



A Virtual Workforce: Are You Ready?

A white paper outlining the most important factors to consider when you are planning to implement a virtual workforce.

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Are You Ready to Implement a Virtual Workforce?



So, you think you're ready to implement a virtual (remote) workforce? Have you considered all the factors for this equation? While there is rarely 100% support within any organization to implement a virtual workforce, if you are the champion, you want to ensure this move is a success. This white paper addresses the primary requirements when implementing a virtual workforce. We are assuming at this point that you are already certain that implementing a virtual workforce is the right thing to do. If you are not yet convinced of the many benefits and return on investment of operating a virtual workforce, please review our white paper titled "*Why Virtualize My Workforce*" (www.movingbeyondthebricks.com)

Now, more than ever, the interest in the benefits of implementing a virtual workforce is growing. Companies that have done it well are sought after to answer the questions that arise when thinking about hiring, operating and sustaining a virtual workforce. Is it a fad or is it really here to stay? How do I start? What's the most important thing to consider? How can we monitor to ensure the employees are really

working? How does the technology work?

The "Must Haves"

Let's first see if you're really ready to embark on this journey. By "ready" we mean "do you have the necessary resources and support in place to establish a virtual workforce?" Implementing a virtual workforce requires groundwork and a solid foundation. Without it, your virtual program will fail. Following are a few of the "must haves" before starting any recruitment efforts.

Executive level support. This holds true for any large-scale organizational implementation or change effort. It's pretty simple ... if you do not have executive support, your program will eventually fail. One of the challenges when implementing a remote workforce can be winning over your executives. If they are of the "old school," believing people will not work if you aren't looking over their shoulders, you will need strong data, preferably a business case, to convince them otherwise.

It's possible to undertake this project without full executive support *only if* you have a high-level champion to support you. In the beginning, you may not be able to gain full support from your CEO or President. However, it is important to have the full support from your division's Vice President or someone in your organization that has the executives' ears. Your champion should provide status updates to the President and/or CEO. The odds are

good they will eventually “get it” and support a virtual workforce, particularly after they see the return on their investment.

Financial support. In order to comprehend the initial savings in implementing a remote employee program, you must have a full understanding of the costs involved. Depending upon your financial structure, you may need to complete a capital investment request to cover the start-up and one-time expenses. Running numerous cost analyses comparing the various options (e.g., computer hardware and software, secure internet connections, telephony choices, etc.) is necessary to help drive your structural decisions. Compiling a 3-year cost analysis, including the investment rate of return, is necessary to gain executive level approval.



An important step is to conduct cost benefit analyses on the various structural models in order to understand your options and make a wise decision based upon the level of executive support provided. It wouldn't make much sense to plan for a full scale structural model if you know you do not have executive

support. Perhaps a pilot program is the best way to start, giving you hard data to support the value of a virtual workforce program.

Front-level support. Employees do not like to feel that they are an island. It is imperative to sustain a feeling of connectedness, a sense of belonging, for remote workers. Their immediate supervisor or manager is the link to your company; that connection must be very strong. It's been said time and time again that employees join companies and leave managers. In addition to the emotional link that must be established with their immediate supervisor, remote workers must have the necessary technology and information at their finger tips to do their jobs effectively. You must offer the tools to make it as easy as possible to complete their tasks. There's nothing worse than putting a customer on hold for several minutes (or worse yet, having to call the customer back) while the agent tracks down the information she needs to help your customer. This frustrates all parties involved and reflects poorly on your company both internally and externally.

The Challenges

Pre-Implementation. The greatest “pre-implementation” challenge will be to gain the support of influential leaders in your company who may not trust the idea of a virtual workforce. The fact is many top managers and senior level executives feel that a traditional workforce is the best structure. They simply have not yet been exposed to a virtual workforce.

During Implementation. The greatest “implementation” challenge will be hiring the right individuals to work from home. Whether you are moving in-house staff or hiring new employees to work at home, your insurance for success resides in placing the right people in these positions. Not everyone can work at home. Through competency modeling, it’s been shown that there are certain characteristics and work styles required to work from home. *Your level of success will be contingent upon who you hire.* A competency assessment is critical and will impact the quality of employee, the level of retention/turnover and employee engagement.

Post-Implementation. The greatest “post-implementation” challenge will be the need for ongoing support and connectedness between the virtual worker and the company. It’s not as simple as hiring people, giving them access to your systems and leaving them alone to do their jobs. It requires certain management talents and skills to work with and lead at-home employees. Managing at a distance requires different methods of engaging employees. It’s possible that some or all of your existing supervisory team may not be able to lead and engage a team of virtual workers because they require consistent face-to-face interaction to be effective. Implementing a virtual workforce may require some changeover in supervisory staff. At a minimum, the management team will require training. In addition to establishing a positive relationship with the virtual worker, the most important factor in engagement and retention is offering on-going development and training. This is especially true for geographically-

dispersed virtual employees. E-Learning is an effective way to deliver training. You may want to consider bringing in the entire virtual team for annual or bi-annual meetings. Many types of communication are key to supporting employee development. An effective tool is to hold regular conversations with your virtual workers. Remember that these virtual workers are often highly educated and professionally advanced, and may have expectations to seek promotions and other opportunities in your company. They should also be fully integrated into your performance management system and given regular performance evaluations. Bottom line: treat them just like any other “officed” employee.



The End Result

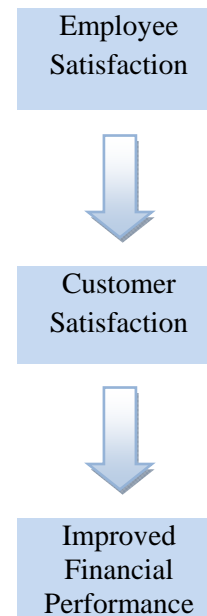
Considering the challenges and the rewards, the end result is a positive – perhaps even an improved – bottom line. Positive returns may include:

- Increase in productivity
- Increase in retention
- Decrease in turnover
- Increase in employee competency (higher quality labor pool)
- Increase in employee engagement
- Reduction in absenteeism
- Increase in customer loyalty (through improved interactions)
- Increase in staffing efficiency and scalability
- Reduction in real estate and overhead costs
- Reduction in recruiting time and costs

When planned and implemented correctly, the virtual workforce will be highly engaged, thus increasing your overall customer satisfaction.

When you get this right, your department can dominate your industry through an enhanced customer experience. When planned and implemented correctly, the virtual workforce will be highly engaged. You will find these virtual workers to be extremely appreciative for the opportunity to work from home. The

agent's 'attitude of gratitude' raises the employees' level of engagement. Engaged employees equal employees who are more productive, profitable, customer focused, safe and likely to stay with the company. The direct link to the bottom-line is:



Next Steps

Competing in today's marketplace and economy forces companies to continually address customer, stakeholder, shareholder and employee needs. Implementing a virtual workforce meets everyone's needs. It truly is a win-win opportunity.

It's always better to "know what you know" and "know what you don't know" (vs. "don't know what you don't know"). It's prudent to learn as much as you can about implementing and sustaining a virtual workforce. Reach out to other companies who have virtual

workers to gain their perspective. Read the various case studies and white papers offered on this topic.

Visit www.movingbeyondthebricks.com and take the Readiness Assessment (click on “Take Our Assessment”). Answer the questions based on your current state and you will receive a comprehensive readiness rating along with a detailed list of must-do’s to ensure your preparedness.

Contact Moving Beyond the Bricks with questions or to schedule a conference call to discuss your needs and questions. Moving Beyond the Bricks is a full service consulting firm which provides customized services designed to create higher employee productivity and customer loyalty through implementing and sustaining a remote workforce. The company provides a full suite of consulting services associated with operating a virtual workforce, from determining feasibility to post-implementation and sustainability.



Haley Sautter Management, Inc.

www.movingbeyondthebricks.com

1-866-935-9554

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