DEVELOPING A REMOTE WORK POLICY DURING A PANDEMIC

The sudden spread of COVID-19 and the recommended precautionary measures of social distancing has urged many employers to quickly develop or update internal policies and adapt to the new realities of a remote work arrangement. Few organizations are equipped to implement such a large-scale transition to remote work, however by taking the right steps employers can overcome some of the core challenges that employers

CME's guide to developing and implementing a successful Remote Working Arrangement (RWA) will provide recommendations on your organization can overcome these challenges, and what essential steps are required to ensure a smooth transition to remote work. It is important to note that although this guide will provide you with a means to establish a framework and policy for remote working, a rapidly changing situation such as a pandemic will require your organization to be adapt quickly in response to the situation as it unfolds.

With that being said, there are opportunities to avoid some of the more common challenges employers face such as not establishing a solid foundation of trust between the manager and employee, or having unrealistic expectations which can lead to poor performance or disengagement. In these scenarios having a solid policy in place and leveraging the support of the success factors used during the implementation process will give you the best opportunity for success.

ESSENTIAL STEPS

1. Analyzing your Workforce;
2. Developing a Remote Work Policy;
3. Implementation; and
4. Success Factors

ANALYZING YOUR WORKFORCE

Critical to the success of implementing a RTA is performing a Job Task Analysis (JTA) to understand the capabilities and limitations of your workforce. This can be done by taking a strategic look at the responsibilities, tasks and functions within your organization to determine which roles can transition to a remote model most efficiently, and what level of support each role will require to maximize success and high-productivity.

You may also want to utilize the JTA as an extension of your business continuity plan, which will identify the key functions, roles, skills and activities required to keep the organization operating as efficiently as **possible** during a crisis such as COVID-19. More information regarding how to develop your Business Continuity Plan can be found here.

Determining the level of support required for each role may entirely depend on the type of industry your organization operates in. For example, it may be determined that roles such as an assembly line worker, or machinist may not be eligible to work remotely given the responsibilities of the job. In these cases, it will be important to determine what level of support will be required on-site to allow those workers to continue being productive, or if that is not possible, what operational decisions will be required in the interim such as temporary lay-offs.

By conducting your JTA, you may identify a number of positions that already work remotely on occasion and require less effort to transition then some of the other positions identified. These positions may require less effort during implementation, however it is important to ensure that appropriate support levels are in place, and expectations are clear to ensure productivity and engagement remains solid.

EXAMPLE: JOB TASK ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

JOB TITLE	ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS	REMOTE WORK CAPABILITIES	SUPPORT LEVEL REQUIRED

1. DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE REMOTE WORK POLICY

Establishing a formal policy and framework that clearly defines the boundaries and behavioral expectations of a dedicated external workspace will be essential to implementing a successful RWA with your employees. The policy that you develop to facilitate the regular operations of your organization and ensure business continuity should clearly explain the policies and procedures applicable to all employees while working remotely. The breadth of the policy you develop will of course vary by industry and business requirements, however be sure to adapt your policy to fit business needs and external circumstances.

In this example, we will provide an overview of the policies and procedures you may want to cover, and also identify a few specific areas you may want to include when adapting to a situation such as a pandemic crisis.

The JTA developed in step one will allow you to easily determine the scope (which employees are eligible under the parameters of the policy) and to what extent support is required to ensure employees are productive and working efficiently. Defining your organizations expectations on the policies and procedures will be essential to a successful implementation. This will include the duties, obligations and responsibilities expected of the employee while working remotely, and will reinforce policies such as eligible business expenses, core business hours and procedures for maintaining security and confidentiality.

It will also be important to establish how business operations are to be conducted, including what technology will be used for remote meetings and what the expectation are in terms of physical

EXAMPLE: POLICY FRAMEWORK

- Purpose;
- Scope (Eligibility);
- Policies & Procedures;
    - Core Hours
    - Communication & Availability
    - Child & elder care
    - Security, Privacy & Confidentiality
    - Access to Physical Workspace
- Guidelines & Expectations
    - Workspace & Equipment
    - Business Expenses
    - Health, Safety & Ergonomics
    - Client & Stakeholder Relations
- Policy Review & Performance;
    - Employer Discretion

contact with each other, or third parties and stakeholders. Employers should also clearly communicate the policies and procedures with respect to permitting employees to access the physical workplace during precautionary measures of social distancing.

A reminder that a RWA is not a substitute for child-care and/or elder care may be considered within the parameters of a typical remote work policy. During a pandemic crisis however, you may want to give special considerations and increased flexibility to staff in the event that daycares and schools may be closed during a pandemic crisis such as COVID-19.

The framework and policy that you develop should appropriately capture the realities of your business operations. Being clear, flexible and being able to adapt your policies to reflect external business conditions will allow you to develop an arrangement that benefits both the employee and the organization and ensures team members are able to perform their best, regardless of their location.

3. IMPLEMENTATION

Once you have assessed your workforce (JTA), established your framework, and developed your policy you can proceed with implementation. At this stage, you will want to ensure that you have the support and collaboration needed from the leadership (C-suite) and operations (specifically IT & HR) teams to ensure a smooth implementation process. You may also want to consider using a top-down, tiered approach to implementation to ensure that managers are trained properly to successfully administer the policy and the procedures therein.

Another essential part of the implementation process is ensuring that employees have access to the necessary equipment and supplies to maintain productivity. This may include having the required technological devices, documents, office supplies and any other relevant equipment required to perform their job duties successfully. In these situations, specific attention should be given to the security and confidentiality of work materials, which may contain sensitive business information.

Obtaining buy-in from your leadership and managers will allow you to roll out your remote work policy with much more ease. Be sure to clarify expectations from staff throughout the process, and explain that the contents of the policy may adapt to the situation at hand. Ensure that staff are reassured that they will be supported during the process and provide them with direction on who they can refer to if they have any questions or concerns.

4. SUCCESS FACTORS

Implementing a remote work policy during a period of crisis is certainly not easy, and will require flexibility. Every employee's personal situation will be different, and although you have developed a solid framework and policy that fits your organization, there may be challenges that your employees face outside of the normal scope of the policy guidelines.

With that in mind, there are certain factors that require special consideration to be successful, and when prioritized, can help you overcome some of the core challenges faced during implementation.

A.   SECURITY & INFRASTRUCTURE

An important consideration in determining whether your organization is equipped with the appropriate infrastructure to support a digital workplace, is whether you have the technological infrastructure in place to drive engagement and enable your employees to carry out their daily tasks and duties. Consider having your IT support provide training and coaching to eligible employees on any new remote working systems, and ensure that there is an adequate level of support available to manage troubleshooting and IT issues when they arise. Confirm that the systems and applications being used by those working remotely have the appropriate levels of security and privacy to safeguard your organizations confidential information & IP.

Teams that require a lot of interaction can take advantage of today's modern technology, but may require support and guidance to navigate the logistical and cultural challenges presented by their new arrangements.

B.   TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT

Coaching managers on how to strategically mentor and lead their direct reports from a remote work location is imperative to achieving success. A common hurdle that some managers may face is building a sufficient foundation of trust, and having unrealistic expectations of staff while working remotely. Coaching managers on how to empower their employees, how to communicate effectively, and how to set attainable goals will all have a positive impact on an employee's level of engagement and productivity.

C.   POLICY REVIEW & PERFORMANCE

Consider including a clause in your policy that stipulates it is within the organizations sole discretion to approve an employee's eligibility to work remotely based on business needs and performance, and that a change in remote working eligibility will not constitute a fundamental alteration to the terms and conditions of employment. Ensure that there is a mutual understanding with the employee that the RWA may be a direct result of current business conditions, and will be periodically reviewed as it relates to the employee's productivity, performance, availability and responsiveness to determine if the situation is working well for both the employee and the business.

D. STAYING INFORMED

Identifying reliable and accurate information streams to ensure your organization is keeping abreast on relevant advisories coming from both the Government of Canada and provincial governments will allow you to keep your employees informed quickly. In these cases, you will likely have to adapt your policies as it relates to business travel, and reporting requirements on leisure travel to ensure the health and safety of your employees. This will also allow your team and your employees to foresee and plan for any anticipated changes to the remote work policies.

E. COMMUNICATION

Keeping your employees informed is critically important to the success of any remote working arrangement. Communicate openly and often. Leverage the knowledge you have of your workforce to decide what channels of communication will work best to maximize productivity and engagement to improve employee interaction. For example, you may want to consider utilizing an instant messaging service such as Slack for direct messaging, or video-conferencing service such as Zoom to host team meetings. Ensure that your employees can receive important organizational updates to avoid employees from feeling isolated. Coach managers to set up regular touch points to review expectations and enable social interactions to help employees stay connected. Establish a foundation of trust by clearly communicating expectations and empowering employees to work within the framework established.

F. MENTAL HEALTH & WELLNESS

Be sure to prioritize and encourage emotional support to your staff, especially when there is an abrupt shift to remote work. It is important for managers to acknowledge stress, listen to employees' anxieties and concerns, and empathize with their struggles. Make time to communicate openly, and be sure to ask staff how they are doing. Let the employee's stress or concerns be the focus of the conversation. Your employees will look to you for cues about how to react to sudden changes or crisis situations.

Effective leaders take a two-pronged approach, both acknowledging the stress and anxiety that employees may be feeling in difficult circumstances, but also providing affirmation of their confidence in their teams, using phrases such as "we've got this," or "this is tough, but I know we can handle it," With this support, employees are more likely to take up the challenge with a sense of purpose and focus.