

7 Ways to Reduce Friction Between Remote and Onsite Employees

By Arlene S. Hirsch

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As organizations prepare for a post-pandemic world, many are embracing hybrid schedules that allow some employees to work remotely at least part of the time. As a result, friction is rising at some companies between remote employees and those required to work onsite who are jealous of their colleagues' flexibility.

HR often is tasked with addressing that friction and guiding people managers who are caught in the middle. Here are seven strategies designed to minimize tension and foster cohesiveness between remote and onsite team members.

1. Identify the Cause of the Friction

"If you take the resentment [between remote and onsite employees] at face value, the obvious solution is to allow more people to work from home. However, that's not always possible," said Anne Loehr, executive vice president of the Center for Human Capital Innovation, a consulting firm in Alexandria, Va. "So to manage the situation effectively, you need to understand what's at the core of this resentment. It's important to have an open and honest conversation with employees to gain insight into what's really going on."

Loehr believes HR can and should take the lead in researching and gathering data that employers can use to determine the best approach. This may include scheduling focus group discussions, as well as fielding employee pulse surveys and employee engagement surveys, she said.

2. Be Transparent

"The decision about whether to allow employees to work remotely is based on a variety of factors, including organizational purpose, strategy, employee preferences and work styles," said Daniel Davis, Ph.D., a senior researcher at Hassell International in New York City who studies future workplace trends. "What works for one may not work for another, so success depends on the leadership team's ability to choose a path forward and communicate that vision."

Jennifer Dennard, co-founder and COO of Range, a workplace collaboration software company based in San Francisco, said internal communications and transparency are key to ensuring that everyone feels like they are on the same team, regardless of whether they work remotely or onsite.

"Create clear guidelines and be transparent about why some people cannot work remotely," Dennard said. "Then apply as much flexibility as possible to level the playing field."

3. Define What Flexibility Means

"Employers need to grant onsite workers the same flexibility as remote workers whenever possible," said Jacob Zabkowitz, vice president and general manager for global RPO at Korn Ferry in Chicago. "If you hold onsite workers to a different standard, that's when resentments occur."

An equality of benefits and scheduling is key to reducing friction, agreed Ellen Ernst Kossek, a management professor at Purdue University and co-author of *CEO of Me: Creating a Life That Works in the Flexible Job Age* (FT Press, 2007). "Every job deserves some flexibility. Even if remote work isn't always an option, organizations should offer flexibility to both office and front-line workers," Kossek said. "It cannot be viewed as a scarce or privileged resource."

Giving every employee the same scheduling options is key if you want flexibility to become a core part of your culture, said Anne Donovan, PwC's former U.S. people experience leader. "Otherwise, some employees may feel left out." But the global professional services firm also recognizes that, depending on the circumstances, "flexibility" can mean different things to different people. For some employees, it might mean starting the day earlier, taking an hour off at noon for a doctor's appointment or leaving early to attend a child's after-school activity.

"It's not about working less. It's about working differently," Donovan said. "Flexibility is a two-way street. If there's a deadline or work priority that requires extra hours, employees are expected to be flexible enough to meet the needs of the business."

At the beginning of the pandemic, Sage North America, an 11,000-person accounting and business management software company based in Atlanta, sent everyone home to work remotely. As the company plans their return-to-office strategy, their top priority is the safety and well-being of their employees, said executive vice president Nancy Harris.

"In May, we rolled out our Flexible Human Work (FHW) plan under which each team is allowed to make their own decisions about how and where they want to work," she said. "A team can manage the ebb and flow in and out of the office based on the work that needs to be done."

"There's lots of appreciation for the change in mindset because everyone is given the same freedom," Harris added. "It's a way to level the playing field."

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4. Rethink What Roles Can Be Performed Remotely

Managers should be encouraged to rethink their assumptions about what roles can—and cannot—be done remotely, Loehr said. "It's possible that you've overlooked other positions that would be fine as remote jobs, even for just part of the time."

At Ford Motor Co., salaried employees are allowed to work remotely at least part of each day, while factory workers are required to be onsite. When an electrician, who is also a single mother, asked HR if she could work remotely part time, she was told that remote-work options were not available to hourly employees. Although the employee says she understands that a lot of her factory work can only be done in person, she believes she could be productive working remotely one to two days a week because her job requires extensive paperwork.

Options exist to help address this type of situation, Loehr said. For example, the physical therapy team at Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center in Columbus, Ohio, incorporated virtual platforms last year to help ensure the safety of staff and patients while maintaining continuity of care, even when employees needed to work remotely. They also cross-trained team members so that if therapists got sick or needed to take time off, there were enough physical therapists onsite to meet patient needs.

5. Address Distance Bias

Although the pandemic has reduced some of the stigma attached to remote work, it hasn't disappeared altogether. "When companies have some employees working remotely and others working onsite, this can foster an 'us versus them' mentality," said Liane Davey, co-founder of Toronto-based 3COZE Inc. and author of *The Good Fight: Use Productive Conflict to Get Your Organization and Team Back on Track* (Page Two, 2019). "People have a negativity bias. They often don't pay attention to what they have in common."

Managers can help onsite employees better understand and respect remote team members by sharing information about the sacrifices remote employees make to complete tasks, meet deadlines and accomplish their goals, said Zabkowicz at Korn Ferry. "Many employees who don't have the option to work remotely still have the perception that, because you work remotely, you can do whatever you want."

What in-office employees often don't realize is that working from home has its own challenges, Loehr said. She advises managers to facilitate a discussion between remote and in-office workers "to let each discuss their personal challenges and dispel any myths they may have about each other." This can be a town hall meeting or even a brown-bag lunch.

6. Build Trust

"Virtual teams often lack context because employees don't have the opportunity to get to know each other," Davey said. "The solution is for leaders to bake in opportunities to increase mutual knowledge and understanding."

When addressing resentment from onsite workers about their remote colleagues, there are a few things at play. Beyond simply wanting to skip their commute and work in pajamas, onsite employees may think their managers don't trust them, according to Loehr.

"Employees don't always trust that managers have their best interests at heart," she explained. "They see working from home as a privilege, and not being allowed to do so makes them feel that their manager doesn't appreciate, value or trust them."

"Many of the complaints stem from a lack of trust," agreed Joseph Flahiff, president and CEO of Radar4ai, a Seattle-based management consulting company. "Employees who work in the office don't trust that the remote people are really working."

Flahiff suggests pairing remote and onsite team members so they can get to know each other better and understand the workload each carries. He also recommends that leaders embrace a culture where paired-up workers are in different locations to help "create opportunities for engagement" across the company.

At Sage, all employees meet together onsite four or five times a year as a way to strengthen the culture and ensure that everyone feels included, Harris said.

7. Show Appreciation for the People Who Show Up Every Day

Employees who are resentful that others work from home often feel unappreciated, because they believe that if they were appreciated, they'd be given the option to work remotely when necessary, Loehr said.

Managers can address this challenge with honest praise and feedback. "A sincere 'thank you' can go a long way toward making onsite employees feel like you really value and appreciate their contribution," she added.

Arlene Hirsch is a career counselor and author based in Chicago.

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How to Make Sure Remote Workers Aren't Left Out

Viewpoint: Why Remote Work Is Corroding Our Trust in Each Other

MBO Partners Adds HR Technology to Support Remote Workers

Ask HR: Feeling Out of Step with Remote Team

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