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The 7 Must-Haves
to Optimize
Productivity and
Engagement
of a Remote Workforce

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Before the COVID-19 pandemic, only 3.6% of the U.S. workforce worked remotely half-time or more. Suddenly, COVID-19 has forced employers to have all non-physically essential employees work – not only remotely, but from their homes. Some employers had weeks to prepare for this, while others only had days. With little lead time, employers' immediate focus was on empowering employees with the capability to work remotely. Now they are seeking remote workforce strategies to ensure that while employees are physically distanced, they are still connected, engaged, and productive in their work.

Below are 7 must-haves to optimize remote work and maximize employee engagement and productivity.

1. Strong Leadership

Strong leadership is crucial to guide employees through these unchartered COVID-19 waters, especially if your workforce is not accustomed to working remotely. Help employees find greater purpose and direction by doubling down on the fundamentals of good management:

- Engage and interact with your team regularly; treat these as high-priority commitments and, if a conflict arises, be sure to reschedule this important time.
- Communicate the organization's needs, objectives, and strategy to get through COVID-19 challenges.
- Share as much information as possible, when possible; but be careful not to over-share, which can create unnecessary panic.
- Engage employees by brainstorming with and/or empowering your team to be part of business operations solutioning such asidentifying cost savings opportunities.
- Strive to maintain a calm composure that embodies agility and patience; employees will likely ask you difficult questions during this time – be careful to respond with facts and not emotions.
- Be an empathetic listener and supporter; many employees are struggling with grief related to COVID-19 – acknowledge this and let them know it is okay to grieve.
- Stay positive; your employees are watching you and will follow your lead.

POTENTIAL IMPACT:
- Will allow you to help employees continue moving forward during these times of uncertainty.
- A strong positive focus and direction will yield greater employee engagement and productivity.

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2. Frequent and Authentic Communication

Employees hunger for information right now, especially as the absence of information can lead them to assume worst case scenario – which damages productivity and engagement. As such, be sure to:

- Create a "Source of Truth" file, webpage, or document with notes from meetings or updates to keep employees up-to-date, as the current situation is very dynamic and changes daily.
- Be intentional with frequent, reliable communications; craft a communications strategy that covers all modes of communication applicable to your employees.
- Establish daily check ins – either one-on-one or a team call. Employees will value the opportunity to consult with their manager and the team now more than ever.
- Set and communicate hours of availability with the team and the best way to reach each other and what to do if an emergency arises; be flexible with employees, where possible, when childcare needs demand an alternative work schedule.
- Understand your team and how the employees like to receive information (e.g., webinar, email, video, etc.).
- Be honest with employees regarding the focus/strategy of the organization during these uncertain times; do not set false expectations ormake promises you can't keep.
- Avoid using blanket statements such as "we put our employees first," if the goal is actually to "save as many jobs as possible while honoring bank covenants."

POTENTIAL IMPACT:

- Will allow employees to collect information from one location to stay up-to-date on the fluid situation and the opportunity for employees to ask questions.
- Not sharing or poorly communicating the strategy may result in employees creating their own "story" regarding immediate future of the organization.
- Lack of communication can lead to employees feeling isolated, disconnected, and out of the loop.

3. Clear Goals/Priorities/Expectations

The COVID-19 crisis is evolving so quickly that many organizations are needing to adapt their goals on a daily basis. As organization goals evolve, be sure to:

- Re-visit employees' goals on a daily basis and make appropriate adjustments to ensure focus on the greatest impact priorities. This is especially important for employees whose responsibilities have changed due to the need to operate remotely (e.g., a retail associate who is now asked to work on administrative projects).
- Set clear and tangible goals. For example, if the goal is to save the organization $100,000 to keep the organization cash-positive, specify that to employees (assuming it is something they can influence) and ask for their help in identifying solutions to save costs and/or bring in more revenue.
- Explore tools that can help make expectation setting easier. For example, 15Five is a great goal-setting, performance, and recognition technology that is offering free usage for teams up to 50 employees through June 15, 2020.

POTENTIAL IMPACT:

- Regular goal-setting will help you maximize productivity and come out of the COVID-19 crisis stronger than before.
- Doing so will help ensure that high-performing employees remain engaged.
- Failing to set clear goals/priorities could lead to aimless work that is counterproductive.
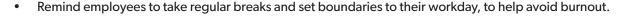
4. Dedicated Workspace and Structure

Most employees have gone from having limited control over their workspace to suddenly having total control over it. Help employees to get the most out of their remote workspace to maximize engagement and productivity. Consider these tips:

- Encourage employees to have a dedicated workspace. Get creative if space is limited in their home; for example, consider hanging a bed sheet to better separate work and living spaces.

- Encourage employees to make it a space that they want to work in – grab a table from here, a chair from there, hang art on the wall, and voila! No art? No problem! Make it a team building activity to virtually create art together that employees can hang on their wall.

- Promote sharing pictures of home-working stations with colleagues to drive greater connection and engagement.

- Ask employees to establish a regular routine and to "get work ready" – whatever that means for them. For example, some employees find they are more productive when they shower and get dressed for work, even if nobody will be seeing them while they work remotely.

- Remind employees to take regular breaks and set boundaries to their workday, to help avoid burnout.

- Educate employees on the importance of ergonomics. Mayo Clinic offers great tips to consider.

- Work with employees to learn how to deal with distractions at home – children, pets, other family members working at home. Be flexible and brainstorm with them to find solutions.

- Have employees share with their colleagues what practices/techniques are working best for them.

POTENTIAL IMPACT:
- With no established structure and/or boundaries, distractions and unproductivity are imminent.
- Sharing ideas around remote work best practices allows employees to find a solution that works best for their situation.
- It is important that employees try to find joy in working remotely, especially when there is no other alternative. Helping them to make it fun and effective, will drive greater employee engagement.

5. Technology to Ease and Enable

Technology has the potential to ease burden and enable greater productivity and engagement of employees. The key, however, is to develop an effective technology strategy to support remote work. To start:

- Ensure employees have the following:
    - Access to appropriate technology to do their jobs
    - Access to needed documents/information
    - Adequate training for the tools/technology
- Proactively check-in on technology solutions to ensure that things are going well and make appropriate adjustments.
- Utilize communication technologies to allow for easy, real-time communication (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Slack). Many providers are offering free usage/additional functionality during the COVID-19 crisis, including Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, and Cisco WebEx.
- Set expectations around what, when, and how to use these technologies – what is appropriate to share in a post, when to use email vs. Slack/Teams post, etc.
- Consider requiring video camera usage on check-in calls as body language goes a long way to boost trust and connection.

POTENTIAL IMPACT:
- Employees who aren't used to working remotely will likely need time to adjust to using them; demonstrating patience and positivity as they learn will help them to be more productive faster.
- These tools will be a lifeline for employees to their supervisor, team, and coworkers. Making connection easy and accessible will yield higher employee engagement levels.
- When using technology to share information, ensure the information is being securely shared with appropriate recipients.

6. Care for Employee Physical and Emotional Well-Being

Employees have had little time to process and grieve the impact of COVID-19. To keep them productive and engaged, research shows that employers must promote greater employee well-being. Effective ways to do this are to:

- Connect with employees on a personal level to ensure they are doing okay, while still respecting appropriate boundaries. If employees are comfortable sharing with you, acknowledge the stressors/anxieties they share and empathize with their struggles.
- Remind employees of Employee Assistance Program (EAP), if one is available.
- Encourage employees to prioritize self-care and to take time to sleep, exercise, and engage in activities that help to calm and rejuvenate their heart, mind, body, and spirit.
- Explore applications that provide this kind of support to employees. Many applications, such as the Healthy Minds Program, are available for free right now and can be great at promoting well-being and stress reduction.
- Post daily exercises that can easily be done within the home and without equipment to keep employees moving! Yoga is a great idea right now to alleviate stress!
- Assign a work from home buddy, allowing partners to check-in and support each other.

POTENTIAL IMPACT:
- Research shows that employee well-being has a strong positive relationship with employee engagement, meaning the higher the well-being, the higher the opportunity for engagement.
- Employees are more likely to be productive when they are less mentally and emotionally distracted.
- Promotes positive channels and outlets for employees to relieve stress.

7. Social Connection

At a time when social distancing is keeping us physically apart, we need to grow closer socially, now more than ever. Help your employees to connect with each other through virtual social interactions that add meaning and joy to their lives.

- Create a "social" channel on Slack, Teams, Yammer, intranet, text, or some other means where employees can post ideas for connection.
- Schedule "theme-days" such as pajama, hat, crazy hair, wild socks, favorite sports team day, etc. and encourage employees to post pictures; what will your winning prize be?
- Share photos of new "co-workers" such as kids and pets who are now working alongside your employees.
- Encourage informal conversations about non-work topics, especially important for employees who abruptly transitioned out of their regular work environment. Just because we can't be by a water cooler, doesn't mean we can't continue to promote connections!
- Have a hidden talent or passion? C'mon Excel gurus, yogis, extreme coupon-ers – now is your time to shine! Host a lunch'n'learn with employees interested in learning more about it!
- Leave time at the beginning or end of calls to catch up with each other on a personal level.
- Hold virtual pizza parties or lunches, where organization sends or provides per diem for lunch so employees can enjoy a meal together, which can help to promote a sense of belonging.
- Hold virtual team meet-ups for coffee or happy hour.
- Launch a book club – be sure to consider all the free virtual library and Audible books that are now available!
- Share jokes (let's keep them work appropriate!) through social channels to bring levity to employees' work day.
- Play online games together – hello, Euchre fans, we know you are out there!
- Continue to celebrate birthdays and work anniversaries.
- Permit employees to utilize the organization's technologies for personal use to connect with family and friends (e.g., Skype chats, Zoom, etc.).

POTENTIAL IMPACT:
- Increases employee engagement
- Decreases employees' feelings of isolation or loneliness.
- Promotes a sense of well-being.
- Encourages collaboration among coworkers.

With the threat of COVID-19, distancing employees physically is critical and essential. But it doesn't need to diminish employee engagement and productivity if you follow these 7 must-have strategies. In fact, you have the unique opportunity to foster greater well-being, connection, and development of employees such that they and your organization can emerge from this challenging time stronger than ever.

As you work to make the most of this situation, let QTI know if we can be of any assistance with your remote workforce strategies or any other HR needs.

ABOUT THE QTI GROUP

The QTI Group, headquartered in Madison, WI, is a privately owned human resources (HR) organization providing staffing solutions, professional and executive recruiting, HR consulting, and HR partnership services to businesses and organizations. Our key services help businesses reach their full potential through people. The QTI Group has been an active member of the business community since 1957. With a rich history of growth, innovation, and community engagement, QTI has nine offices in Wisconsin. For more information about how The QTI Group can help you with your human resources needs, call **608.257.1057** or email **qti@qtigroup.com.**