Managing a dispersed team

Jane Atherton

Aims of this session

- To equip managers with tools and techniques for managing team members they don’t see every day.
- To enable managers to hold performance conversations and support colleagues.

Content

- Essential skills for managing dispersed teams:
  - Building trust and effective communication channels.
  - Hybrid collaboration.
  - Managing performance.
  - Giving feedback.

Introduction

Various changes over recent years have resulted in a greater proportion of people working in a more flexible way:

- Technology.
- Societal changes and the pandemic.
- Recruitment and retention challenges.
- Commercial factors.



Talking point

Think of a time that you struggled to balance your work and life responsibilities. What working arrangements might have helped you during this time?

What type of support has your organisation provided that supports your work/life balance?

Benefits of flexibility for employees

Reduced commuting	Reduced travelling time and costs when working from home or other locations. Reduced stress by avoiding peak travel times.
Increased concentration	Quieter workspaces when need to concentrate when working from home or other locations.
Improved work-life balance	Able to balance work and other aspects of life more effectively.
Improved wellbeing	Better work-life balance means more time for family, friends, passions, interests and exercise and likely increased happiness levels.

Benefits of flexibility for employers

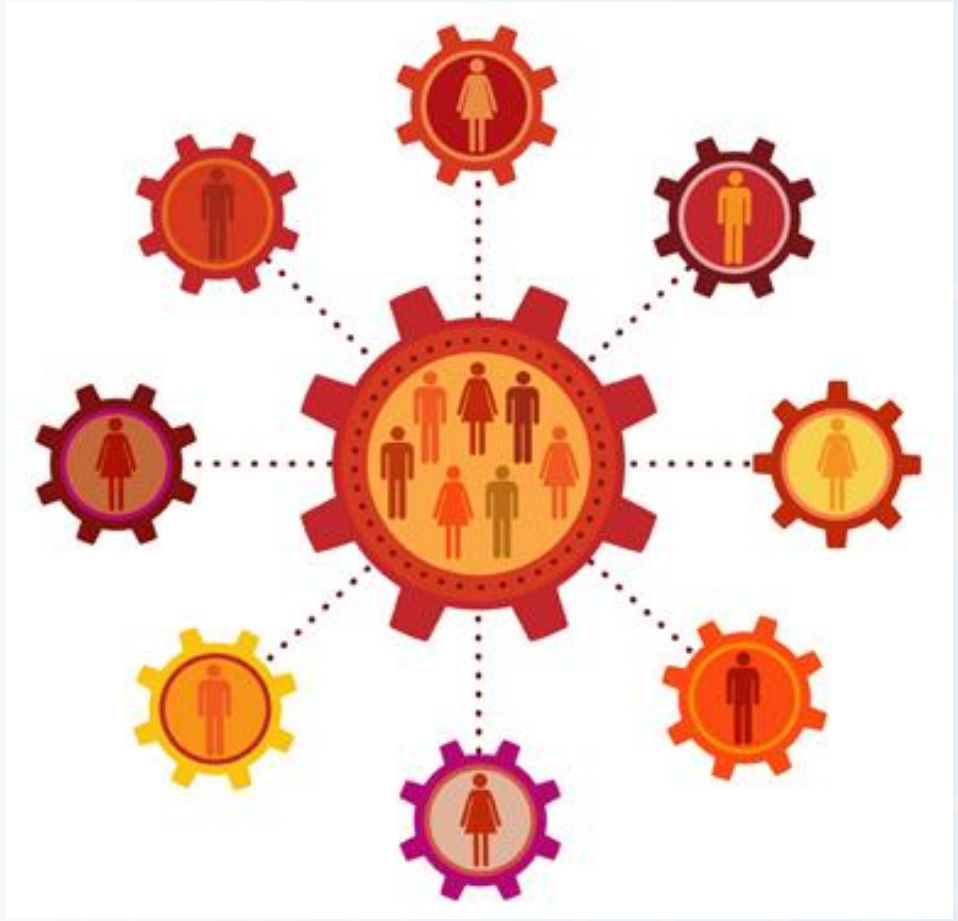
Candidate attraction	The organisation is more likely to attract the most talented candidates by not excluding individuals who cannot (or do not want to) comply with a work model that is inflexible in relation to hours and/or place of work. It will be more attractive to diverse candidates who need or want to work flexibly.
Employee retention	The organisation will not lose employees to other organisations that offer flexible-working options.
Productivity	Improved productivity from employees working at times and locations that are less rigid.
Engagement and commitment	Enhanced engagement and commitment from employees who are given the freedom to work flexibly.
Absence levels (and associated costs)	Reduced absence levels as employees are more able to reduce work-life conflicts (may need less time off if can fit other commitments around work), related stress levels and sickness absences.
Customer demands	Increased capacity to meet 24/7 customer demand as a result of the adoption of different and more varied working patterns by employees.
Operating costs	Reduced overheads as need fewer full-time workstations (not necessary for fully remote workers). May use desk-sharing or hot-desking.
Reputation/brand	Enhanced reputation because employers that give their employees the freedom to work flexibly will be viewed positively by prospective and existing employees.

Some of the challenges...

- Some hybrid workers or homeworkers may work excessively long hours and feel that there is no separation between their work and personal lives.
- It may be difficult to create and maintain a team spirit where people work in relative isolation from one another. Working in isolation can also lead to issues around wellbeing.
- Creating an environment for collaboration can be challenging when employees have different patterns of work or work in different locations.
- There can be negative consequences from a diversity and inclusion perspective.

Challenges of hybrid working

- Lack of face-to-face supervision
- Lack of access to information
- Social isolation
- Distractions at home.



Key success factors

- **Trusting your team.** You need to trust that your team will work diligently towards their goals without you controlling every aspect of how they carry out their work.
- **Knowing your team.** Each employee that you manage is an individual with their own unique combination of strengths and weaknesses and particular set of personal circumstances and life commitments.
- **Having confidence in yourself as a manager.** Your confidence in your ability to guide and support your team will create a positive environment within which you and your team can explore and incorporate new ways of working.

Talking point - motivation

Do you believe:

- That most people want to do a good job, want to succeed and see others succeed, and left to their own devices will get on with the work and do their best?

Or:

- That most people need someone like you behind them, telling them what to do and when, and unless they are closely monitored will do as little as possible?



Where do your beliefs about people lie on the scale that we have described above?

Motivation factors

- Autonomy
- Mastery
- Connectedness

The managers role

- **Do** lead by example and adopt the behaviour and practices that you want your team to adopt.
- **Do** examine your beliefs about individual team members and whether they are justified.
- **Don't** assume that the most effective way to manage your team is to maximise the time that you are in the same physical space.
- **Do** appreciate & recognise team members contributions.



Communication

Timely and effective communication with your team, whatever their working arrangements, is vital to ensure that they:

- Feel part of the team.
- Understand how their work fits in with the team's objectives and how the team's work fits in with the organisations Business Plan.
- Receive regular knowledge updates and information about organisational developments.
- Receive regular feedback on the quality and quantity of the work they are producing.

Flex your communication tools

- If you want to tell an employee that they did not deliver on a particular project, consider doing this in person or via video conferencing to ensure that you are able to take on board their reaction as you deliver your feedback.
- A telephone or video call may be best if you want an employee to pick up an urgent piece of work. This will ensure that they are aware of its urgency and can reprioritise their other work accordingly.
- An asynchronous tool (such as a cloud-based document), where everyone can add their views on a project at the same time or at a time that suits them, can work better than a meeting in some circumstances and can help with hybrid collaboration.

Virtual meetings

- Make sure everyone knows how to use the meeting platform.
- Be aware that you need to include all team members equally, wherever they are joining the meeting from.
- Begin meetings by clarifying how people should contribute to the meeting.
- Consider asking everyone to take turns to contribute to the meeting, and don't always ask people working from home last.
- Give everyone an opportunity to chair meetings. This can encourage people who are more reticent in online meetings to lead.

hqn TRAINING

Meetings, meetings, meetings!



- Encourage people to take breaks between video calls.
- When scheduling calls, yourself, make sure to take account of the need for people (and you) to have a break between calls.
- Encourage your team to bear in mind other people's needs for breaks when scheduling calls.

Talking point

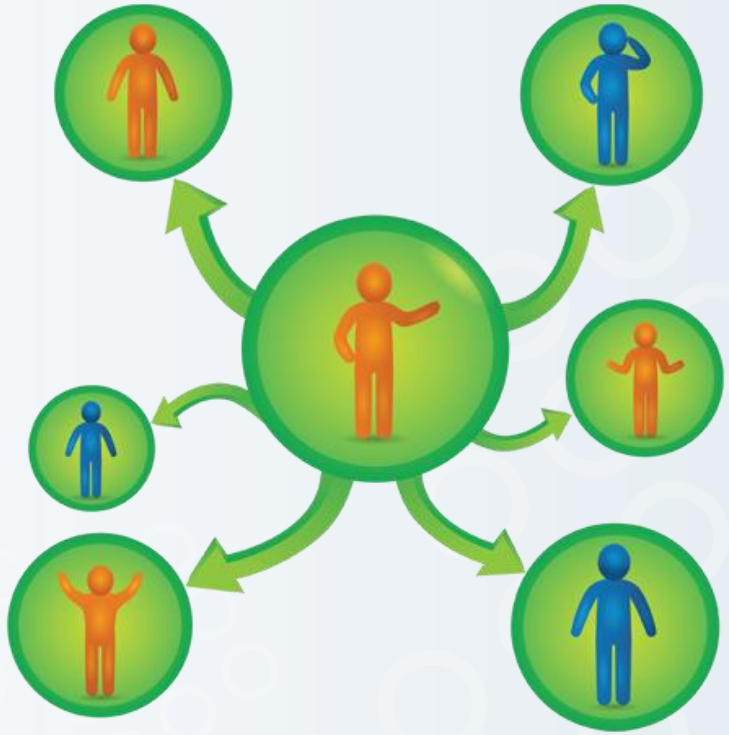
- How and when does your team communicate at its best?
- How and when does communication tend to fall down?
- When and where do informal communications take place in your team?

Collaborating

Three kinds of distance:

1. Physical
2. Operational
3. Affinity (trust and connection).

The best way for managers to drive performance is by focusing on reducing affinity distance.



Hybrid collaboration

- Regular telephone, video calls and team meetings.
- Workplace chatrooms to replace daily social interactions.
- Workplace social events, remembering to factor in when people are working or if people live far away.
- Seek the team's opinion before introducing anything new.



Get to know your team

- **Don't** expect to get everything that you want to know about a team member from one conversation. You are trying to develop a relationship as well as gather information.
- **Do** create opportunities for team members to work together and learn from each other.

Flexibility all round

- **Do** be flexible - employees may need to change their working pattern over time.
- **Do** bear in mind that homeworking employees may need help to work out a structure for their day and handle distractions at home.
- **Do** appreciate the risk that some home or hybrid workers may overwork because they can access work at all times, and make sure to speak to them about this.

Managing performance and expectations

- Realistic flexibility around response times.
- Encourage people to be open about their working arrangements.
- Shared calendars.
- Using signatures and out of office messages.
- Team charters.

Plan and schedule

- Organise meetings for maximum attendance.
- Agree key and regular events that you want commitment to e.g., away days, training sessions, team updates, planning projects or scheduling learning and development.
- Include remote dial-ins for meetings in case people can’t attend in person.

Set clear targets and deadlines

SPECIFIC	What is the specific task to be completed?
MEASURABLE	How will you know when it has been achieved?
ACHIEVABLE	The task should be **aspirational** and still within reach.
RELEVANT	Is the target important? Does it align with team goals and the org's Business Plan.
TIMED & TRACKABLE	Adding a specific time can mean targets can be more easily measured.

Giving feedback

Actions What the person has done or is doing – either positive or negative.

Impact The effect these actions had or are having, on you or on others.

Do What you want the person to continue doing, change doing or stop doing.

Constructive feedback

Regardless of whether it relates to a task well done or one that needs improvement, constructive feedback is always:

- Information specific
- Focused on a specific issue
- Not ‘right or wrong’ but based on observation
- Two-way – encouraging discussion and dialogue
- Objective
- Direct.

Wellbeing

- **Do** ask people what they do to take care of their wellbeing and encourage them to take advantage of any organisational wellbeing activities.
- **Do** talk to your team about following health and safety guidelines around using computers at home.
- **Do** talk to your team about the importance of taking regular rest breaks and exercise while working at home.

Action planning

What are your takeaways from today's session?



Further information and feedback

For further information on any of the areas covered in today's session, please contact

Jane Atherton

jane@hoogaconsulting.co.uk

@athertonjane71