



Manage a Virtual Team



The **Inclusive**
Workplace

You want to be understanding, supportive, and helpful to your remote employees while maintaining productivity—but how?

This document provides some relatively quick and inexpensive actions you can take. These strategies can support all employees, including those on the autism spectrum or with an intellectual disability. This document may also be useful to employment agencies who have remote staff.

How do I build and maintain connection?

Virtual work means a drastic drop in informal social interaction—there’s no chance to chat at the water cooler. As a result, remote employees can feel lonely, socially isolated, less like they belong, and less engaged.

Here are some **tips** managers can use to keep employees engaged and connected even when they can’t be together in person.



Establish frequent check-ins

- Virtual employees and teams have different needs than those who work on-site.
- Connect frequently with your remote employees.
- Check-ins are a valuable way to monitor your employees’ well-being, challenges, concerns, and needs—and to support them as needed.
- Consider the needs of your employees. Schedule check-ins that best support them. Do they prefer one-on-one or group check-ins? What time of day do they prefer?
- Make these calls regular, structured, and predictable.
- During your check-ins:
 - Listen to their concerns.
 - Answer their questions.
 - Consult with them.



Provide and use various types of technology

How can your team **communicate** effectively?

- Do you use phone calls?
- Do you send emails?
- Do you use a direct message tool (Slack, Google Chat)?
- Do you use a video conferencing tool (Zoom, Google Meet, Skype)?
- What tools does everyone have access to? What tools does everyone know how to use?
- How do your employees prefer to communicate and be communicated with?
- Is everyone comfortable with being on video?
- What technology best allows them to participate in meetings and communicate with others?

Offering a variety of options is key to ensuring your team communication is accessible and inclusive.



Incorporate and encourage social interaction—but don't require it

Support your remote workers by incorporating opportunities for **social interaction**. For example:

- **Virtual lunch:** Schedule a video call on a regular basis (for example, every Wednesday). Employees who are interested and able can join the video meeting, eat their lunch, and chat socially with their team.
- **Direct message recognition:** Encourage your team to compliment, praise, and recognize fellow co-workers for their work, efforts, contributions, learnings, and successes.
- **Rotating coffee date:** Encourage your team to have one-on-one time with other co-workers. Schedule or encourage them to have a phone call once a week with a different co-worker.

Participation in such events should be optional.



Find ways for everyone to participate

When encouraging social interaction among your team, find ways that support and allow **everyone** to participate.

- What technology can everyone access?
- Is everyone comfortable with talking?
- Are some employees more comfortable to share by writing or typing?



Be available

- Be available if an employee wants or needs to connect with you.
- Let them know they can reach out and connect with you.
- Clearly communicate when you are (and aren't) available.
- Provide options for how employees can reach you (phone, video call, email).

How do I build and maintain collaboration?



Hold virtual morning “huddles”

- If it works well for your team, hold a quick 15-minute **virtual meeting** each morning. It sets the foundation for a productive day.
- Have the same agenda for each huddle.
- Have each employee, in turn, share (in their preferred way of communicating):
 - The things they did yesterday.
 - The things they will do today.
 - What they need from the team.



Use your tools

Use the various **communication technology tools** you have. For example, use phone calls, email, text messages, video conferencing tools, or direct messaging.

- How can your tools be used more inclusively?
- Do your tools have features such as closed captions?
- Are you able to record meetings for employees?
- During a video meeting, include visuals (a few bullet points) for your team to look at while you're talking.
- Take breaks during long video meetings.



Confirm access to technology

Remote employees need **access** to information and resources to be successful.

Are all your employees able to access and use your technologies?

- Equipment: Do they need a monitor or keyboard?
- Access: Are they able to access files, documents, or other sources of information?
- Knowledge: Do they require training?
- How can you support them?
- How can your IT or training department support them?
- How can other team members support them?
- Don't assume the same technology works for everyone. Provide a variety of options to accommodate the different needs of employees.



Establish rules

As a team, establish the **rules** for how you'll work together remotely. This helps set up the team for success.

- What are the team's expectations and best practices?
- How often will the team meet?
- When is the best time for the team to meet?
- What communication tools will you use? For what purposes will you use them (for example, direct messages each morning to the entire team to share your status update)?
- As a team, do you turn on the video feature so you can all see each other—is everyone comfortable with this?
- How far in advance of meetings do you send out the agenda and purpose or goals?
- Will everyone use the mute feature when not speaking?



Work together

- Look for opportunities to have employees work **together** on projects or assignments.



Discuss inclusion

Discuss **inclusion** with your team.

For example:

- What does inclusion mean to our team? Why is it important?
- What are some things we can do to make everyone feel included and part of the team?
- Are there challenges? What are possible solutions?

How do I manage employees?



Understand differences

- Some employees prefer working remotely. It allows them to focus better and with fewer interruptions than in a busy office. Other employees are energized by other people and find electronic communication and remote work draining. **Both** groups of remote workers need interaction and support from you.
- If your team has recently started working remotely, some employees may still be adapting to the change in routine and lack of structure.
- Don't assume the same virtual management techniques work for everyone. **Ask** your employees what works best for them.



Be empathetic and supportive

- It's okay for your employees to find remote work challenging, and it's okay for them to talk about it.
- Support them with encouragement and emotional support. Be empathetic and understanding.
- Ask how your remote employees are doing. ("How is working from home going for you so far?")
- Actively listen to their concerns and struggles.
- Briefly repeat their responses back to them to show you were listening and to ensure you properly understood them.
- Acknowledge that lots of people (including you, as a manager) can find remote work challenging. Develop solutions together. ("Yes, this is challenging ... I know we can handle it together.")
- As a manager, don't focus on your own stress or concerns during these meetings. Focus on your employees. Model positivity and solution-finding to your team.

“ How is working from home going so far?”

“ It sounds like it can be difficult to know when to go for a break when you’re at home.”

“ Thank you for sharing that with me. It can be challenging. Let’s see if we can work together to find a solution.”



Be mindful of tone

- Misunderstandings are much more common through virtual communication such as emails and direct messaging. Be **mindful** of the words you use.



Encourage a safe, dedicated workspace

- Encourage employees to have a **dedicated workspace** with a work set-up that is comfortable and safe (ergonomic) and free from distractions. Understand that this may not be possible for some employees.
- How can you assist your employees with their home-based workspaces? Are you able to provide a computer with a monitor and keyboard if needed?



Encourage on and off hours

- A separate workspace in the home (if possible) can help with the mental **separation** of “at work” and “off work.”
- Encourage your remote employees to keep **boundaries** and work during office hours (not during their “off” time) and relax during their “off” time.
- **Role-model this behaviour** for your employees by not sending them messages during their “off” time.



Communicate a lot

- Communicate **frequently** and **clearly**. Keep everyone updated about what is happening. Talk about progress. Talk about changes. Be clear on goals. Be transparent. Provide feedback and coaching.



Set a positive tone

- In team meetings, **acknowledge** your employees' hard work and accomplishments. Thank them and celebrate them.



Monitor communications

- Keep an eye on what and how your team is **communicating** with each other. Is everyone being included? Is anyone left out?
- Are they sharing information that is required? Is everyone on schedule? Is everyone contributing?
- Has someone's tone or activity level changed? Do they seem to be struggling? Be **alert** to signs like these and reach out to offer support.





Ask employees what they need

- Every employee is **unique** and has unique needs and personal circumstances. The best way to know what an employee needs is to discuss their needs with them.
- Flexibility in work schedules can support some employees with childcare needs and work-life balance.
- For some remote employees, it's helpful to provide structure to their workday. For example:
 - For deadlines, give a specific date and time.
 - To avoid email overload, suggest that employees check their email once in the morning and once in the afternoon.



Discuss, implement, and maintain accommodations

- Accommodations support **everyone** to work at their best.
- Discuss existing accommodations with employees. If they are helpful in a virtual work setting, maintain them.
- Ask employees about any new or different accommodations they may need while working remotely.
- Most accommodations can be provided remotely, but they may be different from on-site accommodations. For example, job coaching is an accommodation that can be maintained remotely, but it may be delivered differently than it would be at a job site.
- Discuss these considerations with your employees and your business in order to support them.

To read more about accommodations, see:



[Accommodations for Your Workplace](#)



Talk about and offer support

- Inform and remind your employees of the **services and benefits** available to them through their employment (for example, remind them of your employee assistance program and the services it provides).
- Arrange for and offer optional virtual well-being workshops (for example, a meditation class or a nutrition class) as a positive and preventive action. How can you make these workshops accessible for all employees?



Links



[Accommodations for Your Workplace](#)

Sources

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