Make a New Year's Resolution for a Successful Remote Workforce Program

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2011 may well be the Year of the Remote Worker. The technology is available and affordable and there is a ready pool of workers. The benefits have proven compelling for a broad range of organizations. It may be time for *you* to begin a program, or tune and expand an existing one.

Strategic alignment

Start by setting goals for a remote workforce that align with and support your overall operations strategy. Considerations include:

- Expanding the recruiting base
- Accessing higher caliber applicants
- Retaining valuable employees
- Lowering the wage scale
- Reducing facilities costs or future requirements
- Covering scheduling gaps or expanding scheduling flexibility
- Supporting disaster recovery

Work with your executive sponsor to secure cross-functional buy-in. HR will need to adjust their recruiting, hiring, and personnel management processes. Training, QA, and other support services will need to adjust their processes to serve remote workers. IT will implement and support the technology that enables your remote workforce processes. Teamwork is a key to success.

Personnel Selection

Develop recruiting or selection criteria specific to remote workers. Their skills and temperament must include these characteristics:

- Self-disciplined and organized
- Capable of being their own first line of support for technical issues
- Demonstrate the capacity to protect confidential information per company policies
- Self-motivated and self-sufficient

Many remote workers value the convenience and flexibility of working from home and therefore may accept alternate work hours and compensation models. You may also choose to vary the types of contacts that these people handle. Whatever your decisions, make sure that you document any variances from on-site workers with an appropriate rationale.

Core Technology

The technology for remote workers includes a voice path (including phone or PC softphone, with headset), data connectivity, PC-based phone control capabilities (e.g., login/logout, workstate changes, queue visibility, reason codes, etc.), and PC or thin client with access to appropriate applications, databases, and knowledge sources.

A key decision is whether you provide the technology or make it an agent responsibility. Most companies supply and manage the technology to minimize technical difficulties, ensure compatibility, and manage voice quality and data security.

Personnel Management

All remote workers should sign a formal remote worker agreement which includes eligibility, workspace, and process requirements. If geography and cost work in your favor, bring remote staff into the home office for onsite training and coaching or team meetings. If not, explore other options such as web collaboration, conference/video calls, computer-based training, and eLearning.

Remote workers should be held to the same standard of excellence as their onsite counterparts. Extend your existing quality monitoring program to your remote workers and ensure you include screen capture with the voice recordings. As with on-site staff, make sure that the remote agents have visibility into their goals and progress toward them. Ensure your metrics include critical performance criteria and accountabilities such as schedule adherence.

Think carefully about the tools and processes you'll use for communication and collaboration. Instant messaging is a "must have" tool, which can be further augmented by conferencing and web collaboration tools. Remote workers have the same needs for coaching and peer-to-peer interaction as their on-site counterparts.

Following these remote workforce best practices can ensure 2011 is the year you have a successful remote workforce program.