HOW TO
manage a successful virtual team

Employees all over the world are now working virtually, many for the first time. Some organisations have not embraced virtual working before now. That could be because technical barriers prevented it, or the work required dealing with customers in person. But now, as remote working becomes the norm in a bid to stop the spread of COVID-19, there is extra pressure on managers and employees alike.

Managers who have never worked virtually before need to make sure their teams don't lose focus or motivation during what is an uncertain time. Employee engagement must take centre stage. Managers must check-in with their teams regularly to make sure they're OK and ensure productivity is maintained.

There are lots of myths surrounding working remotely. A common one that I've heard is that remote workers aren't as productive as their office-based counterparts. That really is a myth. Remote workers tend to be more productive than those based in an office. Don't just take my word for it. A recent study by Airtasker revealed office staff reported being idle for about 37 minutes a day, excluding lunch and standard breaks, while remote workers cited just 27 minutes of unproductive time.

At WilsonHCG, virtual working is nothing new. I manage teams remotely, and sometimes I don't get to meet people in person, but we all come together as a team. We have excellent tools and technology that allow us to do jobs and stay connected and it's meant that in this crisis, our service delivery has been uninterrupted.

Here are some tips on how to manage teams virtually.

Be social
Human beings are hardwired to be social and interact with others. Employees working virtually do not have the 'water cooler' moments to catch up with people, share news, and build friendships. So, don't make meetings all about work. Allow virtual friendships to blossom, set up virtual coffee breaks, and build a community.

Be caring
Everyone is feeling the impact of the current crisis, so ask your team members how they're doing. If they have children and their child's school has closed, ask how you can make things easier for them and offer more flexibility. Anything that breaks the cycle of work will allow you to understand your teams better and help protect their welfare. As a manager, you have a duty of care to look out for staff so notice signs which may concern you. If your company has a wellness program, remind staff and provide details on the support available if they need it.

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Build multiple communication methods
Don't just rely on email to communicate with your team. Open a chat room for collaboration and use video in meetings as much as possible.

Set an agenda
Build an agenda so the team has structure during meetings. Arrange a daily agile call to go through to-do lists and ask if anyone has any questions – including non-work-related ones.

Flexibility
When people work from home, they will welcome flexibility. So, if one of your team wants to go running during the day or have lunch with his kids, provide that flexibility. Have core hours they're required to be online so the team can effectively work together, especially if working with teams over multiple time zones. But if they work their other hours in the early morning or in the evening, it shouldn't matter if they're producing the expected output.

Manage productivity
Have tools in place to manage the team's output; the more you understand a person's output the easier it is for you to correct course if something goes wrong. You don't want to reach the end of the month and find out someone has been missing a target for the last 20 days. Give clear measurable goals to each team member, check they fully understand and keep going back to these during your one-on-ones to ensure they fully understand what's expected. Encourage your teams to set up a dedicated workspace – even if it's just the corner of the kitchen table. This will help boost productivity and ensure they have the necessary tools to hand to do the job properly.

Don't lose the company's culture
Just because you are working remotely does not mean you need to lose your organisation's identity, mission, or values. Your culture should traverse virtual working! Treat your employees the same, just tailor to fit the virtual environment. Your employees will be going through a lot of uncertainty right now and if they still feel like they are working for the great organisation they originally joined, it will give them the reassurance they need.

Reward hard work
Don't forget to reward your team. Call it out in your weekly calls or to the wider business. If you have a recognition tool, remember to use it. It helps to keep people motivated as well as engaged.

Virtual working has been pushed to most organisations whether they were ready or not. Managers need to ensure cohesion among teams, so employees are still engaged and productive. But as restrictions relax, think about the working environment – it may not go back to how it once was.

Trust your teams, work with them, and give them clear direction and targets; they will appreciate your trust, flexibility, and support and show you by being productive.

Further reading
Talent at an unpredictable time
Simple tips to stay on track when working from home