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Creating a Teleworking Policy

COVID-19

In April 2020, Stay-At-Home orders were enacted across the nation in response to the spread of COVID-19. With very little warning, many began to work from home. Businesses have had to run headlong into a teleworking program with no formalized policy, or an outdated policy. As Washington begins to open back up, businesses will need a return to work plan. **An updated teleworking policy will be critical to a successful transition.** There is more teleworking now than ever, and it is unlikely that teleworking rates will drop below pre-COVID numbers in the next few years.

Introduction to Teleworking

Teleworking, Telecommuting, Remote Work, and Work From Home refer to a staff member completing their assigned duties outside of the office. This could include accessing a co-working space, working from a coffee shop, working from a home office, and more. Teleworking can be utilized in a variety of ways. Some may telework frequently as part of their regular schedule while others may telework only a few times a year for unusual circumstances such as injury and sickness, needing to let a repair person into their home during the workday, temporary loss of regular commute method, and so on.

The purpose of this guide is to walk you through a series of topics, questions, and recommendations to help you create a policy that fits with the unique needs of your worksite and staff.

Eligibility

Teleworking may not be appropriate for everyone at your worksite. Some roles, such as maintenance or human resources, may not function in a telework capacity. **It is important to decide before the implementation of a telework plan who will be eligible for remote working and to what degree.** Any distinctions between departments must be clear. It must be determined if new hires will be eligible for telework immediately, if they will require a duration of on-site training, or if there will be a seniority requirement for remote work.

Determine Objectives

It is important to decide the scale of your telework program. There is a significant difference between a program that allows for occasional telework as circumstances require and a telework program which allows for an employee to primarily or exclusively work remotely. **Are you actively encouraging teleworking or simply allowing for teleworking?**

Consider the timeline for your policy. Are you creating a policy to meet the temporary needs of an extenuating circumstance, such as parking disruptions, office construction, or a global pandemic? Or are you updating your policy for the foreseeable future?

Provided Materials

There are a number of materials that an employee must have access to in order to successfully telework. It cannot be assumed that all employees will have these materials available for remote work, and **it must be determined which materials will be provided by the employer and who will be eligible for these materials.**

Norms must be established for access to work-provided teleworking materials. Will all employees be required to use work-issued computers, will there be an option, or will no one be provided a computer? If there are full-time telework employees, will their internet costs be reimbursed? Will there be a difference between current employees opting into telework versus new hires being onboarded for telework? Will you maintain standards for an employee's workspace?

Physical materials range from technological to furniture. They may include: a laptop or desktop computer; a separate webcam if not included in a laptop; a headset; a computer mouse and mouse pad; a modem or router; a cell or desktop phone; an office chair; a desk.

Once physical materials are determined, there are **online materials** which are key to remote success. They may include: internet access; remote server access; remote access to a work system such as Amazon Workspaces; access to Microsoft Office; access to a video conferencing platform such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

Cyber Security

If you manage any kind of proprietary information, both internal and for clients, it will be important to have **clear rules surrounding file management and remote server access.** Do you have an established code of conduct for accessing and saving files? If an employee works using a personal computer, can they save files onto that computer or onto a third-party hosting service like Google Drive or Microsoft OneDrive? What about storage of printed materials at a home office?

Remote Supervision

Teleworking can present a novel situation for supervision. To maintain a positive work atmosphere between departments and groups, it can be highly beneficial to have **consistent remote supervision protocols** across the company. If this is not possible, then consistency within departments between managers will be important.

It can be helpful to re-adjust perceptions on what denotes productivity, **shifting towards a focus on timeliness and quality of tasks completed** rather than hours at a desk. This can feel counter-intuitive while managing hourly employees. It is impossible to keep employees from distraction while they are in the office and it is impossible to guarantee no distractions during remote work. That's OK. What can be effectively managed is how tasks are being completed. Focusing on these outcomes leads to less micro-managing of employees, which leads to more productive employees.

How often will managers check-in? Will employees submit a daily or weekly list of tasks? Will employees 'clock in/out' for their shifts? Will telework employees be eligible for overtime, and how will that be monitored?