MARTIN VEASEY
TALENT SOLUTIONS

The Ultimate Guide to
Managing Virtual Teams

Overview

The world is changing.

And with it, the global marketplace is changing too. As we move into a new decade, more and more people are choosing to work from home, or remotely.

Remote working has, in the most part, been made possible by the significant advances in technology – Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams – there is a multitude of platforms to utilise that enable you to run and manage your team from anywhere in the world.

If you've never managed a virtual team before, building in best practices will ensure your team remain engaged, happy and productive.

Therefore, Martin Veasey Talent Solutions has created this report to provide insight into the value of remote working, alongside some specific strategies for you to use that will enable you to build and manage your remote team successfully.

I look forward to working with you.

Best regards,

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The Rapid Rise in Remote Working

Before we dive into the strategies for managing a virtual team, it's worth taking a brief look at the rise in popularity of this working style.

There has been much debate on the virtues of remote working. Is it a boost or a drain with regards to productivity? How can managers bring cohesion to a team who are physically remote?

In recent years, flexible working arrangements have continued to increase across the world, with much of the global workforce spending less time in the workplace and more working from other locations. Remote working has grown by **159 per cent** since 2005. In the UK, **50 per cent of the workforce** are expected to work remotely by the end of 2020, and in the UK nearly a quarter of a million workers have made a move to remote working over a decade.

Additionally, some positive figures are coming out that support remote working as a viable, and indeed preferable, alternative to traditional office-based work.

A two-year **study by Stamford** found that employees who work remotely have increased concentration levels and are less likely to be off sick, or take prolonged leave than their office-based counterparts. They are also more likely to have shorter breaks during the day, and of course, the effect on the carbon footprint of negating the need for a daily commute means reduced carbon emissions.

With many employees inciting work-life balance as one of their top priorities when job hunting, flexible and remote work is an attractive asset for employers to offer.

Seventy per cent of 18 – 34-year-olds value meaningful experience more than possessions and as such, the ability to work anytime, anywhere to fit in with their life plan is appealing.

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But it's not just the younger generations. As the retirement age rises, around 51 per cent of 45 to 60 years old are taking the option of remote working to prolong their careers.

There are definitely advantages to business for remote working. The USA will see an estimated **4.5 trillion dollar saving** per year as a result of remote working by 2030. This is predicted to be due to improved productivity, a reduction in fixed overheads and an increase in business agility overall.

Additionally, by adopting a more fluid approach, organisations can utilise individual productivity levels, while avoiding the distractions and politics of a busy workplace, to experience a boost in performance.

For the employer, this is all good news. But, how exactly do you manage a team who are located in many different places and who you may never, or rarely, see in person?

Challenges of Developing Your Virtual Team

What is the ideal virtual team?

A team without boundaries, with freedom and flexibility for agile business anywhere in the world while maintaining a healthy work-life balance – and the ability for you to select the best candidate for the job – wherever they are.

The above is, of course, the dream and aspirational outcome when creating a virtual team.

There can be little doubt that digital workplaces and virtual teams are becoming popular options for many forward-thinking employers. Even in traditional workplaces where some staff may be required for customer's face to face liaison, background staff such as admin teams are often working flexibly either part-time or have moved to full-time virtual working.

But the reality of creating a virtual team can be challenging for managers. Virtual working is still a relatively new concept, and it requires a different way of thinking. Without careful management, lack of social interaction can lead to loss of morale and team spirit. Communication is pivotal to ensure everyone on your team is on the same page and is following the same structure.

Harvard Business Review informs us that there are three kinds of distance in remote collaboration. These are, firstly, operational – the size of your team and their skillsets. The second is physical (location and times), and the third is affinity (referencing trust, values and interdependency of the team).

To achieve success, managers must focus on reducing affinity distance. This can be achieved by establishing rapport, switching to visual methods of contact, and creating empathy within the team. Once that is done, managing other potential obstacles such as skills, distance and time zones should follow. In this guide, we look at putting strategies into place to help you achieve these goals.

But first, how to do set up your virtual team?

Setting up a Virtual Team

Unless you are managing a team who are already working remotely, the first consideration is how to set up your virtual team. Ensuring they have the right software, hardware, office sundries such as notepads, pens, etc. is critical to get right so that they feel your organisation are investing in them.

Once you have the essentials in place, consider the processes to implement regarding the structure of your team and daily procedures. This will clarify the system for everyone and allow for better workflow.

For example, you may decide to have video links at specific times through the working day. In essence, this could be a morning team meeting where you establish what everyone will be doing that day and a call before the end of the workday to catch up on progress, allow for comment and clarification on projects.

Additionally, it's worthwhile using instant messaging throughout the day to contact each other with questions – but remember to put in place some boundaries. Hence, people have times they won't be interrupted. For example, you could block off 10.30 am – 12.30 pm and 2.00 pm - 4.00 pm as times for 'focus' work.

As a manager, it's critical in the early stages of setting up and managing a virtual team to establish a sense of belonging to your organisation for people who never see each other (or rarely). This is important for maintaining mental health and a feeling of camaraderie. We'll look at this in more detail later.

Connecting the Team

Your second most important consideration for successful management is that communication is vital.

In your regular online meetings, remember to provide as much detail as possible on your organisation plans, so information is dispersed, and you ensure transparency across the team.

Also, communicate priorities and goals, and be straightforward on what you expect from each team member. Ensure you know their skill set and that it allows them to complete their designated tasks. It may be that you will need to offer additional support to develop skills they may not have had to use before. For example, skills needed for remote working such as using specific data software, webcams or other technology.

Being empathetic to cultural or language differences is crucial. Each member of your team is an individual, and you will need to get to know the personality of each and their preferred working style so that you can ensure you're getting the best out of everyone, working positively and pulling in the same direction.

Time differences can also create challenges if your team is based around the globe. In which case, you could rotate meeting schedules to share compromise across the group. Also, consider meeting at times that coordinate with a

natural break or meal time – so a breakfast meeting for one team member could at the same time be a dinner meeting for another.

Checking on Workload

Have you given your virtual team too much work? Or too little? It can be hard to tell in a virtual environment.

Check-in regularly on a one to one basis to confirm tasks and ensure that your employee is managing the workload. This allows you to monitor how each team member is doing, allows them the opportunity to clarify details, confirm they are on track or, indeed, request any help and support they need.

Remember to recognise a task well done to help build a connection. But be mindful that everyone has a different personality style – so over-enthusiastic praise at the all-team Zoom meeting might not be ideal for those who prefer a quiet one to one 'thank you'.

Building Trust

Alongside the question of workload, it's also challenging to know who is working and when. Say, for example, one of your staff emails a colleague for some information and hears nothing back. Is the colleague at their desk and busy with something else, or are they elsewhere?

When people are working at a distance, it's easy for situations to be misread. Left unchecked, distrust can take hold. This can quickly become a significant problem to contend with, as colleagues begin to wonder if everyone is putting equal effort into accomplishing tasks.

Disgruntled employees are the last thing you want to contend with, so avoid this situation by setting a daily plan and check-in zoom calls at specific times.

It's also a good idea to consider investing in a data management system such as Monday or Basecamp. This will enable all the team to see who is working on what, and what progress has been made. These excellent systems are not only ideal for real-time progress reports but help keep everyone in the loop with ease.

Using Your Webcam

A survey on trends of high performing teams discovered that that human factor remains the most significant challenge for successful global virtual teams. So, bringing your team together is crucial. And with faster and more reliable broadband and Wi-Fi now is the time to make the most of your webcam in your meetings.

Practically all computers and laptops now have a camera included, so there's no excuse for not using it. Face to face calls are much more personal than voice calls or email. They allow you to see other peoples facial expressions, read their body language, and feel part of a real team. So make sure your team are using theirs.

Visual contact allows individuals to feel more engaged – thus providing a platform for more meaningful conversations.

Another advantage of video calls is that you can record your meetings. So, you can go back over details to clarify decisions or specific points that were made, thus ensuring that everyone is clear on specifics. Additionally, this type of meeting allows any colleagues who were unable to make the meeting to watch it later, avoiding anyone missing out on essential information.

If your team are new to using a webcam, make sure you provide some pointers, such as: -

- Remember, others can see you. I know it sounds obvious, but check how you look online. You don't want other meeting attendees to see the giant pile of laundry on a table behind you or that pot plant on the shelf that looks as though it's growing out of your head. So, make sure you can be seen without background distractions – head and shoulders are ideal.

- Make sure you won't be interrupted – if you are in a designated office room – close the door and put a sign on it. If not, make sure anyone else in the house or where you are working knows you are on a call and so won't interrupt you.

- Try to look at the camera when you are talking, so you are making 'eye contact' with others, to maintain engagement.

- Similarly, beware fidgeting or waving your arms as this can become distracting for others.

- Dress as you would for a face to face meeting. Smart-casual clothes are excellent for team meetings. Additionally, dressing smartly will put you in the right frame of mind for working. A psychological tip to ensure you feel 'business-ready' is to wear your outdoor shoes.

- If individuals feel uncomfortable taking part in a large webcam meeting, it can help to pretend there's just you and one other person there.

Top Tip – place a mirror just below the camera – that way, you can check how you look and maintain eye contact with the rest of the team.

Wellbeing in Your Team

Wellbeing is a topical issue within all workplaces and is even more relevant for those working at a distance. **Studies** show that over 200 million workdays are lost to mental health conditions every year, so it's crucial to ensure your team remain mentally healthy.

One of the main downsides of working remotely can be a feeling of loneliness. Lack of work friends and the daily minutiae of office chatter can make virtual workers feel isolated, so it's essential to build a good support network for them – and for yourself.

Of course, it's going to be more challenging to build a community network and develop a sense of company culture when working remotely. Still, there are some easy ways to ensure you are helping maintain wellbeing for your team. Offering support to your team is vital, and we'll look at this later in the guide, but there are other strategies you can use to help maintain a mentally healthy virtual workplace. Consider implementing some of the following ideas into your virtual team:

- Informal check-ins – these could be scheduled around lunch or coffee breaks, or maybe on Fridays just after work is finished. An online face chat site provides an ideal platform to enable colleagues to swap stories of their working week, their home life, funny stories about something that happened in the supermarket or their plans for the weekend. The idea is to keep it informal, as you would if you all gathered for coffee in an office staffroom or for drinks after work.

- Vlogging – let each team member create a vlog to share. It could be the view from their office window, their dog, or a quick tour of their garden or

local neighbourhood. This will help establish each person as an individual character and create a visual for the rest of the team.

- Create a wellbeing plan. It's best to do this in discussion with the team, so everyone is on board. Be clear on your concerns for their wellbeing and establish how you can all look out for each other's mental health. Offer advice on how to offer and seek support for any mental health issues and encourage the team to let you know if they have any concerns.

Also, encourage your employees to get plenty of fresh air and sleep. It's a common symptom when working remotely actually to work more hours than you would in an office.

Therefore, encourage everyone to take regular breaks away from their screen, enjoy a lunchtime walk in the fresh air, 'clock off' at the allotted time and get a good night's sleep (around eight hours is ideal) to help maintain wellbeing.

Offering Support

As a good manager, you want to support your team not only to manage their day to day workload and stay mentally healthy but to grow, develop and achieve their career ambitions with your organisation. However, that's not always easy when you're working remotely.

Isolation is one of the significant downsides of working on your own, and your team will rely on you for support in their daily tasks and long-term inspiration to remain focused, engaged and working towards their ultimate goals.

One way of injecting a sense of team spirit to help discourage insolation is to remind them how they fit into the bigger picture.

Having an understanding of how the work they do benefits the whole team – and more widely, the organisation – will enable everyone to feel part of

something much bigger than themselves. This helps keep feelings of isolation at bay as well as increasing loyalty and productivity levels.

Check in with your team via online meetings and showing encouragement to each individual. Relay transparent information about the organisation and its goals, and provide regular feedback, highlighting team successes, to give your team a sense of belonging.

Finally, support your team by ensuring they each have a personal development plan. This plan should reflect how and when they can acquire new skills to help them progress their career, as well as offering a clear pathway to achieving their career goals. It should also contain regular milestones to assess progress, create purpose and celebrate achievement.

Handling Difficult Conversations

No-one likes having difficult conversations. And it's even more challenging when you do not face to face with an employee.

Creating a cohesive team that works well together and understands how they each fit into the group is an excellent start to ensuring you can handle any problematic situations that may arise.

This is because it's much easier to talk to a team member when that person doesn't also harbour feelings of isolation or misunderstanding. So, always be transparent with your team about your plans, processes and procedures – and check in regularly. That way, you can avoid small tensions getting out of hand by dealing with anything as it arises before it turns into a crisis.

Additionally, if possible, always hold any such conversations using a face to face platform such as private Zoom call, rather than by email. Not only is a video link more engaging, but it will also provide you with the opportunity to receive body language signals from your employee that would be missed in any written correspondence.

Finally

This guide should have informed you of the best ways to build and manage a virtual team.

It's important to remember that the success of your organisation depends on establishing a great team culture, even at a distance. That way, everyone feels involved and knows they are working towards the same goal.

With your excellent managerial support, clear direction, regular feedback and encouragement, your virtual team can soar to success.

About **Martin Veasey Talent Solutions**

The Secret to your Success is Hiring Exceptional Talent.
Our Talent is helping you find it.

- A 35-year track record successfully recruiting for blue chip and SME businesses both in the UK and Internationally.

- Essentially, we match exceptional talent with excellent jobs. We have a reputation for proactively finding and placing hard to reach talent into our clients' businesses. Our testimonials and completed assignment portfolio confirm this.

- Martin Veasey Talent Solutions have a unique expertise in hiring managerial, professional, technical, functional specialists and senior executive roles, including complete teams both in the UK and internationally.

- A boutique consultancy, with Director led account management of your recruitment campaign; offering national and global reach whilst retaining personal attention, expertise and support.

- We place a strong emphasis on developing partnerships that enable us to get to know your business objectives, your challenges and your specific requirements.

- We then create a tailored campaign that delivers the best talent to add value and become an integral part of your business growth and success.

- We have invested in State of Art recruitment technology to ensure that we are always able to source the best UK and international talent, both passive and active, for our clients' key roles.

- Highly qualified & experienced team of recruitment experts, including degree and Masters educated consultants, with memberships of professional bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the British Psychological Society, Institute of Leadership & Management and Association for Coaching.

- Our Recruitment Solutions division is complemented by our Talent Management Solutions division, which offers talent strategy planning, psychometric testing and executive coaching.

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