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Strategies to keep remote workers engaged, from Skype to pizza

Updated October 1, 2017 6:00 AM

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Herzlich writes the Small Business column in Newsday.

Technology has made it easier for employees to work anywhere, and the percentage working off-site continues to grow.

From 2012 to 2016, the percentage of employees doing at least some of their work remotely grew from 39 percent to 43 percent, according to Gallup's State of the American Workplace report. But along with this increase in remote workers comes the growing challenge of keeping them engaged. Employees who work remotely 100 percent of the time are among the least engaged, the Gallup report found.

"What happens with those working remotely all the time is they miss out on some of the social connections that are so important to being engaged at work," says Jim Harter of Gallup's Omaha office, whose title is chief scientist of workplace management and well-being. "There's a risk they can feel isolated because they don't have those interpersonal connections."

The report found that optimal engagement occurs when employees spend 60 percent to 80 percent of their time, or three or four days of a five-day workweek, working off-site.

That's not to say that employees who work 100 percent remotely can't be fully engaged, Harter says.

"I wouldn't conclude that you shouldn't allow people to work 100 percent remotely. . . . It comes down to having great managers and the right kinds of feedback with the employee," he says, noting the best managers individualize and really get to know their employees.

Randi Busse, president of Workforce Development Group, a Massapequa Park customer service training and employee development firm, agrees, noting, "I don't think it's the location that's disengaging them." It could be their manager or peers who are causing them to become disengaged by perhaps even unintentionally leaving them out of meetings, phone calls and other communications, she says.

"Just because you don't see them every day doesn't mean they don't need to be connected with on a regular basis," Busse says.

Have regular check-ins and not just over the phone, but also face-to-face, even if it's virtually through Skype, she says. That's what Bryant Strozinsky, director of marketing at Woodbury-based EZFacility, a provider of scheduling, management and membership software for fitness and sports facilities, tries to do with his remote team. "You really can't put a price on how important video calling is," he says, noting the firm has a remote worker in Florida and some members of its marketing team work remotely in a satellite location in Pennsylvania. He checks in with remote employees one-on-one at least once a week through video calls, and encourages employees in the Woodbury headquarters to check in with them also via video calls. Strozinsky calls to talk about business, but sometimes "I literally just drink a cup of coffee with them on a video call."

Connecting with them "on a human-to-human level . . . is really important in order to connect with them on a business level," says Busse.

Knowing something about them personally helps when you want to recognize them for an achievement, adds Kevin Sheridan, chief engagement officer at KevinSheridanLLC.com, an Evanston, Illinois, management consulting firm, and author of "The Virtual Manager" (Career Press; \$16.99). People who work remotely want "tailored recognition," he says. So for example, you might find out what local restaurant they like and send them a gift card as recognition of their great work, he says. When providing recognition, don't just say thank you, but explain how that person's work affects the company overall, he says. Make sure you convey the company's strategy and mission to the employee, as well as the company's values and beliefs, says Sheridan.

And if a company hits a milestone and has a pizza party, he says, send a pizza to the remote worker's home too, so he or she can join the celebration.