

# Staying Connected & Working Remotely

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*This Tech Tip was produced using information from the article “A Guide to Managing Your (Newly) Remote Workers” published in the Harvard Business Review and the article “8 Tips To Make Working From Home Work For You” published by National Public Radio*

The current COVID-19 health crisis has required all of us to modify or even suspend many of the normal ways we work, interact, and spend time with other people. The work of local highway and public works departments is deemed essential, however many local agencies are still choosing to modify their operations in order to limit the spread of the virus. It is also possible that local government employees may be exposed to the virus and, as a result, be quarantined for extended periods of time.



The “new normal” of social distancing and government mandates requiring many employees to work from home may require departments to utilize different ways of interacting with others in order to get the job done. There are many challenges to instituting remote or work from home operations. From choosing the right technology to managing teams effectively when you are not in their presence, this *Tech Tip* will help you learn the how to make working remotely manageable for your department.

## **CHOOSING THE RIGHT TECHNOLOGY AND HOME ACCESSIBILITY**

For most remote work or work from home situations, a PC with internet connectivity is all that is required. Before attempting to institute remote work for your staff, be sure to check with your employees to confirm that they have the technology needed to perform their jobs at home.

Home internet capability, and access to high-speed broadband are important factors to consider for remote work. In rural areas, many people do not have access to high speed internet which could disrupt a remote work plan that calls for lots of video conferencing or connecting to outside networks. Different capabilities require different levels of bandwidth. For instance, streaming video such as in a video conference, takes more bandwidth than using audio only. IT departments can help employees discern what they can and cannot do based on their home network capabilities. When it comes to internet speed, the number of devices in use can affect your ability have access to the bandwidth you need to do your job. Consider turning off internet connected devices that you don't need for work such as entertainment services, streaming television, or games.

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### **CORNELL LOCAL ROADS PROGRAM**

416 RILEY-ROBB HALL, ITHACA, NY 14853

PHONE: (607) 255-8033

FAX: (607) 255-4080

E-MAIL: [clrp@cornell.edu](mailto:clrp@cornell.edu)

INTERNET: [www.clrp.cornell.edu](http://www.clrp.cornell.edu)

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Software is the other key component that makes productive work from home possible. Different types of software serve different purposes. There are many software options that smaller departments can use for free or at reduced cost to effectively manage remote work. Municipalities may have access to discounts or have purchased licenses to software that all department staff can access.

### **Video Conferencing Software (selected platforms):**

**Google Hangouts:** Google hangouts is a video calling, meeting, and messaging service hosted through google. The software is free to download however there are charges for use with larger groups, meetings, and for access to more capabilities.

\*Through July 1st, 2020, Google Hangouts will allow you to host meetings with up to 10,000 viewers, or 250 visitors in a single domain, for free. There is also an option to record and save meetings to Google Drive.

<https://cloud.google.com/blog/products/g-suite/helping-businesses-and-schools-stay-connected-in-response-to-coronavirus>

**Microsoft Teams:** A video conferencing, team management and messaging platform from microsoft.

\*New in March 2020, a free 6-month Office 365 E1 Trial, including Microsoft Teams, is now available. Microsoft is making this special E1 Trial license available in response to the increased need for employees to work from home (WFH) in response to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak.

<https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoftteams/e1-trial-license>

**Zoom:** A remote conferencing services platform that combines video conferencing, online meetings, chat, and mobile collaboration using closed source applications. Zoom has a free version of its software with a 40-minute time limit on all video conversations, the ability to host up to 100 participants, access free 1-to-1 meetings, and create group.

### **Messaging and Alternative Communication Software (selected platforms):**

**Slack:** An instant messaging platform that has a “freemium” pricing model with basic services available for free. Slack is a popular emerging platform for internal business communication.

**Discord:** A voice, video, audio and chat platform. The software is free to download but there is a subscription service option.

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- For a more comprehensive list of video conferencing software options see:  
*USA Today - COVID-19: Ultimate Guide to Free Video Conferencing & Collaboration*  
<https://www.uctoday.com/collaboration/video-conferencing/covid-19-ultimate-guide-to-free-video-conferencing-collaboration/>

## CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH REMOTE WORK

- **Lack of face-to-face supervision:** Both managers and their employees often express concerns about the lack of face-to-face interaction. Supervisors worry about productivity and accountability while employees struggle with reduced access to managerial support and communication.
- **Lack of access to information and personal interaction with coworkers:** Newly remote workers are often surprised by the added time and effort needed to locate information from coworkers. Even getting answers to what seem like simple questions can feel like a large obstacle to a worker based at home. Coworkers who are not in each others' physical presence lose the benefit of understanding the emotional cues that go along with interpersonal communication. This can lead to misunderstandings or a loss of empathy between employees.
- **Social isolation:** Loneliness is one of the most common complaints about remote work, with employees missing the informal social interaction of an office setting. Over a longer period of time, isolation can cause any employee to feel less “belonging” to their organization which can affect their motivation and productivity.
- **Distractions at home:** The current COVID-19 outbreak has forced many schools to close across the country which means many parents will be working from home while also watching children. Being flexible about how much employees can realistically get done will benefit both you and your staff during times when teams are forced to work from home.

## HOW MANAGERS CAN SUPPORT REMOTE EMPLOYEES

- **Establish structure and regular check-ins:** Many successful remote managers establish a daily call with their remote employees. This could take the form of a series of one-on-one calls, if your employees work more independently from each other, or a team call, if their work is highly collaborative. The important feature is that the calls are regular and predictable, and that they are a forum in which employees know that they can consult with you, and that their concerns and questions will be heard.
- **Utilize video when possible:** Email alone can be insufficient. If possible, utilize technologies such as video conferencing because they give participants many of the visual cues that they would have if they were face-to-face. Of course, this means enabling the camera function if on a video conference call.
- **Establish priorities, rules, and standards for communication:** Establishing a list of priorities for employees can also go a long way in making sure everyone is on the same page about which tasks are necessary to get done and which ones aren't priorities. Remote work also becomes more efficient when managers set expectations for the frequency, means, and ideal timing of communication for their teams. For example, “We use video conferencing for daily check-in meetings, but we use text messaging when something is urgent.” Also, if you can, let your employees know the best way and time to reach you during the workday. Finally, keep an eye on communication among team members (to the extent appropriate), to ensure that they are sharing information as needed.

- **Offer encouragement and emotional support:** Especially after an abrupt shift to remote work, it is important for managers to acknowledge stress, listen to employees' anxieties and concerns, and empathize with their struggles. If a newly remote employee is clearly struggling but not communicating stress or anxiety, ask them how they're doing.

Employees look to their managers for cues about how to react to sudden changes or crisis situations. If a manager communicates stress and helplessness, this will effect employees. Acknowledge the stress and anxiety that employees may be feeling in difficult circumstances, but also provide affirmation of your confidence in the team.

## ESTABLISH A PLAN OR POLICY

While the current COVID-19 pandemic is likely to be temporary in terms of workforce modifications and enforced social distancing, it is always a good idea to establish a formal policy for your department should a future need for staff to work from home arise. While it is not possible for all, or even most local highway and public works employees to work remotely, a policy will help your department define the parameters and qualifications for those staff members who could perform their job duties from home.

## Resources

- Ohio LTAP Webinar Recording "You're Killin' Me Smalls! How to Avoid Death by PowerPoint"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuKsThquVjw&feature=youtu.be>
- USA Today - COVID-19: Ultimate Guide to Free Video Conferencing & Collaboration  
<https://www.uctoday.com/collaboration/video-conferencing/covid-19-ultimate-guide-to-free-video-conferencing-collaboration/>
- 8 Tips To Make Working From Home Work For You by Yuki Noguchi, National Public Radio  
<https://www.npr.org/2020/03/15/815549926/8-tips-to-make-working-from-home-work-for-you>
- A Guide to Managing Your (Newly) Remote Workers by Barbara Z. Larson, Susan R. Vroman and Erin E. Makarius  
<https://hbr.org/2020/03/a-guide-to-managing-your-newly-remote-workers>
- FHWA Telework Program Order 3620.1  
<https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/legsregs/directives/orders/36201.cfm>

# Society for Human Resource Management

## Sample Telecommuting Policy

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### Telecommuting Policy and Procedure

#### Objective

Telecommuting allows employees to work at home, on the road or in a satellite location for all or part of their workweek. [Company Name] considers telecommuting to be a viable, flexible work option when both the employee and the job are suited to such an arrangement. Telecommuting may be appropriate for some employees and jobs but not for others. Telecommuting is not an entitlement, it is not a company wide benefit, and it in no way changes the terms and conditions of employment with [Company Name].

#### Procedures

Telecommuting can be informal, such as working from home for a short-term project or on the road during business travel, or a formal, set schedule of working away from the office as described below. Either an employee or a supervisor can suggest telecommuting as a possible work arrangement.

Any telecommuting arrangement made will be on a trial basis for the first three months and may be discontinued at will and at any time at the request of either the telecommuter or the organization. Every effort will be made to provide 30 days' notice of such change to accommodate commuting, child care and other issues that may arise from the termination of a telecommuting arrangement. There may be instances, however, when no notice is possible.

#### Eligibility

Individuals requesting formal telecommuting arrangements must be employed with [Company Name] for a minimum of 12 months of continuous, regular employment and must have a satisfactory performance record.

Before entering into any telecommuting agreement, the employee and manager, with the assistance of the human resource department, will evaluate the suitability of such an arrangement, reviewing the following areas:

- Employee suitability. The employee and manager will assess the needs and work habits of the employee, compared to traits customarily recognized as appropriate for successful telecommuters.
- Job responsibilities. The employee and manager will discuss the job responsibilities and determine if the job is appropriate for a telecommuting arrangement.
- Equipment needs, workspace design considerations and scheduling issues. The employee and manager will review the physical workspace needs and the appropriate location for the telework.

- Tax and other legal implications. The employee must determine any tax or legal implications under IRS, state and local government laws, and/or restrictions of working out of a home-based office. Responsibility for fulfilling all obligations in this area rests solely with the employee.

If the employee and manager agree, and the human resource department concurs, a draft telecommuting agreement will be prepared and signed by all parties, and a three-month trial period will commence.

Evaluation of telecommuter performance during the trial period will include regular interaction by phone and e-mail between the employee and the manager, and weekly face-to-face meetings to discuss work progress and problems. At the end of the trial period, the employee and manager will each complete an evaluation of the arrangement and make recommendations for continuance or modifications. Evaluation of telecommuter performance beyond the trial period will be consistent with that received by employees working at the office in both content and frequency but will focus on work output and completion of objectives rather than on time-based performance.

An appropriate level of communication between the telecommuter and supervisor will be agreed to as part of the discussion process and will be more formal during the trial period. After conclusion of the trial period, the manager and telecommuter will communicate at a level consistent with employees working at the office or in a manner and frequency that is appropriate for the job and the individuals involved.

## **Equipment**

On a case-by-case basis, [Company Name] will determine, with information supplied by the employee and the supervisor, the appropriate equipment needs (including hardware, software, modems, phone and data lines and other office equipment) for each telecommuting arrangement. The human resource and information system departments will serve as resources in this matter. Equipment supplied by the organization will be maintained by the organization. Equipment supplied by the employee, if deemed appropriate by the organization, will be maintained by the employee. [Company Name] accepts no responsibility for damage or repairs to employee-owned equipment. [Company Name] reserves the right to make determinations as to appropriate equipment, subject to change at any time. Equipment supplied by the organization is to be used for business purposes only. The telecommuter must sign an inventory of all [Company Name] property received and agree to take appropriate action to protect the items from damage or theft. Upon termination of employment, all company property will be returned to the company, unless other arrangements have been made.

[Company Name] will supply the employee with appropriate office supplies (pens, paper, etc.) as deemed necessary. [Company Name] will also reimburse the employee for business-related expenses, such as phone calls and shipping costs, that are reasonably incurred in carrying out the employee's job.

The employee will establish an appropriate work environment within his or her home for work purposes. [Company Name] will not be responsible for costs associated with the setup of the employee's home office, such as remodeling, furniture or lighting, nor for repairs or modifications to the home office space.

## **Security**

Consistent with the organization's expectations of information security for employees working at the office, telecommuting employees will be expected to ensure the protection of proprietary company and customer information accessible from their home office. Steps include the use of locked file cabinets and desks, regular password maintenance, and any other measures appropriate for the job and the environment.

## **Safety**

Employees are expected to maintain their home workspace in a safe manner, free from safety hazards. [Company Name] will provide each telecommuter with a safety checklist that must be completed at least twice per year. Injuries sustained by the employee in a home office location and in conjunction with his or her regular work duties are normally covered by the company's workers' compensation policy. Telecommuting employees are responsible for notifying the employer of such injuries as soon as practicable. The employee is liable for any injuries sustained by visitors to his or her home worksite.

Telecommuting is not designed to be a replacement for appropriate child care. Although an individual employee's schedule may be modified to accommodate child care needs, the focus of the arrangement must remain on job performance and meeting business demands. Prospective telecommuters are encouraged to discuss expectations of telecommuting with family members prior to entering a trial period.

## **Time Worked**

Telecommuting employees who are not exempt from the overtime requirements of the Fair Labor Standards Act will be required to accurately record all hours worked using [Company Name]'s time-keeping system. Hours worked in excess of those scheduled per day and per workweek require the advance approval of the telecommuter's supervisor. Failure to comply with this requirement may result in the immediate termination of the telecommuting agreement.

## **Ad Hoc Arrangements**

Temporary telecommuting arrangements may be approved for circumstances such as inclement weather, special projects or business travel. These arrangements are approved on an as-needed basis only, with no expectation of ongoing continuance.

Other informal, short-term arrangements may be made for employees on family or medical leave to the extent practical for the employee and the organization and with the consent of the employee's health care provider, if appropriate.

All informal telecommuting arrangements are made on a case-by-case basis, focusing first on the business needs of the organization.