

West Midlands Employers
Managing Employees through a Pandemic
for use by Local Authorities / other public sector bodies

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. In adopting the measures set out by the Government to decrease the spread of the Coronavirus, all businesses have been forced to work from home where they can. This has been a sudden and radical shift to working practices which most have adopted quite quickly especially where the technology was in place.
- 1.2. Managing employees remotely on a day to day basis is a skill set that managers will need to adopt and develop. This is different to remotely manage employees on an ad hoc basis therefore it is crucial to have practices and protocols in place. In compiling this guidance, the conventional management approaches and practices were examined to offer the remote alternative to this as a management solution.
- 1.3. These solutions are designed to sustain employee engagement, address any wellbeing concerns and ensure connectivity and collaboration of the team. This guidance also offers task/project ideas to assure that employees will continue to carry out meaningful and challenging work at the same time as feeling that they are contributing in the best way possible to the business demands.

2. Managing hours and employees with schooling responsibilities

- 2.1. As part of the remote working arrangements, managers should discuss the pattern of hours the employee will be working. Where it is usual for employees to work a fixed continuous number of hours this may need to be varied due to other pressures and variations in the home/family environment. This may involve caring responsibilities for dependants (elderly parents) or the responsibility of schooling children. Managers are advised to discuss with employees what the typical working pattern could be. This may not be the standard 9-5 working hours; therefore, managers should demonstrate flexibility in working patterns.
- 2.2. The Government's decision to close schools has had a considerable impact on working parents. Managers will need to accept there will be disruption for working parents, e.g. a child may interrupt an employee while a meeting is taking place. The advice to managers is to show understanding and to accept that the employee may need to see to the child and then resume work respectively. A flexible approach should be taken, especially for employees with younger children who will inevitably need more care.
- 2.3. Employees who have children or other dependants at home, should be encouraged to consider how they can best balance work commitments and care responsibilities. It is vital for the employee to discuss this with the manager detailing what their availability and limitations are.
- 2.4. Where it is identified that an employee is unable to fulfil their contracted hours, managers could offer solutions including the utilisation of annual leave or the reduction of contracted hours for a temporary period. It would not be necessary to complete a formal flexible working request so managers can make these decisions informally with the employee, as long as they can demonstrate they are taking a consistent approach with other employees in the council. It may be advisable for Senior Leaders and HR to agree a common initial approach to this situation, so that employees in some services are not penalised by having a reduction in pay or having to



use annual leave, whilst others are allowed to “do what they can” with no detrimental impact.

- 2.5. Where possible an overlap of 4 working hours with the employee and the team should be encouraged to ensure collaboration and communication can be coordinated effectively. This might involve varying start and finish times or breaking up the working hours into segments. For example, if an employee wanted to work from 10.00-14.00 and the rest of the hours in the evening, then this would be a workable pattern, and would support the attendance at most meetings or contact with the rest of the team. The important principle is to ensure that this is communicated and shared with the team or other stakeholders.

3. Defining the new BAU and engaging the team

- 3.1 Managers will need consider how they can replicate the working environment virtually. There is a risk of employees becoming isolated and disconnected from the team, particularly for those employees not used to working remotely. Managers should schedule activities to maintain interactivity with the team. Some examples include:

Weekly

- Zoom/Teams video conferencing weekly team meetings
- one to one’s via video conference
- Weekly after work fun activities including pop quizzes, online team games, chats over coffee or drinks via video conferencing

Fortnightly/monthly

- Well-being sharing activities via Zoom/Teams. What information can team members share on this topic to encourage discussion, sharing of challenges, tips and techniques.
- Tasks/challenges that require team members to collaborate and work together
- Team building Activities – these can be simple activities including sharing of experiences or responding to questions to share views

- 3.2 Managers should be challenged to virtually replicate work scenarios such as the chats around the water cooler, or the coffee breaks in the canteen/bistro. By using video conferencing and being able to see teammates this increases the feeling of emotion and human connection. Therefore, managers should encourage the team to “get ready for work” and turn video cameras on. This will enhance remote communication and connectivity.

4.0 How to fully utilise employee skills, knowledge and abilities

- 4.1 Dependent on the service area, there may be times during a pandemic when employees are not fully utilised, because the service or work they normally deliver cannot be carried out in the current circumstances. This may be due to social distancing, self-isolation or other factors. Managers may want to consider the following ideas/options to provide meaningful work to employees who are not fully employed so that they feel valued and the work will benefit the business/service in the future:

Business Review

- Carry out research into the Local Authority Service and report findings



- Research future service offerings or opportunities for income generation where applicable
- Carry out analysis of macro and micro business environment using business tools e.g. PESTLE Porters 5 forces, SWOT
- Review 'local work instructions' and look at improvements and updates
- Map a current business process and identify possible improvements
- Develop and present management information, reporting to evaluate trends based on service user/resident utilisation

Business Continuity and Business Development

- Map and generate ideas for anticipated future changes in the business and capture these in a plan with actions
- Work with 2-3 members of the team to carry out a review on the service operating model and current digital tooling
- Research digital tools on the market
- Create a business proposal to change an aspect of the business operating model

Partnership working opportunities and Business Planning

- Explore partnership opportunities with external organisations to raise the profile of the service and support joined up initiatives
- Look at opportunities to share services or resources with other Local Authorities and other Key stakeholders, Suppliers and Vendors

Policies, Procedures and systems

- Review policies and procedures that need amending in response to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Create an induction manual for future new starters with 2-3 colleagues in the team

Digital Activity and learning

- Look at the digital skills required for business continuity and coordinate training for the team that require the training
- Generate ideas on how to deliver services using a digital platform
- Explore ways in which employees can continue engagement with their client base/residents to provide useful resources or key messages using social media

CPD – Continuous Personal Development

- Review annual appraisal objectives and complete any self-learning actions
- Highlight a book or resource the employee/team can review
- To carry out a self-appraisal to identify areas to develop and create a self-learning plan
- Create/update a career development plan
- Research/explore leadership skills and models
- Create personal and work goals

Training & Development

- Develop training materials for the team and outside of team
- Coach and mentor junior employees



Housekeeping

- Update distribution lists
- Cleanse the data file storage
- Update distribution lists by emailing contacts using the opportunity to 'get in touch'

Communications

- Update web pages on the intranet for the service area
- Create a webpage with team members on the impact of COVID-19 and the future business aspirations and goals
- Create virtual networking opportunities for the team and diarise
- Introduce or improve the use of MS Teams, Yammer or other platforms
- Chair and lead a virtual networking event
- Coordinate a webinar on an interesting / relevant topic
- Create a digital marketing strategy

Well-being

- Develop and deliver a wellbeing initiative for the team
- Research resilience tools and techniques that work for the team

5.0 How to continue to performance manage and carry out one to one's

5.1 Managers should continue to performance manage employees by carrying out regular one to one's and by setting short term objectives for this period of downturn. These should be reviewed on a weekly basis to ensure progress and support is in place. These objectives should be documented with clear outcomes and timescales. Using SMART to set objectives is a useful business tool to use.

5.2 Managers should use a supervision template document to capture the task/objective for the employee. There may be a requirement for managers to be more task oriented with some employees who have not worked remotely before. It is recognised that remote working requires a sense of discipline and focus that will need to be developed for some employees. By being task-oriented, employees will know what task needs to be completed, details of the approach, outcomes and deadlines. This will keep them focused on the task and will also avoid misunderstanding, confusion and help manage expectations on both sides.

6. Maintaining a positive psychological contract

"What can I really expect from the organisation"

"What should I reasonably be expected to contribute in return"

6.1 During unsettling times managers should think not only about how to utilise their teams but also how to keep them engaged. A positive psychological contract is worth taking seriously as it will create more commitment and loyalty to the organisation during a time where business continuity is at risk and employment stability is fragile. Managers should recognise that employees benefit from:



- being treated with fairness, equity and consistency
- having security of employment
- scope to demonstrate competence
- career expectations and the opportunity to develop skills
- involvement and influence
- trust in the management of the organisation to keep their promises

6.2 By bearing these principles in mind managers can ensure the effective management of employees during turbulent times. By taking some time to put these practices in place future benefits for the service will be delivered in the form of better outcomes, improved performance and stronger well-being and resilience of teams.

