LEADING FROM AFAR: ENGAGING VIRTUAL WORKERS

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or better or worse, technology has changed the way people live. This includes how and where they work. Today more than ever before, there are numerous options for highly knowledgeable and skilled workers to work when and where they choose. Business executives are looking for ways to attract and retain the best of these workers; they also need to look for ways to fully engage virtual workers.

RISE OF THE VIRTUAL WORKFORCE

U.S. Census data from 2010 indicated that over 13 million adults worked from their home at least one day per week. Nearly one in four of these virtual workers were employed in management, business, or financial occupations. Between 2000 and 2010, virtual workers in computer, engineering and science occupations increased by approximately 69%.

The table below is data from the U.S. Census Bureau for 2010. This shows that in 2010, knowledge and technical workers made up the majority of home-based workers. The number is likely to climb significantly by the 2020 census.

VIRTUAL WORK CHALLENGES

While the U.S. Census Bureau uses the term home-based workers, other descriptors include virtual, remote, telework or flexible work arrangements. In addition to confusion over what to call these workers and work environments, mixed messages abound on the pros and cons of home-based work conducted using information and communication technology (ICT). Remember Yahoo's 2013 announcement to return all virtual workers to onsite facilities? According to a Huffington Post report (Peck, 2015), Yahoo backed down from this decision in 2015.

SELECTED DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF HOME-BASED WORKERS: 2010

(Civilian employed age 15 years and older; numbers in thousands)

OCCUPATION[1]	TOTAL WORKERS		WORK AT HOME	
	NUMBER	PERCENT	NUMBER	PERCENT
Management, business, and financial	19,690	14.5	1,450	24.9
Computer, engineering, and science	7,066	5.2	432	7.4
Education, legal, community service, arts, and media	14,647	10.8	770	13.2
Healthcare practitioners and technicians	7,465	5.5	100	1.7
Service	24,454	18.0	956	16.4
Sales and related	15,094	11.1	849	14.6
Office and administrative support	18,952	13.9	595	10.2
Farming, fishing, and forestry	1,007	0.7	55	0.9
Construction and extraction	6,861	5.0	197	3.4
Installation, maintenance, and repair	4,496	3.3	116	2.0
Production, transportation, and material moving	16,174	11.9	296	5.1

[1]Occupation codes are based on the 2010 Standard Occupational Classification (SOC). The 2010 Census occupation codes were updated in accordance with the 2010 revision of the SOC. Occupation data from 2010 are not strictly comparable to data from prior years.

Note: Estimates from this table exclude those in the Armed Forces.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 1-year American Community Survey.

Despite advances in and the availability of ICT, challenges associated with virtual work include isolation or lack of social support, communication barriers, as well as time and space differences. Organizations and leaders that strive to recognize and overcome these challenges are poised to win the talent war with engaged, virtual workers.

ENGAGEMENT UPSIDES

In recent years, engagement has received a lot of attention as a driver of many positive outcomes. At the individual level, lack of engagement correlates to turnover and burnout. At the organizational level, engagement fosters improved job performance, elevated customer service, and increased profits. Because of these positive outcomes, engagement is important to organizational leaders.

SATISFACTION IS NOT ENGAGEMENT

As reported in 2010 in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, many of the instruments used to measure "engagement" by organizations today are likely measuring constructs such as organizational commitment, job involvement, or job satisfaction. While employees who are satisfied with their jobs have less intention to leave the job, much of the research associated with engagement has focused on work engagement as defined above. Employees may be satisfied with their jobs yet not performing their work with the vigor, dedication and absorption characterizing full engagement. For organizations hoping to capitalize on the many benefits for engagement, initiatives based on organizational commitment, job involvement, or job satisfaction are likely to fall a bit short.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCES

The term "engagement' is often referenced without a great deal of explanation of its meaning, or the various types of engagement. Job engagement refers to the energy that engaged employees invest physically, cogitatively, and emotionally into their work role. Work engagement refers to a positive state of mind "characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption." Vigor is considered to be a behavioral component where one has a high degree of energy towards, and a willingness to, invest in one's work. Dedication is an emotional component whereby one has a high degree of enthusiasm, pride, or inspiration for one's work. Absorption is a cognitive component whereby one is fully immersed with one's work. Much of the academic research, and the subsequent positive benefits associated with engagement, refer to work engagement.

JOB ENGAGEMENT VS WORK ENGAGEMENT

Job engagement measures an employee's engagement with the role. How one views a work role often encompasses identification with the job title, management, or the mission of an organization. One may identify strongly with the role yet not perform responsibilities with vigor, dedication, or absorption. For example, in a labor environment one may identify strongly with the role of a union worker but may not be engaged with the actual work duties. As another example, one may identify strongly with the organization's mission yet not be actively engaged with the daily work. In both cases, measuring the workers' level of job engagement, organizational commitment, or job satisfaction may not result in helping leaders determine if workers are performing the work with vigor, dedication, or absorption.

Work engagement measures an employee's engagement with the work activity—the actual requirements of the role. Research shows leadership directly impacts work engagement (Hagen, 2012; Liu & Batt, 2010).

Leadership may play a key role in mitigating many of the day-to-day job demands associated with the work activity. Leadership also may play a key role in providing or withholding job resources needed to complete the work activity. Job resources are aspects that support work goals attainment, reduce job demands, or support individual growth, learning, or development.

ADOPTING THE RIGHT APPROACH

Business leaders who understand the differences in the types of engagement are more likely to effectively lead initiatives aimed at improving engagement. Both job and work engagement are important. However, the focus for improving each differ. Job engagement may be improved by systemic or organization-wide initiatives. Work engagement may be improved through job resources. Leaders play a key role in providing job resources such as coaching and feedback.

IN BRIEF:
TIPS FOR LEADING VIRTUAL WORKERS

- **Choose the best communication channel for each message**
- **Make coaching a priority**
- **Motivate with direction setting, empathy and meaning making**
- **Foster trust with unplanned communications**
- **Cultivate belonging and connection**
- **Understand time orientation and cultural differences**

Given the known difficulties associated with virtual work, including isolation and communication challenges, organizations with virtual workers would benefit from training leaders on how to promote engagement among this group.

KEYS TO VIRTUAL WORKER ENGAGEMENT:

Leaders' choices make an impact upon virtual workers' engagement. Following are practical applications which may positively influence work engagement levels.

1) Be intentional about ICT choices.

In a recent study of virtual workers, 81% indicated their leaders rely on text-based messages as the primary means of communication. Yet research also shows text-based messages are more likely to be misinterpreted—based on one's expectations and biases—than voice/video communications.

When communicating complex information or messages, give consideration to the type of information communication technology (ICT) chosen. Technologies such as Skype, Zoom, or Adobe Connect offer face-to-face interactions that provide both verbal and non-verbal communication cues. Even conference calls provide for paralinguistic cues such as voice inflection, vocal expression, and tone—all of which convey additional meaning to the message receiver.

Keep in mind that many people, particularly digital natives who grew up with digital technology, may prefer text to other communication channels. Know your virtual workers, understand the complexity of the message you are conveying, and evaluate all of your ICT options. Then determine if your message is best conveyed by text or voice/video technology.

2) Be a coach.

Coaching is considered by many to be an essential management function in today's organizations. Research has demonstrated that traditional, on-site workers benefit from managerial coaching. A recent study on virtual workers shows that leaders who exhibit consistent coaching behaviors had higher levels of virtual worker engagement than leaders who provided little to no coaching.

Managerial coaching, in both traditional and virtual work environments, can be difficult for a variety of reasons. These may include perceptions about the coach's motivation, or perceptions of the worker's motivation, willingness, or ability to change. Managerial coach training should address perceptions of both the leader and worker to help overcome some of these challenges.

Managerial coaching focuses on improving the skills and competence of a worker. Common coaching behaviors include creating a learning environment, providing feedback, communicating clearly, as well as offering care and support. For leaders coaching virtual workers, creating a learning environment can be challenging. Similar to traditional work environments, leaders can look for opportunities to offer new or stretch assignments to virtual workers to build or develop new skills. To help broaden a worker's perspective, have the worker participate in a new initiative or attend a meeting on behalf of the leader. Feedback is essential to learning and developing. Without feedback on what one is doing well, and what needs to be corrected, a virtual worker cannot grow or improve performance. Feedback includes both specific, positive encouragement about what one is doing right, and specific insight about what one must correct or amend.

3) Use motivational language.

Language choice matters regardless of the communication channel used. Research reported in 2014 in *Industrial Management & Data Systems* (Fan, Chen, Wang and Chen. 2014), showed the appropriate use of motivational language may impact virtual workers performance, communication satisfaction, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

According to Paul E. Madlock (2013), motivational language incorporates three specific types of language: direction giving, empathetic language, and meaning making. Direction giving ensures the virtual worker has clarity around job-related tasks to reduce ambiguity. Empathetic language incorporates shared emotions between the leader and virtual worker such as appreciation, encouragement, or criticism. Meaning making helps the virtual workers understand the culture, norms, and structures of the organization.

Appropriate use of motivational language may include expressions of appreciation for virtual workers who are high performers. Conversely, for a virtual worker not performing to expectations, the appropriate motivational language would be clear direction on job tasks. Context for organizational culture and norms is often communicated during onboarding. However, meaning making may be necessary at other times as well—for example, when the organization is undergoing change.

4) Plan for "unplanned" communication.

To cultivate relationships with virtual workers, leaders need to schedule regular, ongoing times for communication with virtual workers using a variety of available channels.

Not surprising, Kelley and Kelloway (2012) found that leaders of virtual workers have less unplanned communication than leaders of face-to-face workers. In addition, leaders of face-to-face workers communicate more frequently via email and phone than do leaders of virtual workers.

Frequent planned and unplanned communication from the leader to the virtual worker may increase the level of trust the virtual worker has in the leader. Planned communication may include scheduled weekly or bi-weekly individual meetings or emails.

To "plan" unplanned communication, leaders want to communicate somewhat regularly on an "unexpected" basis with virtual workers. These unplanned events could be set up as a reoccurring reminder in Outlook or as a standing weekly task item on a to-do list. Unplanned communications may be opportunities to share information or updates at the organizational or department level, project updates, recognition of the virtual workers contributions, or solicitation of the virtual worker's opinion on a future project.

The intent is to engage in unscheduled communication with the virtual worker as an individual. These communications are similar to unplanned conversations that regularly occur in office hallways, at the coffee machine, or stepping into an elevator. Unplanned communications do not have an agenda or motivation; they are intended to build the relationship, which in turn may increase trust.

5) Cultivate a Sense of Belonging. Isolation can be a challenge for virtual workers.

As reported in *Career Development International* (Schaufeli, 2015), when leaders encourage collaboration or provide opportunities for bonding, virtual workers are likely to feel a sense of belonging.

After struggling to "connect" with her virtual workers, virtual manager Elizabeth Pearsall took a bold approach. Pearsall arranged to have two assessment tools (CliftonStrengths and 16 Personality Types) offered to her virtual workers. The group was comprised of 16 independent contributors who had little interaction with one another.

Pearsall then created a Google Form posing a few communication-related questions and invited all 16 to respond. Following that initial form, Pearsall scheduled five, 60-90 minute sessions over a three-month period using Adobe Connect with video. Pearsall invited all 16 virtual workers to voluntarily participate. None of the subsequent sessions had agendas or a topic. Yet all 16 participated; many also opting to use video to get to know their peers. Six months later, the group continues to meet virtually by video on a monthly basis. Best of all, Pearsall's job has changed drastically. Instead of addressing performance issues, Pearsall finds herself acting more as a coach and mentor, roles she much prefers.

6) Minimize Time and Space Differences.

Challenges may arise as the result of time or space differences. Time relates to both time zone and concepts of time differences. Space relates to distributed location, cultural practices, and differing technologies.

For leaders, understanding virtual workers time orientation is essential. Time orientation may differ by culture. Depending upon one's cultural background, virtual workers may possess a monochronic or a polychronic time orientation. For individuals possessing a monochronic orientation, schedules and promptness are highly valued. For individuals possessing a polychronic orientation, time is more fluid with multiple events that may be happening at once and time frames less exact.

Delayed response times can be both unproductive and interpreted negatively. Leaders can help to minimize these challenges arising from time and space differences by ensuring virtual workers are aware of local times zones and cultural differences. Leaders can also help minimize differences by clarifying time expectations prior to any conflict or misunderstandings.

LEADERS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

New research shows that virtual knowledge workers, working in a remote capacity full-time (i.e. 40 hours per week virtually) were significantly more engaged than those in traditional work environments, and that leaders do make a difference. Technology has changed the world in which we live and work. With increased globalization and the struggle to attract and retain talent, virtual, and flexible, work arrangements are here to stay. By understanding ICT options, coaching, using motivational language, planning for unplanned communication, cultivating a sense of belonging, and minimizing time and space differences, leaders will be well equipped to support a fully engaged, virtual work force.

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