

Offering Telecommuting as a Benefit for Recruiting and Retaining Talent

Everyone agrees it is tough to find quality people. We certainly want to keep the great people we have on staff. However, we are sometimes faced with the challenge of hiring or retaining people who just cannot work from our current office locations. There can be a number of reasons. We may be aware of a prospective employee who does not live in the same town. A current employee may have to move away. When employees spend most of their time at client sites, commuting to offices in large metropolitan areas during times they are not with clients may not make sense. If we require these employees to commute, we will find ourselves placing more want ads in the classifieds.

With vast improvements in technology, working from a virtual office has received a lot of publicity. The concept implies that you can gain staff for some jobs from just about anywhere. They simply work from home.

Of course nothing is ever simple.

About a year ago, we had to make a decision. A five-year employee was moving due to a spouse's transfer. The employee wanted to continue working for us, and we wanted her to continue utilizing the skills she had obtained for our benefit. As she spent most of her time on the phone, we chose to let her telecommute 500 miles from our office. The following are some of the issues we had to work through.

Job Functions

A telecommuter can do anything that any employee can do from the office, except face-to-face meetings. At first, this may seem to be an issue, but let's break it down.

- Project meetings can be done by phone. I was recently involved in a project that involved more than 20 people in three different states, which lasted four months. Every meeting was conducted via telephone. This meeting style required a strong project manager — someone who knew how to assign out tasks and hold people accountable.
- Client meetings can be scheduled. One of our requirements was for the employee to come to the office at least once per month. This monthly visit allows the employee to meet with local clients when necessary. If the client can not wait for this visit, then the employee teams with someone in the office. The remote employee is included in the meeting by telephone while the local employee is the face for the firm.



- On-site projects can be an obstacle. Our firm is regional, and our clients usually want the employee with the best skills for their situations. Often a Tulsa employee may travel to Houston, or a Houston employee may travel to Little Rock. When this is presented correctly, the client will pay for the travel costs to get the best solution. If the client base is localized, the employee may be restricted on the type of projects they may participate or the firm may have to pay the travel costs. Although there are obstacles, the goal is to transfer employee expertise for our clients' benefit. The goal should not be to focus on the vehicle of delivery, but on making the correct matches between expertise and need.

Required Equipment and Systems

In order for employees to be productive, they must have the correct tools for the job. Office technology today makes this possible.

On-site equipment is fairly standard. A laptop provides the computing power for routine tasks. The all-in-one breed of printers not only helps with output, but also with communications. One unit that includes printer, scanner, fax and copier helps limit the desktop real estate needed for the home office. Make sure the employee keeps files on the office server. This keeps important information available to the rest of the organization. In addition, backups can be maintained in the normal course of business. A cell phone can handle most phone needs.

Hardware is only one aspect. The employee will also need access to the systems used in the office. Accounting, client relationship management and tax preparation are just a few of the systems our employees need to accomplish their jobs. EvenSimple broadband Internet connections usually don't provide the speed necessary for the employee to be productive. Adequate access also requires a virtual private network (VPN) connection, which encrypts data over the Internet. Once the connection is made from the home to the office, adequate speed for computing is achieved through a server (try Citrix Server or Terminal Server), which handles the processing and sends screen refreshes to the employee's system. This remote processing allows employees to work like they are at the office.

Seamless communication can be another concern. If clients and co-workers can not reach a remote employee as easily as other employees, they are at a disadvantage. New developments in Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) can bridge the gap. Utilizing Internet routing devices located at the office and the home, a dedicated VPN can be set up to carry telephone signals between the two locations. This allows for an instantaneous connection. Calls to the remote employee are handled like any other extension on the phone system. With the signals going over the Internet, there are no long-distance charges back to the office even though the employee may be out of the area.



Culture

Everyone in varying degrees depends on interaction with peers. The physical tools are easy to provide. The hardest part is keeping the employee tied to the organization and operating as part of the team. Being able to rely on an employee is only developed through trust — trust that the employee understands and accepts the organization's vision and values. Requiring two or three days in the office per month helps to keep the employee connected. We also utilize a daily five-minute meeting each morning to make sure everyone is aware of each other's schedules and needs.

For new employees, an extended period of time in the office may be necessary. A training plan on processes and methodologies should be developed to assure technical competence. Training on the vision and purpose of the organization helps employees get a sense of culture, while training on the values of the organization provides guidelines on how they are expected to deal with others. Most importantly, out of sight, out of mind should not be the norm. Spending more time with the employee, even if by phone, should be practiced. More management is necessary, not less. The additional investment will payoff many times over.

Case Study

Chris Morgan has spent the last year working from her home in Houston. She shared a few comments about being the sole employee not housed in our offices.

"Honestly, I have a lot fewer distractions," she said. "I am able to use my time a lot better, and I get more done. I am also glad I am able to continue my career with a company I am proud to work for.

Morgan said she hasn't had any problems working with clients.

"Most of my work is by phone, but when I need to meet with clients we can usually schedule the meetings for when I am in town," she explained.

Morgan did express some drawbacks to her situation.

"There are some downsides as I am a social person and used to spend time going from office to office to see what was going on. I felt more a part of the team," she said. "The new five-minute daily meetings have helped me feel more connected.

"We do need to work on some behaviors. Some of my co-workers may see someone in the hall and postpone a meeting, but they forget to call me and let me know it has been postponed. Pretty basic stuff, but since they don't see me everyday it slips their minds."



Although technology has come a long way, Morgan said there are still issues with it.

“The technology can be a pain at times. We moved into a new house in a new neighborhood and the Internet connectivity was not consistent at first,” she explained. “When it went down, I lost my access to the Web, the office network and my telephone connection. It has been much better lately.”

At Crouch, Slavin & Company, we are glad Morgan has remained with us. She has been promoted from a client service position to an outside sales position in Houston. Based on her success, we plan on hiring additional employees in Houston and ultimately open an office there.

In today’s global environment, we should not limit ourselves. Utilizing technology in appropriate methods can give us access to resources otherwise impractical. Before dismissing an attractive new-hire because of geographically restraints or losing a current employee whose circumstances have changed, look at new alternatives to the old one-office/one-team model of employment.

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