/state-of-remote-work-survey/>) showed that the great majority (68%) of employees prefer to work remotely and are reluctant to go back to a traditional workplace. The same study also found that 61% of employees are willing to take a pay cut to continue working remotely and 45% would quit their job if they were forced to return to the office full time.

On the other hand, the majority of managers prefer in-person work arrangements because they believe that organizational culture and productivity are better managed when employees are physically back at work (Elias, 2021). This is especially true at family firms, where the business-owning family often makes all of the decisions and holds all of the power (Martin, McKelvie & Lumpkin, 2016).

Many family businesses are therefore at a crossroads. While their managers prefer employees to physically return to the workplace, employees have embraced working from home and are refusing to go back to the old ways of work. Add in the current climate of picky job applicants, mass resignations, and a tight labor market, and the challenges are clear. Tradition-bound family businesses interested in attracting and retaining the best employees in this new world of work need to offer remote work options and change their management style accordingly -- and give employees new incentives to come in to the office, even if it's less frequently.

A New Way of Managing

Managers will need to change how they manage remote employees to keep them motivated, satisfied with their jobs, and focused on achieving business goals. This will not be easy for those accustomed to the centralized,

hierarchical style of traditional offices, where managers have all the responsibility and authority instead of delegating it. Family business owners often believe that this centralized authority helps them closely monitor operations, minimize conflict and errors, and ensure that strategies reflect the goals and values of the family. It also makes it possible for family business owners to continue their desired vision for the firm (Chrisman, Chua, DeMassis, Minola & Vismara, 2016).

However, having all this power in only a few hands has downsides. It can reduce employee participation and interpersonal communication, which can limit informal relationships and organizational commitment, especially when the firm has many remote employees. For example, it can be harder for remote workers to meet customer demands because the nature of the job requires them to work with different functional areas. (Green, Inman, Brown, & Willis, 2005). Centralized authority also makes it more difficult for employees working on the same project to coordinate with one another (Lam, Dixon, and DeCarlo (2017), especially when they work remotely. Employees in centralized organizations may also get lackadaisical as they wait for decisions from top managers and feel that their input does not matter.

These problems intensify with remote work, where the lack of face-to-face communication and informal meetings prevent the exchange of information; this can hinder employees' ability to effectively perform their jobs (Andres, 2002; Sahai, Ciby, & Kahwaji, 2020). The absence of face-to-face meetings and informal communication also creates a sense of workplace isolation and makes remote workers feel that they are not supported by their manager or organization (Mulki, Bardhi, Lask, & Nanavaty-Dahl, 2009).

The Challenge of Isolation

One of the most frequently cited concerns of employees working in remote offices is the perception of being

isolated from coworkers and social networks (Sahai, Ciby, & Kahwaji, 2020). Employees want to be part of a network of colleagues who provide help and support for specific work-related needs. Remote work can affect employees' perception of the availability of co-workers, peers, and supervisors for consultation and work-based social support. My own research has revealed that remote workers often feel "out-of-sight and out-of-mind," and feel their supervisors are not aware of their effort (Mulki et al., 2009). Separated by physical distance from coworkers, remote employees also feel left out of social networks and alone, which can prevent them from forming an attachment to their organization and from developing relationships with coworkers that could help their job performance.

This is why it is important for organizations to foster informal communication. Research indicates that it can increase the job satisfaction and organizational commitment of remote employees (Koch & Denner, 2022) and also improve productivity (Golden, Veiga, & Dino, 2008). Informal communication among coworkers is an integral part of organizational life in almost all firms, particularly for family businesses seeking to gain nonfamily employees' loyalty by making them feel "part of the family" (Barnett & Kellermanns, 2006; Mustafa, Caspersz, Ramos & Siew, 2018). The process of informal information exchange crosses departmental boundaries, with work groups and teams sharing critical information along with office gossip, rumors and personal tidbits (Koch & Denner, 2022). In turn, informal communication has a positive influence on employees' perception of being "kept in the loop" and their ability to complete their jobs effectively. Thus, while formal communication is used to share official information among employees to achieve organizational goals, informal communication often supplements formal communication by providing information critical for the effective completion of a job. In addition, informal communication is known to foster camaraderie and social bonds - antidotes for the workplace isolation that plagues many remote employees.

So what can businesses do to gain loyalty and improve productivity, no matter where their employees work?

Strategies in the New Work Environment

Through our own research of remote work

arrangements, studies by colleagues, and years of experience helping organizations manage and retain remote employees more effectively, we've seen that certain strategies can support both employees who want to work remotely and the business's desire to manage them effectively.

Make Hybrid Work the Norm

Institute a hybrid work arrangement in which employees come to the workplace 2 or 3 times a week. As the research above shows, this helps the business attract and retain most employees and still lets managers interact with them and observe them. The days employees are scheduled to physically attend work should be devoted to activities that benefit from their presence. These might include meetings with supervisors and/or colleagues, in-house training programs, and tasks that require the use of equipment or technology onsite.

Hybrid work allows many organizations to decrease their physical space, saving substantial costs. However, they should restructure the reduced space thoughtfully. To foster collaboration and information exchange among employees, consider restructuring the workspace as a common area with a few private offices. Having employees conduct their work in a common area with workstations gives them opportunities to interact with one another formally as well as informally. This will help them share information, solve problems and be more creative. Additionally, the social bonds created can help to ensure that remote employees build organizational commitment and do not feel isolated.

A hybrid work environment can lead to better coordination and direction if remote employees, especially new hires, understand how their work fits in with the work of others. To help all employees get on the same page, managers must clearly define and explain goals and identify milestones to success. Organizations should make mentors available to guide employees as needed; some supervisors may also need mentors who can help them manage remote employees.

Meet In-Person With Your Team

To improve the monitoring and motivation of employees, while also fostering a sense of camaraderie, managers should regularly meet in-person with employees and teams to provide and receive updates, and discuss new company initiatives, career opportunities, and projects.

In addition, managers should consider finding time to meet informally with their employees individually and learn more about their non-work lives, if the employee is willing. Work is just one part of a person's life, and managers who take the time to get to know employees, and listen and share, demonstrate that they care about their employees' well-being.

Remote employees often feel "out-of-sight, out-of-mind" and that their opinions are not wanted. Thus, it is important to encourage employee feedback and make sure that their suggestions are discussed with the group and incorporated if useful. If the idea is not worth pursuing, you should tell them why.

Recognize Achievements

When an organization has many remote employees, it needs to work harder to make them feel that they are part of the business and appreciated by their colleagues, and that their contributions matter. A good strategy to help with this is using small group meetings to recognize individual employee achievements and the organization's successes. Consider rewarding employees whose suggestions lead to better performance by a group or by the company. By encouraging participation, employees feel more valued and develop greater trust in the organization's leadership.

Additionally, employees should be encouraged to recognize co-workers for going the extra mile. Some organizations solicit nominations for co-worker awards and periodically offer recognition and/or small rewards to these star co-workers. The goal: celebrate both small and big successes as a way to help employees feel welcome, appreciated, and integral to the business.

Bring Back the Celebrations

Allocate time for informal gatherings with food and drinks (easily covered with savings in office expenses). Use the occasion to celebrate personal events such as birthdays, engagements or a new baby (after getting employee consent) as well as to recognize employee milestones, such as job tenure and promotions.

Make sure employees are aware of the organization's commitment to social causes, and involve them whenever possible. Employees like to feel proud of their employers – and social responsibility initiatives are a great way to gain their loyalty and support. For example,

the organization might calculate how they have reduced their carbon imprint and energy usage through their use of remote work arrangements. Getting employees involved in social responsibility initiatives -- such as beach cleanups, "walks for a cause," toy donations during the holidays, and volunteering at homeless shelters or soup kitchens -- helps bring them together, foster social bonds, and show that their organization is much more than a job: It's a family.

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