

Achieving High Performance Level for Remote Working

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Abstract — After the COVID-19 pandemic many employees were forced to work from home. Most of these employees were showing low performance when working remotely. The low performance was associated with the different distracting factors depending on each individual. A small group of engineers were studied in an effort to help them regain performance when working remotely. It was found that with clear broken-down objectives, constant remote engagement, team progress monitoring and the correct tracking tool, high performance was achieved.

Key Terms — Home distractions, Remote empathy, virtual collaboration, working afterhours, high performance.

INTRODUCTION

Since the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown many employees were forced to work from home. Right after that, some of them started to show low performance when working remotely.

A federal agency from Pennsylvania was the perfect example of a workforce directly affected by low performance when working remotely. This federal agency is responsible for supporting the US Navy with all the engineering tasks needed by the fleet. Within this agency, there is a small group of engineers responsible for the compressed air system inside the aircraft carriers in the fleet. This team was also known as the Aircraft Carrier Team (ACT). The ACT was performing poorly when working remotely.

One of the main roles of the ACT was to hire qualified contractors to perform maintenance and repairs on the compressed air system onboard all the aircraft carriers. If the ACT does not award the require number of contracts per year, the ships are forced to either hire the original equipment manufacturer (OEM) or a small local business. The

service from the OEM tend to come at a significantly higher rate, while the service from small businesses tend to come at lower rates but, higher risks. If the small business performs an improper repair, catastrophic failures can occur and emergency repairs might be needed. These emergency repairs are considered high visibility and demand a massive amount of time and funding to be executed.

Before the pandemic, the ACT was awarding an average of 4.4 contracts per year. After the pandemic, the ACT reduced the number of contracts awarded to only one per year. Figure 1. shows the ACT performance decrease since the COVID-19 shut down in year 2020.

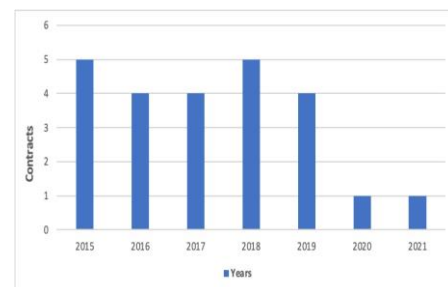


Figure 1
ACT award contract

Working from home brings many benefits. For example, working remotely allow employees to save time and money by not having to commute to their worksite. If desire, employees can also cook their own preferred meals and control most of their working environment. Some companies even allow their employees to work from different locations, which gives employees more freedom to explore and a better work life balance. If the ACT wants to keep enjoying the flexibility included when working remotely, they need to perform at home as they were doing in the office.

The factors contributing to the ACT low performance were investigated and the existing

managerial methodology was adjusted. In addition, the possibility of a pattern between low performing employees and the type of work performed remotely was also analyzed, along with any other contributing factor that could have caused the ACT to lose motivation at home.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most employees prefer to work from home [1]. The reason why employees decide to come back to the office after being working remotely is usually related to loneliness or distrust in their abilities to work alone [2]. When employees are working remotely on interesting or creative task, they can perform better working from home [2]-[3].

It has to be kept in mind that many researchers showed positive remote working performance because they did not track or take in consideration the hours employees worked outside of normal business hours (unbilled hours). Therefore, it is important to compare the employees' performance against the total number of hours worked [1]-[4]. Employees tend to become less productive when working from home, therefore, they have to work extra time during unusual hours to avoid distractions and make up for the lost time [1]-[4]. In addition, parents that work from home performed lower than those employees without children [3]. Women were performing lower than men regardless of their parental status [4]. There were few different factors distracting employees that work remotely regardless of their age, gender, or parental status.

Not every employee is ready to work remotely. Recently hired employees or old employees with no experience working from home, tend to feel disengaged from their supervisors and co-workers. In addition, employees with low technological skills tend to also feel isolated from their team [3]-[4]. This contributes to their low performance as they need constant support to do their daily tasks. It is the manager's responsibility to provide the tools and technology to keep an active communication between working groups. It is also extremely

challenging to transmit empathy and show that supervisors care about their employees remotely. Empathy is a key factor to motivate employees [3]-[5]. Technology has made all the virtual collaboration challenges more bearable. However, managers are responsible for encourage and train employees to effectively use these resources.

Not all jobs can be executed remotely or track accurately [2]-[4]. If the productivity and performance cannot be tracked, usually there are not enough metrics to accurately measure against employee's performance [2]-[4]. Before sending employees to work from home, it is imperative to closely evaluate the job being performed in combination with the employee's experience and skills level. Sometimes this evaluation can provide an idea on whether the job can or cannot be performed remotely.

METHODOLOGY

The ACT was evaluated in order to improve its remote performance. First, the management information technology device list (ITDL) was reviewed and the ACT was contacted in order to ensure that all technological needs required to work remotely were met. After this was confirmed, the ACT was virtually brought together to make them aware of their low performance and the severity of consequences. Simultaneously, that opportunity was also taken to share empathy and hear their concerns. It was made clear that transparency would be kept at all times during the new planning process.

Afterwards, another meeting was held with the purpose of involving the ACT in the organizing and planning process. Clear objectives and expectations were set. In this meeting, it was also determined that a tracking system was required to closely monitor the contract award process. It was brought to discussion that many deadlines were missed due to the perception of the task not having a due date in the near future or that task not having any urgency.

The ACT worked on creating a Microsoft project file with all the mayor milestones that were required to regain the team performance. This helped to meticulously track all the due dates. Once the tracking system was in place and the employees were engaged in the development of this system, a motivational speech was given finalizing with a promise of a reward for the team member with the highest overall performance. The highest performing team member would be granted the opportunity to choose first from the business travel list, regardless of his or her seniority. This will ensure a desirable and enjoyable business trip.

Two team members volunteered to lead the preparations for two different contract packages, one package per leading member. In order to remain on track, a weekly meeting was held to monitor progress, delegate tasks, and evaluate results. In addition, another internal weekly meeting was held to analyze results and adjust methodology.

RESULTS

Two team members volunteered to lead the contract package development processes. The ACT weekly virtual interaction increased to a minimum of two meetings per week. The ACT also awarded two repair contracts in four months while remaining under budget, as showed in Figure 2. It is expected that the ACT will award six contracts in one year performing over the 4.4 previous award contract average.

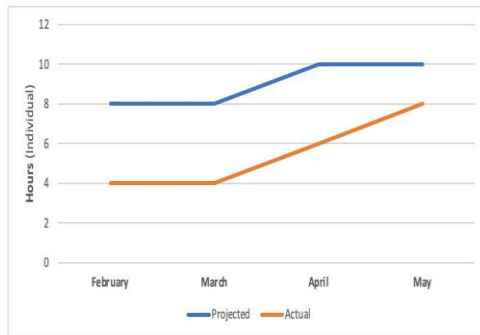


Figure 2
Contract development labor hours

CONCLUSION

The ACT performance results showed that it takes time and motivation for employees to quickly adjust to a new working environment. It also showed that if the tasks being performed do not depends solely on collaboration; frequent virtual interaction, constant motivational encouragement and the implementation of the proper monitoring system can significantly increase employees' performance when working from home.

Although the ACT number of awarded contracts increased, there was not an accurate tool in the evaluated agency to measure the ACT total number of hours worked outside of business hours. The ACT was provided with a full home office set up and they are allowed to work as many unbilled hours as they desire. This prevents the accurate confirmation of ACT overall productivity increase. It remains unknown whether the ACT performance was increased, or they just worked additional hours to deliver on time. Nevertheless, the project objective was achieved.

It is recommended to establish a method to track more accurately employees' number of worked hours regardless of their billing status. It is also recommended to further investigate the relationship between the performance of employees' working from home with the creativity of the task being performed.

There is no recipe for a successful working from home policy. However, managers must evaluate the proposed policy based on their specific company situation. In addition, a trial run is highly recommended before any official policy is implemented.

Finally, focused employees outperform remotely while others cannot. This is independent from their environmental situation as focused employees tend to set themselves for success while the rest risk themselves with additional distractions. However, unfocused employees can still perform significantly better under broken-down specific short-term objectives and expectations as they were given to the ACT. This helped mitigate

procrastination and the unnecessary postponed of nonemergent tasks, ultimately empowering them to meet the trimester goal.

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