

# Keep Employee Communications Human in the Age of the Remote Workforce

By Shannon Hoffmann

Today's office has taken on a whole new look. To function as a whole, especially with the latest trend in hiring home-based, independent contractors as "employees," consistent internal communication is more crucial than ever for that much-needed synergy.

## Why Should We Care?

According to **Global Workplace Analytics**, the rate of remote workers continues to climb for many different reasons. Five readily apparent reasons are:

1. Corporations are downsizing and outsourcing work. Independent contractors are not entitled to benefits, so some corporations are hiring more remote workers with this type of savings in mind.
2. Parents are more in need of flexible time for juggling different schedules.
3. Technological advances are making it easier to communicate with the corporate office.
4. The economic downturn has put a stress on income.
5. With certain positions, the need for presence in the office is being reassessed.

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## Number of Remote Workers Growing—Quickly

Consider the following: **Forrester Research** reported in 2009 that more than 34 million U.S. adults were telecommuting occasionally, if not full time. The number of remote workers has been climbing since 2005.

*Fortune* magazine reported in February of 2011 that 82 percent of the companies that were included in its annual "100 Best Companies to Work For" list also allow employees to telecommute at least 20 percent of the time.

People seek to work for companies that offer the best benefits. As companies offer more benefits and as it becomes more sensible for some employees to telecommute, the remote demographic will continue to grow.

Forrester also reported that with better tools for collaboration, broadband adoption and the growth of management experience, the number of remote workers could reach 63 million by 2016. That includes those who occasionally work remotely as well as those who are engaged in full-time telecommuting.

**WorldatWork**, a human resources association, estimates that based on the history of growth (approximately 12 percent per year) the number of remote workers could reach about 50 million people by 2018.

## Prepare for Change Now

The aforementioned predictions are good reasons to begin to prepare your company now for the possible changes to come. If you can identify with any of the following, it's time to seek help:

- **“Wait, is that even in my job description?”**  
You cannot have three different job descriptions for someone in the company. That might be a problem if all or part of your workers and management are working in a remote situation.
- **“Didn’t you get the memo?”** When working in the remote system, it is so easy for information to fall through the cracks. Someone could even miss a paycheck if they don’t get the request for invoices to be sent early because of a holiday schedule change or other scenario.
- **“Oh, I forgot to mention that to Joe. Sorry his email to you was so scathing.”** It is very easy for working relationships to be affected in a negative way if information is not disseminated in a consistent manner. Someone may be expecting details they aren’t given, adding frustration to the mix. This can lead to scathing emails, which are not fun for anyone involved and are often hard to overcome.
- **What do your remote associates and in-house associates know about each other?**  
Someone may ask the aforementioned question in the event that the person asking wasn’t even at least briefed about skill sets and responsibilities of the people they are working with on the other end. Make sure your workers know each other’s responsibilities.

### Help Is On the Way

We have talked about why the trend for hiring remote workers is booming and about the possible hiccups for this increasingly likely scenario. Let’s say you’ve decided you need some help in this area. Here are ten ways to help ensure that your physically disconnected environment can also be an inclusive, synergistic work environment.

1. **Be available.** As the owner or manager of the company, you’re busy and people understand that. But your team needs contact with you. They need to see your face, hear your voice and get a strong sense that you want to be included.
2. **Use asynchronous chat.** Don’t just rely on chat clients. Add video chat to the mix. With video chats, you can see facial expressions, reactions and body language as a message is delivered. This will help especially when discussing a sensitive issue. It also helps build synergy, as workers get a better feel of how to work together by being able to see each other.

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3. **Be inclusive.** Don’t just chat with your team one-on-one. Include your whole sales group or your whole customer service team in a chat to help keep everyone on the same page.  
Do not, however, open a chat with someone who is responsible for troubleshooting a sensitive issue and bring a group of employees in on it prematurely. Gather the information from those having the problem, contact the person who would deal with it and then disseminate that information to that person only to see what the course of action might be to resolve it. Nothing says open season on the IT guy (or whoever) like opening a group chat and telling them of a problem a few people are having, demanding a solution right then and there. Be judicious about this.
4. **Schedule regular times for check-ins and meetings.** Make sure everyone knows that it matters that they communicate on a regu-

lar basis. Schedule your sales meetings and customer service meetings, and then stick to the schedule.

Also, if you schedule meetings, don't cancel every week—and especially not 20 minutes before—and leave your team feeling that their time has no value to you. After all, they have a schedule too. Chances are they likely passed on another meeting because they knew you had that time scheduled to meet with them. Be respectful of your team just as you would want them to be with you.

5. **Make good use of technology and have a maintenance plan.** Make sure the necessary technology is available to all, and be sure to make it work to your advantage. If you can't explain something without visual help, utilize **JoinMe.com** or **WebEx.com**. Have an IT person on staff as well to make sure the technology is working out. It may seem like an unnecessary addition to the team, but the headache you will save if you commission someone to be “on call” to fix your system will far outweigh the money you'll pay.

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6. **Use a task manager.** **Basecamp** is a tool used to upload files, assign and check off tasks for different projects or even to create a simple daily task list. Users can start discussions on any project or file, and the information is saved and visible to all involved. It's a great little business piazza.
7. **Schedule in-person visits.** Don't forget the value of in-person visits, when possible. Of course, part of the reason the team is working remotely is because in-person visits may

not be easily scheduled. Still, a short visit can go a long way in making your team feel included and for building that important synergy a strong company will have.

8. **Be proactive.** Don't assume that your team will always check in. Although most people are very good about checking in because they feel the need for communication—(especially over long distances), some may just check in when there is an issue. Letting your team know that you want to communicate is valuable, not just for troubleshooting but for building healthy working relationships.
9. **Strongly consider your email aptitude.** Take great care in being professional, concise and to the point about an issue in a neutral tone. You might also consider saving the informal banter for other means of communication since it may not be well received on the other end. Things can get lost in translation. Be clear about your message and what results are desired by asking direct questions. Save anything that belongs on the fringes for another time and place.
10. **Pick up the phone.** Most of the time, your voice will be better understood than words on a page. Many people struggle with putting words on paper. Pick up the phone and let your voice and tone be heard while putting a little more human touch on your communication. **PRN**

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*Shannon Hoffmann is publisher of Forefront Focus Media.*