GoCo

Remote Work: HR's Role Through COVID-19

Expert Q&A for HR Professionals on implementing a remote work policy, while mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on daily operations.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Companies across the country are temporarily sending workers home to reduce the potential spread of the coronavirus. And while this has been lauded as the right move, many companies are finding themselves unprepared to set up their workforce for remote success.

We recently hosted a Q&A panel that addressed the building blocks of quickly implementing a remote work policy and remote work capabilities during emergencies. Better Growth founder Katie Cheney, Kim Moshlak, and GoCo's Sarah Koller, Bryan Brorsen, and Allie Collins joined us on the panel. We received several user questions before the live panel, so we've assembled an FAQ that addresses the most pressing HR questions we received.

Panelists

Kim Molshak - SPHR, SHRM-SCP

Principal Consultant at Helios HR. Has sixteen years of progressive Human Resources experience across multiple HR disciplines. And is a veteran of the Armed Forces

Katie Cheney - Founder of BetterGrowth

Founder and SVP of Client Strategy at BetterGrowth, an agency focused on building Revenue-generating remote teams. They focus on recruitment, onboarding, training and management phases of their growth.

Sarah Koller - SHRM-CP

GoCo's People Operations Specialist. As the person developing programs and policies that protect and nurture our company, She joined the panel to talk about what we're doing at GoCo to prepare for and respond to the Covid-19..

Bryan Brorsen

GoCo's Director of Sales. Has over 20 years of leadership experience, 10 of them managing remote teams of up to 150 people. and joined the panel to brings a manager's perspective & best practices on how to lead remote teams.

How Do You Maintain Professionalism When Working From Home?

Bryan Brorsen, Director of Sales at GoCo, recommends that we "relax our managerial mindset and just say out loud that there will be periods of time where they're not working." But he also says that this isn't really different than being in the office.

"Yes, they may go swap a load of laundry out when they're at home. But when they're in the office, there's plenty of time being lost throughout the day at the water cooler or hallway conversations and things of that nature. I think [as managers] the main job we've got to do is adjust our mindset, start to trust our people, and build and measure effectiveness with adequate plans and processes."

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> **Bryan Brorsen · Director of Sales · GoCo**

GoCo's People Operations Specialist, Sarah Koller, mentions that technology plays a big role in maintaining your existing workplace structure. "[When creating the Remote work Policy] We clearly communicated what we expected from the team. For example, we require everyone on video chats for meetings to be just as professional as they would be in the office. Having the right technology already in place can help you foster communication and stick as close to your normal day-to-day as possible."

Remote workers still need to be held accountable, and daily interactions are a big part of this. Assign goals, track them, and circle back to talk about those goals just like you would face-to-face to keep everyone moving forward.

How Should We Handle Positions That Can't Work Remotely?

Some companies, such as manufacturers, may have office staff that could work from home, while some positions don't allow this.

> I recommend looking at other ways employees can contribute outside of their normal duties so they can continue to provide value and still get paid.
>
> **Kim Moshlak, SPHR, SHRM-SCP · Principal HR Consultant · Helios HR**

In these cases, Molshak looks for opportunities to reassign duties so that everyone can continue to work. "The unfortunate thing in some parts of the country is that salaried employees are expected to be paid no matter what, but hourly employees are not guaranteed pay. As employers, I think it's important to figure out how we can help those employees as much as possible."

Molshak recommends looking at other ways employees can contribute outside of their normal duties. For

example, if someone has administrative skills, then companies may be able to assign them project work so they can continue to provide value and still get paid.

> When developing policies, it's HR's role to fill the blanks about how remote work should be managed and be as explicit as possible.
>
> **Katie Chaney · Founder & SVP of Client Strategy · BetterGrowth**

When developing policies around who can work remotely and who can't, Katie Chaney, founder [BetterGrowth](), mentions getting specific on job descriptions and leaving no room for interpretation. "One thing I see is companies leave a lot of "blanks," and employees will try to fill them however makes sense to them. But it's HR's role to fill these blanks about how remote work should be managed and be as explicit as possible."

What Tech Do You Recommend for Enabling the Team to Connect?

Chaney uses tools for real-time communication, like Google Hangouts and Slack, along with communication tools that don't require immediate responses, such as BaseCamp. Also in Chaney's remote tech stack are storage tools like Dropbox and Google Drive, where she can send, save, and share team documents and files, and video tools like Zoom or Google Hangouts for facetime interactions.

Molshak notes that many companies are offering remote work tools like these for free during the coronavirus crisis. "You need to consider teammates who might not have the technological capabilities they need. It's critical to work with your IT department to fill these needs."

Can We Ask Employees to Self-Quarantine If They've Traveled and/or Appear Sick?

There are some legal implications here, but the short answer is yes, you can ask employees to self-quarantine. Cheney recommends creating or updating policies that reflect current safety concerns, such as those we're experiencing now with COVID-19.

"You don't want to appear as though you're showing xenophobia or anything that could be taken as discrimination," Cheney reminds us.

> This is where remote work presents major opportunities for employers so that productivity isn't lost, AND employees don't risk spreading sickness to others.
>
> **Kim Moshlak, SPHR, SHRM-SCP · Principal HR Consultant · Helios HR**

If you want to address the people within your company who have been traveling, you could request that anyone who has traveled to X place within a certain time period stay

home for a determined amount of time. Cheney believes this is wholly reasonable and doesn't cross any discriminatory lines. A bad approach to this would be to target people based on their descent, pregnancy, age, or other protected classes.

Molshak also suggests that simply conveying the gravity of coming to work sick can help to influence employees' own choices. "I think of it as a two-way street: employers need to help employees take care of themselves as well as others."

On a similar note, Molshak believes that employers should take an active role in making it easy for employees to make the choice of not coming to work when sick. This is where remote work presents major opportunities for employers so that productivity isn't lost, AND employees don't risk spreading sickness to others.

"We're seeing a lot of positive firsts right now. Employers are doing things like eliminating the waiting period for short-term disability and offering leave with pay. These are excellent ways we can make it easier for people to be respectful of the workplace and also be able to feed their families."

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> **Katie Chaney · Founder & SVP of Client Strategy · BetterGrowth**

Brorsen acknowledges that money isn't always the driving factor behind why people show up to work. Instead, many workers hold themselves to high standards and don't want to let their team down. "This is often the case in any team-driven environment," he says. "We're all driven by not feeling like we're letting the person to the left or right of us down. But the reality is, you're actually being respectful of everyone."

Brorsen believes that this mindset starts from the top down. Leadership should help to foster this culture and integrate it with their PTO and attendance policies. Make it clear what you want people to do in these situations.

How Do We Keep Employees Motivated and Engaged at Home?

Brorsen notes that, like many companies, GoCo employees want the opportunity to work from home. And even though he feels their hand was forced by COVID-19 to allow this opportunity, employees are motivated to show that remote programs *can* work.

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> **Bryan Brorsen · Director of Sales · GoCo**

He believes this is a similar situation many companies face. Simply offering the prospect of remote work can be motivating enough to keep engagement and productivity high. Still, he suggests that leaders put plenty of checkpoints in place to monitor performance.

"Do more than build a Slack channel. Pick up the phone and talk to your team, interact with them, and maintain a personal touch that goes beyond providing instruction."

Koller and Cheney echo Bryan's sentiment by boosting cross-collaboration just as though you were in the office. "Sharing ideas and playing games over Slack makes it feel like your team is right beside you rather than miles away," says Koller.

> For me, much of what we do in the office is still available when we work remotely. We do 15-minute walking talks in the office, and that's something we can easily do at home, too.
>
> **Katie Chaney · Founder & SVP of Client Strategy · BetterGrowth**

For Cheney, working at home isn't much different than being in the office. "We do 15-minute walking talks in the office, and that's something we can easily do at home, too. We also do Slack Attacks, where we ping someone and jump on a video chat for 15 minutes. Much of what we do in the office is still available when we work remotely."

How Do You Get Leadership Buy-In to Implement a Remote Work Policy?

Koller notes that HR people are the "keepers of all data," so supporting the case with background information is critical. "It could be a survey or any data you have to show who you need to support and how," Koller mentions. "Gather what you need to show them why remote work is important and how it will benefit the company and employees alike."

How Should We Manage Regular HR Processes Right Now?

> [Having an HRIS] is ideal for remote work situations because it eliminates much of the need for in-person back and forth.
>
> **Sarah Koller, SHRM-CP · People Operations Specialist · GoCo**

Chaney says that technology plays an important role in translating HR to a remote environment. For example, in a firing, you would still need proper documentation in place. The difference is that you would need technology to help facilitate the situation. Koller admits she's been spoiled by GoCo because documents can be sent and signed from the platform. It's ideal for remote work situations because it eliminates much of the need for in-person back and forth. Ideally, if you have the right technology and processes in place to facilitate daily HR tasks, the bulk of these processes likely won't change.

What Can We Do to Prepare Our Team for the Transition Back to the Office?

Chaney challenges business owners to think about why their business isn't remote all the time. "We're all in an experiment, and it's showing there's a lot of value in remote work despite its challenges.

Even if companies decide not to make remote work a permanent thing, they should get employees involved in the transition back to the office. It's vital to figure out what makes sense for them in terms of how and when to come back, with the understanding that a one-size-fits-all approach might not work here."
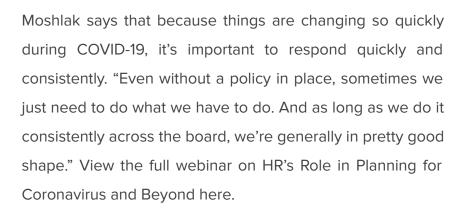
How Do We Communicate New Policies to Our Employees?

"HR does a lot of the heavy lifting," admits Koller.

> At GoCo, we use our own platform to send out policies and documents, then we can easily keep track of everyone who has signed it.
>
> **Sarah Koller, SHRM-CP · People Operations Specialist · GoCo**

Moshlak says that because things are changing so quickly during COVID-19, it's important to respond quickly and consistently. "Even without a policy in place, sometimes we just need to do what we have to do. And as long as we do it consistently across the board, we're generally in pretty good shape." View the full webinar on HR's Role in Planning for Coronavirus and Beyond here.

Additional Resources

The GoCo team is working hard to support HR pros through COVID-19. Here are some additional resources that can be useful during this time:

- From GoCo: The COVID-19 Resource Center
- From the DOL:
    - FFCRA Law FAQs
    - FFCRA Poster and poster's FAQs
    - Furloughs and temporary layoffs FAQs
- From the IRS:
    - COVID-19 Tax Relief Webpage
    - FFCRA Leaves and Tax credits FAQs
    - Employee Retention Credit
- The COVID-19 pages for:
    - The CDC
    - The Department of Treasury
    - OSHA
- The HHS bulletin on HIPAA & COVID-19

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