

## Enhancing Remote Work and How it is Supervised

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### **Abstract:**

Working remotely or teleworking or working virtually is not new. The experience with COVID-19 has expanded the concept and options for remote work environments and so has the need to expand how remote workers are supervised. Developing and training for remote or e-Supervision is certainly appropriate and timely given many industries are expecting remote work to continue long term, libraries might not be the exception.

**Keywords:** remote work | libraries | remote supervision

### **Article:**

#### **Introduction**

The world continues to struggle and adapt to the changes brought about with the COVID-19 pandemic, and modification of workplace operations and standards is a big part of how life is seen going forward. While the concept of working from home or remotely is not new, the impact of COVID has made remote work less of an exception and more common practice and expected. While maintaining a public persona, libraries will not be an exception to this but could be limited in options.

The phenomenon surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic is upon us and is expected to impact our lives for years to come. The way in which we operate both personally and professionally and the way in which our profession moves forward will face many choices be it individually or collectively within the profession. This pandemic has created in most individuals a level of high anxiety, emotional tolls and enhanced concerns about wellbeing and safety issues. These new directions with COVID, in terms of finding solutions for modified conditions, can create an environment for decisions/choices to be made as organizations contemplate how to provide service to stakeholders.

#### **Expanding remote work options**

Libraries traditionally served stakeholders in a physical, face to face environment that is connected to physical materials, instruction and community benefits such as programming and space. With the onset of COVID-19 shutting down most libraries completely in early 2020, libraries looked for ways to continue to provide materials and services to patrons, as much in academic settings as in public. The beginnings of virtual options already existed with eBooks,

electronic databases and tools such as LibGuides to offer services to stakeholders virtually. This is now expanded and enhanced across most library venues to engage patrons in multiple ways.

In addition to some patron services, many operational elements of libraries have taken on remote status in order to provide staff work options, such as HR functions, business processes, technical services and IT work. Overarching meeting guidelines and communication channels, such as conference calls and phone calls, are eliminating the need to see each other face to face. Work/life flexibility is expected to rise and continue long term as organizations adapt to change management needs and expectations.

For libraries, this can create a disparity between staff members in terms of their job definition and their preferences for being able to work remotely, including exempt and non-exempt statuses. Those disparity issues must be worked out locally, and that is important for establishing a program for the organization that balances remote work options across the institution in order to then establish guidelines, procedures and policies for managing effectively.

### **The Supervision Element**

The hybrid arrangement of employees working face to face, remotely or in a combination of both, creates a huge challenge for library management. Managers are expected to maintain operations along with budget constraints, logistical considerations and stakeholder demands, but also now must account (in a higher degree) for employee empathy and flexibility. Part of providing empathic support is recognizing the need to advocate these concerns to upper management addressing how these new considerations will impact employees' work life.

Many of the challenges with remote supervision are common across industries and fall into these categories:

- Change from face-to-face communications - Employees and managers have developed an expectation that face-to-face contact is part of the job; the loss of that ability can create a feeling of being out of touch.
- Expectations of job performance can become vague or cloudy due to assumptions being made or lack of contact to reinforce daily what expectations should be.
- Remote work isn't for everyone and while some employees are self-motivated to be more productive, some are not, given the change in workplace dynamics.
- Communication issues are more complex, with lack of face-to-face contact, alternative forms of communication can be diverse and technically challenging.
- Some folks respond poorly to the social isolation and lack of team cohesiveness, so developing strategies around those issues can be important.

The supervisory challenge becomes making the changes needed to adapt yourself and your team into new ways of communicating with each other and your supervisors. It is also about setting expectations for job performance that accomplishes value for the organization but also for the individual who is looking for accomplishment and ways to contribute effectively.

## **So, what to do?**

At this writing, many articles have been written across multiple industries on how to manage employees/teams remotely. Most of these could apply to a library workplace environment and should become standard training or discussion among library leaders to develop best practices for remote supervision. Across many resources the following suggestions are offered:

- Communication is not only key but should be a priority. Determining frequency, type, content and expectations can ensure a much more productive relationship between employees and library leadership. This also reinforces the individual value and importance that each employee feels that makes them more motivated to work for the larger good.
- Communication techniques should include routine check-in by employee and supervisor so there is an expectation of attention and the ability to have a say in the conversation. To make this successful the techniques should also include determining the best and most accommodating technology that is agreeable to both parties for quality and efficiency.
- Creating an individual and intentional focus for each individual can be an effective way to keep them engaged because it is more personal to them. Mitigating isolation issues will also keep employees team-focused for the good of the larger institution.
- Share and provide information broadly and openly. COVID-19 created a feeling of uncertainty which has lasted a long time. That uncertainty is compounded when lack of information or knowledge breeds speculation and fear of the unknown.
- Find ways to create a social environment even virtually. This reduces the feeling of isolation and loneliness for individuals and reinforces the concept of being part of a larger team. The benefits of these interactions can be seen in the quality of one-on-one conversations that don't start with damage control issues.
- The old rules still apply in relationship building, supervisors should be prepared to listen, offer encouragement and display the same emotional intelligence with their employees virtually as they would in a physical setting. This is important for developing employee confidence as well as supervisor trust in understanding the employee point of view.

## **Lessons learned**

Lessons learned two years into this pandemic include a variety of positives. An example can be a streamlining of the need for bureaucratic processes and paperwork. As remote work catches on and becomes refined in its' quality and trust for positive results, less of a hierarchical need is present to ensure compliance standards are met.

It is also important to recognize that organizational culture still exists, although perhaps somewhat modified. The core culture that existed before COVID-19 is still there, but it has been adapted to the current circumstances. Taking advantage of that as leaders helps to drive those modifications or adaptations into positive territory.

A long-term point of view is helpful in current hiring practices. Knowing where we are now with remote work helps us identify skills needed going forward that will complement the existing organization and help blend skills and needs going forward. Many hiring practices already utilize

remote actions for recruitment, interviewing and onboarding. Individuals experiencing this form of hiring will blend with your existing staff and share how these expectations were different from what they experienced and be proactive and involved in how those conversations can be mutually beneficial.

## **Conclusion**

Libraries, while not aligned solidly with traditional industries that can more easily offer remote work options, are still finding ways to incorporate remote work into their organizations. This increases the need and value for learning and adapting supervision techniques and understanding of managing remote employees, even in a hybrid mode. Recognizing the difference in managing remote and managing face- to-face is just the beginning. It is necessary to proactively adapt concepts, methods and processes to effectively and smoothly manage that remote workforce.

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