## 5 Ways To Buoy Productivity When Everyone's Teleworking

By **Vin Gurrieri**

*Law360 (April 15, 2020, 9:42 PM EDT)* -- With no end in sight for the novel coronavirus pandemic, the ability to work remotely has emerged as a necessity rather than a perk. Here, experts look at five ways employers can help workers stay engaged and productive when coming into the office isn't an option.

Over the past few months, as COVID-19 has ravaged countries around the globe and caused tens of thousands of deaths in the U.S., public health officials have ordered lockdowns that have forced many businesses to close. That has pushed millions of workers to work remotely, including many who never had before.

Those telework arrangements, many of which were implemented on the fly, have come with steep and sometimes anxiety-inducing learning curves for workers and businesses alike as they try to navigate new workplace realities alongside health and economic worries brought about by the pandemic.

Maria Greco Danaher, a shareholder at Ogletree Deakins Nash Smoak & Stewart PC, said that helping remote workers manage stress during anxiety-inducing times is a key component of keeping them engaged.

"They say that the primary source of stress is change," Danaher said. "And we have just changed everything. There's nothing that's the same right now — people are working from home, they're working different hours, they have to worry about, 'Do I have enough internet strength in my house?' There are so many things we have to worry about that we didn't have to worry about when we were just sitting in the office working."

**Build Trust**

At the foundation of workers' ability to smoothly adjust to remote work and successfully manage all the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic throws their way is their faith that the decisions their employer is making are sound, according to Danaher, whose practice involves training and advising corporate HR departments.

That means the onus is on employers and managers to prove to workers that they deserve that sort of trust.

One concrete way that managers can do that is by giving workers "something to hold on to as an anchor," Danaher said, adding that it may be as simple as establishing a routine that once per week a

manager makes a quick call to touch base, go over a worker's assignments and discuss any needs the individual may have.

"If we get a sense of where our employees are and allow them to understand we're giving them a little bit of space to get things done, then that builds their trust in us," Danaher said, noting that that sort of trust instills in workers the kind of confidence that makes things run smoothly.

## Communicate Honestly

With bad news coming at a dizzying pace, it may be tempting for some employers to try to shield workers from negative developments. But that may not be wise when it comes to earning and keeping workers' respect.

"One of the things I have seen work ... is continuous effective communication by management to its workforce, whether its via Zoom, Skype or email," said Carl Muller, a partner at Tucker Ellis LLP. "The best messaging seems to me to balance candor with optimism."

Kris Meade, chair of Crowell & Moring LLP's labor and employment team, also stressed the importance of individualized communications, particularly in ways other than email, in which managers check in personally with workers to see how they're doing and if they need anything.

"Check-ins by telephone by leaders [and] by supervisors seem to be making all the difference in the world to help folks with the kind of sense of isolation that they can feel," Meade said. Some companies have offered counseling services and other employee assistance programs that have "provided a useful outlet" for some people in recent weeks, he said.

## Be Flexible

Going hand in hand with the concept of honest communication is the need for employers to understand that workers might have a mountain of worries or distractions during the pandemic and to lend them a hand in managing it all.

For people in professional service industries, Meade said one difficulty is that "the day never ends," with work starting potentially early in the morning and ending well into the evening, even overlapping the times when they had commuted to and from the office.

"What we've been seeing our clients doing and our law firm has been doing is trying to provide space for folks to break away from the laptop — changing [people's] mindset so that you can put your out-of-office message on at 1 o'clock in the afternoon and take an hour to get outside, stroll around, get on the bike, whatever it may be," Meade said. "That tends to have a great impact, we think, on morale and the mental health of the employee."

## Promote Enrichment

While some remote workers will see little change in their workload from normal times, it's inevitable that some companies will have less work for employees to perform.

However, instead of taking that as a negative or giving employees busy work, businesses can instead use the opportunity to encourage employees to step away from day-to-day tasks and instead use their time

to do some learning and skill-building.

That can include, for example, taking continuing legal education courses, skill seminars or online classes during the pandemic — activities that can keep workers engaged if times are slow, according to Muller.

"There are a lot of sectors or practice groups that are not terribly busy right now," he said. "I think that employers are encouraging people to, if they have spare time ... catch up on continuing education."

For example, Muller said Ohio, the state where he is based, has loosened some of its restrictions on how much of a person's CLE requirement can be met working remotely and that some seminars that would normally be held in person have migrated online.

"Keep on top of your game, fulfill your requirements if your profession has [them] ... expand your skill sets during this period — it's being encouraged. It's a win-win," Muller said.

**Curb 'Ineffective' Management**

Since some managers who have never had to manage remote workers before suddenly have to do it, particularly at companies just starting to dip their toes into the teleworking waters, a few of them may inevitably find it hard to make the adjustment smoothly.

Where "ineffective managers" may fall short in managing remote workers during the pandemic is when they try to impose the same productivity deadlines, levels or metrics that were in place when people showed up to the office every day, Danaher said.

"They do it for the best reasons. They think, 'Hey, the show must go on,' and, 'Maybe if I give them a little bit of what they were doing before, it'll make them feel better,'" she said. "But it's really ineffective management to try to impose that same productivity metric when the circumstances of production are so much different. We've got to be able to adapt [and] be more resilient on this."

In order to effectively manage others, Danaher said that supervisors should first look inward to understand their own emotional reactions to situations and reflect on their own ability to adapt to new circumstances to better understand what their workers are facing.

"At least part of the answer is that in order to effectively manage other people in a supportive way, we have to increase our own self-awareness and self-management," she said. "Taking the time first to figure that out before we say, 'Gee whiz, why didn't she call me?' Well maybe it's because she's at home and the washing machine repairman is ringing the doorbell at the same time the phone is ringing. We've got to give people a little bit more space than we normally would at this point."

--Editing by Brian Baresch and Aaron Pelc.