

# Embracing The Virtual Workforce

We are in a new world where growth, volatility and disruptive technology and innovations have taken over organisations and changed the way we engage with each other.

This means that now is the time for HR to embrace these disruptions and transform itself from a transaction-execution function into a valued consulting function by bringing innovative solutions to business leaders at all levels.

Today's challenges require a new playbook – one that enables HR to be agile and forward thinking. HR needs to seize ownership of the challenges and show bold leadership in addressing them.

## New world of work

This complex world means employees are “always on” - hyper-connected to their jobs through pervasive mobile technology. Barriers between work and life have been all but eliminated.

Networking tools like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter allow people to easily monitor the market for new job opportunities and comment on their employers.

Employees today work more hours and are involved in demanding cross-functional teams that often bring new people together at a rapid rate. Flexibility, empowerment, development and mobility have risen to hold an important role in defining a company's culture and ‘attractiveness’.

## The virtual workplace

Virtual teams are in vogue. Virtual teams

(i.e. a geographically dispersed team, distributed team, or remote team) work across time, space and organisational boundaries and have links strengthened by webs of communication technology.

Various studies suggest that between 50 and 70 percent of all white-collar workers in OECD countries at least occasionally work on projects that engage in some form of virtual collaboration. This level of collaboration and communication has shifted how team members gather, share, exchange information, make decisions, and monitor progress.

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The appeal of forming virtual teams is clear. Amongst the advantages of virtual teams, flexibility with geography and timing are frequently cited as being beneficial. Knowledge workers can manage their work and personal lives more flexibly, save money, and have the opportunity to interact with colleagues anywhere in the world around a 24-hour global clock.

But virtual teams are hard to get right. Most people agree that virtual communication is less productive than face-to-face interaction, and nearly half admit to feeling anxious, confused and uncomfortable with collaboration technology.

So how do you create and lead an effective virtual team? There's a lot of advice out there, but through our research, forming productive virtual teams and helping organisations navigate collaboration challenges, we've learned that

there are four must-haves:

- › **The right team:** people, roles, team size
- › **The right leadership:** building trust with constant contact, encouraging open dialogue
- › **The right touch points:** articulating clear goals, progress tracking, formal online events
- › **The right technology:** An online ‘work place’, instant messaging, dashboard and analysis tools, live video, screen sharing, cloud apps integration.

## The art and science of being a virtual employer

Employers and managers are often sceptical when it comes to hiring virtual workers. To build a virtual team of employees, trust and confidence are essential factors in the hiring process. When you think about it, some employers might never meet candidates in person - yet that employee is involved with building a company's success. No wonder some managers are nervous when it comes to hiring virtual workers! So - some facts to consider about the positives:

1. Apprehensive about hiring virtual employees? According to Forrester, nearly 34 million Americans are working from home and telecommuting is expected to rise 43 percent in the United States by 2016.
2. Virtual workforces have been painted as a boon to both employee productivity and retention. The degree of increased productivity varies with different organisations but noted employee productivity improvements range from 10 percent to 43 percent.
3. A survey conducted by WorldatWork of over 600 HR professionals showed 85 percent of respondents reported their organisation's virtual work programme had a moderate or high impact on employee retention.

4. Effective organisations promote virtual work as an incentive that adds to the overall employment value proposition without significantly impacting expenses.
5. Instead of losing a valued employee when personal circumstances create a need for relocation, remote work helps retain these valued employees plus their institutional knowledge. And costly expenses to recruit, hire, and train a replacement are eliminated.

### Building an all-star virtual team

Thinking about building an all-star virtual team? Here are six things to consider:

#### 1. Figure out the type of team needed

Think about how the team will function in an online environment. Although virtual employees will miss out on face-to-face interactions, a strong company culture can still be created.

Platforms like Skype can serve as the “water cooler,” giving employees a way to interact and share ideas. Using social media options such as Yammer assist in building a social connection platform.

#### 2. Create goals for the virtual team

Make sure everyone is on the same page with clearly communicated expectations which are specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic and time-bound. This will help manage employees efficiently and remove the dreaded ‘ambiguity’ that can creep in.

In the absence of face-to-face interactions, the virtual team needs goals that are both concise and attainable enough to sustain motivation.

Keep the focus on deadlines. After all, employees won’t have a manager standing over their shoulder to ensure the work is done.

#### 3. Increase communication as you increase distance

The old saying “Out of sight, out of mind” really applies when it comes to virtual workers.

It’s easy to forget that they’re out there - at least until something really good or really bad happens that involves them.

Make a point of reaching out to your virtual employees regularly, even if it’s just to say hello and ask how things are going.

The farther away you are from your virtual workers, the more important it is to keep in touch. Put a weekly call on your calendar to each of your virtual employees, and make sure you follow through on it.

#### 4. Schedule periodic team-building events

People naturally build strong relationships when they work together as a team. It’s much harder for virtual employees to

build these strong relationships with co-workers - especially co-workers whom they never meet in person.

You can help your virtual employees build strong bonds with their co-workers, both virtual and non-virtual, by hiring a facilitator and scheduling periodic team-building sessions with all of your employees.

Not only will these employees enjoy meeting one another in person, but you will help them build better working relationships and bridges of trust that will make them more effective and productive.

#### 5. Make your expectations crystal clear

Because virtual employees don’t work in the office, they are not subject to the standard rules that your other employees have to adhere to.

If they work at home, every day may be ‘casual day’, and you may find them working at a Starbucks in the evening or on a schedule that has little relationship to the one your business runs on.

Although some amount of independence in your virtual workers is usually a good thing, if you have specific expectations for them, e.g. that they will work during normal business hours or that they will always be available by phone, then you need to make those expectations perfectly clear. With everyone’s expectations

in sync, you can avoid a lot of misunderstandings and potential conflict.

#### 6. Celebrate their successes

All employees need to be recognised and rewarded when they do good things for your company, and this includes your virtual workers.

Make sure you take time to reward your virtual employees and publicise this recognition widely throughout your organisation.

Though you may not be able to bring your virtual employees into the office for recognition, you can send them thank-you notes and recognition items such as gift cards, flowers, or any number of other items to celebrate their success **HR**



**Jane Kennelly**, Director of Frog Recruitment Ltd, is a recruitment professional with over 25 years’ industry knowledge. Frog Recruitment specialises in permanent, contract and temporary staffing in mid-management to business support across seven talent areas: Accounting & Finance, Business Support, Human Resources, Technology, Marketing, Operations and Sales. For more information see [www.frogrecruitment.co.nz](http://www.frogrecruitment.co.nz).