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Briefing Note

CECA Member Briefing:

Guidance On Managing Remote Teams, Furloughed or Self-Isolated Employees

Introduction

The current Coronavirus pandemic has resulted in a change to the working patterns for many of us. Some employees who are unable to work from home have been furloughed, others are self-isolating and many are now working remotely for the first time. Even though some have continued to work throughout the lockdown and others are now being encouraged to return to work, there will be many who will continue to work from home or at a distance from their team.

This brief best practice guide has been written for those employers, managers and supervisors who have suddenly found that they are separated from their team for the first time. It is by no means an exhaustive guide and there will be many circumstances where some of the suggestions are impractical.

While few can have anticipated the current crisis, some companies will have clear guidelines and policies on flexible and remote working and obviously these should be referred to and followed. Some companies will have dedicated HR teams to help manage employment processes but these hints and tips are aimed at managers and supervisors who are responsible for a team, these responsibilities should not be delegated.

Your team will have their own unique set of challenges but whatever the circumstances, all employees want to know they are valued so it is important that regular contact is maintained. Letting your team know you are thinking of them and keeping the team spirit alive will pay dividends.

Generally

Ensure all employees feel able to carry out the work they are being asked to do safely and efficiently and check to see if they have the equipment they need and the skills and knowledge to use it.

It's important to set clear expectations, both for working from home and virtual team meetings, as you would if working together in close proximity.

Establish a communication plan with your team, detailing how often they can expect to hear from you and be sure to keep to it.

If you manage a large team you may wish to set up a communication cascade and ensure that everyone will have personal contact with at least one other team member at least once a week but preferably more frequently.

Consider the communication preferences of team members when communicating one to one, some would rather just talk on the phone, others will be comfortable with a facetime call, while others may be happy to "chat" via What's App but do try to encourage the use of video calls. Some employees will want to check in more frequently than others.

A group email, while better than nothing, may not elicit two way communication.

Be mindful that some employees are trying to juggle home schooling, caring and other responsibilities with work and agree mutually acceptable timeslots to make contact. Help them understand that they can say 'no' and maintain a schedule that suits them as well as the business. If you can be flexible on working times, this may help with employees who find working in the evening and for shorter periods allows them to be more productive.

Don't just rely on email and phone calls. Video calls, such as MS Teams, Skype and Zoom, can help increase the amount of interaction a team has and will help you pick up any non-verbal messages as well as heightening concentration levels and allowing participants to absorb more information.

Don't put off performance reviews, coaching, mentoring and one to ones because you can't be in the same room. They are still important.

If a team member doesn't check in to a planned virtual meeting, find out why as soon as possible. It may be something as simple as an email going to spam but may be something more serious.

Plan regular social events via a video call, such as a virtual quiz or a lockdown sporting or creative challenge. As ever, it's important to find something that everyone in the team can enjoy so ask for their suggestions.

Try to operate as normally as possible. If birthdays are celebrated in the office or pizza parties held on a Thursday after work, try to continue to do this remotely.

Furloughed Employees

While furloughed employees are unable to carry out any work that generates revenue for the business that certainly does not mean they should be cut off from their team.

Be sure to have current contact details for furloughed employees and ask their permission to use them to avoid the use of company communication channels, work emails in particular should not be used, though employees who have previously been allowed to use company laptops and mobile phones for personal matters may still do so.

Consider the use of social media, setting up a closed group within Facebook or WhatsApp or similar platform so that the team may stay in touch with each other whether furloughed or not.

Ensure that everyone is aware that work related topics are off limits and stick to talking about social, health and wellbeing matters.

Learning is definitely not off limits and might help a furloughed worker to feel they are using both their brains and their unexpected time off wisely. This may include using the time to catch up on college work, professional qualifications or further learning. It may also include webinars and other CPD activities.

Circulate honest, reliable and up to date information about how the company has been impacted by and is responding to the challenges of the pandemic.

It may be feasible to set up a dedicated website or regular newsletter for furloughed workers, to keep them updated with links to relevant advice and guidance on matters such as health, wellbeing and financial matters. Include a frequently asked questions section and a channel for all furloughed employees to communicate with each other and share tips and ideas.

You may want to survey employees to understand their major concerns and state of mind so that you can develop strategies to help them. Be sure to advise employees that any responses are confidential and will not be used in any performance reviews.

Self-isolated or Shielded Employees

Some employees will be required to stay at home while other members of the team have been able to return to work. Make sure they are still involved in the day to day workings of the team but be respectful of their individual circumstances and needs. Working without the right tools can add to the stress of isolation so it is most important that self-isolated employees have access to the right resources to enable them to carry out their role.

Look out for signs that might suggest self-isolated employees are working continuously to fill their time and sacrificing leisure time. Similarly, if they start to struggle to complete work or hit deadlines, this may be a sign that they are struggling with not only motivation but perhaps mental health issues.

As a manager it is up to you to keep up morale. Those who are self-isolated and/or living alone may well feel more stressed and depressed than usual, so acknowledge that and hold more regular meetings with them without an agenda so you can chat as you would if you were meeting by the watercooler at work.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

If you have any concerns about how a member of your team is coping it's important that you know where to access help for them. CECA and Mates in Mind have produced a guidance note to coincide with Mental Health Awareness Week which runs from 18 – 24 May 2020. Please click [here](#) to access it