

Tips for the Virtual Employee

The case for being a virtual employee is a pretty easy one to make. The short commute, the lenient dresscode, the flexibility, and the comfortable office culture only begin to address the benefits of working from home. But while there are plenty of upsides, there are also considerable downsides to working outside the office.

In a recent survey, 615 of managers of virtual employees reported having misinterpreted co-workers through email, according to the Mobile Work Exchange, a public-private partnership that supports telework efforts. Another 32% rated the lack of face-to-face contact as the No. 1 telework communication challenge. But communication issues are only the start, according to virtual employees. Among the other top worries:

- Feelings of isolation
- Concerns about missed career opportunities
- Lack of trust by co-workers
- Declining self-motivation

The thing to keep in mind is that these issues are easily surmountable with a little effort. Here are some tips for staying on top while staying at home to work.

Get off to a good start

As much as possible, ensure that you have access to the communication tools, software and bandwidth needed to get the job done. Nothing halts workflow or creates frustration faster than lacking the proper tools.

Over-communicate to avoid misunderstandings

Without daily personal interaction, it can be difficult to establish a rapport with co-workers and managers. This can lead to several issues, including:

- Misinterpretation of questions or facts
- An escalation of emotions, especially frustration and anger
- Inbox overflow

Email and online chat are great tools, but they can lead to misunderstandings. Reach out to your colleagues often and talk with them one-on-one or in a group as much as possible. Encourage them to do the same with you. Verbal clues to meaning and personality are much more apparent in conversation than in written communication.

Create your own watercooler

Feeling isolated and the lack of rapport with and trust in colleagues are some chief complaints of virtual employees. You can blame much of this on the absence of an office canteen or water cooler. Casual workday interactions can be vital to team-building, problem-solving and well-being. To give yourself these same opportunities, try to create virtual canteens. Skype, team chat rooms and group teleconferencing services can be good substitutes. Be sure when gathering in these spaces that the atmosphere is casual enough to allow for the free flow of information, whether the chat is about sports, the latest TV shows or the work at hand.

Build a rhythm

Offices function on monthly, quarterly, or annual cycles, allowing employees to gage the pace of their work and to set meaningful deadlines. Create the same rhythm for yourself, scheduling online and face-to-face meetings, deadlines and updates with managers at regular intervals.

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