

# How to manage the performance of remote workers

By **Chloe Hava**

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Many things about the workplace have changed this year but the need to get the best from employees has not. Here's how to do that remotely.

With [many organisations](#) committing to remote working for at least the medium term, many leaders are managing their teams remotely for the foreseeable future.

For those managers used to sneaking the occasional glance at employees' screens to make sure they really are working on that report they promised to turn in by close of business, learning to trust that employees have got things covered will be paramount.

"From most of the [data that we've seen](#) in a remote environment, trust is absolutely foundational, says Aaron McEwan, vice president of research and advisory at Gartner.

"When trust isn't there, employees don't perform as well remotely."

Trusting employees to manage their own time might be the first step, but there are other things to consider to ensure remote performance management runs smoothly.

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*Aaron McEwan will be discussing responsive culture at AHRI's SHIFT20 virtual conference this October. [Click here](#) to read more about Aaron and register for this unmissable event.*

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## Input vs output

When setting goals with your newly-remote workforce, keep in mind that progress should be tracked by output rather than input, says McEwan.

“The biggest challenge managers have in the current environment is that in many cases they can’t see their employees. So the big risk is that we revert back to inputs – how long someone is logged into their computer for.

“We’ve got to get better at checking in and [gathering data](#) about the contributions employees are making,” he says.

To do this, a recent Deloitte [report](#) suggests defining outputs in collaboration with the employee before tasks are undertaken, and keeping track of progress, outstanding tasks and completion using tools such as a virtual Kanban board or shared task list.

Not all roles can be appraised by outcomes, so for those that can’t consider net promoter scores and rankings via internal customers a la Apple, according to an [article](#) in *BCG*.

## Alignment

It’s easy to get off track when teams are dispersed, so it’s important to ensure that what employees are working on continues to align with the organisation’s overall mission.

Alex Hattingh, chief people officer at Employment Hero, says it’s crucial to be transparent and cascade organisational goals from the top when it comes to setting KPIs (key performance indicators) in a remote setting – so that every individual’s OKR (objectives and key results) is aligned with the company’s.

“Every week, we do an all-hands where we read out how we’re doing in terms of achieving the company OKRs so people can understand what they’re working on and how this work contributes to these overall goals,” says Hattingh.

## Keep it regular

When employees are working remotely, regular check-ins and transparency will ensure they are kept in the loop about how they’re performing.

“I think most organisations will continue to have their formal performance management process, but managers should be checking in regularly so that when it comes time for the performance review, it’s never a surprise conversation,” says McEwan.

Hattingh says her organisation has adjusted the frequency of its performance discussions to reflect their new remote first modus operandi.

"We melded our quarterly OKR check-ins with weekly one-on-one check-ins," she says.

"We have a one-on-one template that helps to facilitate a guided conversation which is very owned by the employees and helps managers remove any barriers or roadblocks, check in on the employee's wellness when they are working remotely and make sure they are there to coach them through any development needs they might have."

## Be flexible

McEwan says course correction is key when it comes to remote performance management.

"If priorities change, the last thing you want is employees still focusing on the old ones."

"Performance is more likely to be derailed when people are focusing on the wrong things rather than underperforming. That's why it's so important to have regular check-ins about course correction," he says.

"It's as simple as saying, 'You're doing a great job, but these tasks you're focused on are no longer as important as they used to be, whereas these ones really are. So I just want you to shift your focus over here'."

Short-cycle work planning will assist in this process, says McEwan.

"Who would have thought in January that here is where we'd be in September? The world is a different place and organisations are focused on completely different priorities," he says.

"COVID-19 has highlighted that it's difficult to set goals 12 months in advance that are still going to be relevant."

## Underperformance

When an employee's performance has started to decline since working remotely, it's important to change tack and [separate the performance from the person](#) i.e underperformance vs. the underperformer.

There could be many factors contributing to the reduced performance, especially in the uncertain circumstances we now find ourselves, so managers should take a diagnostic approach and consider:

1. **The differences.** Have things changed within the organisation or has the employee been suffering personal difficulties? Working remotely can be technically challenging and not everyone is capable of self-management.
2. **Organisational issues.** Working remotely can highlight the weak spots in your organisation – whether that be outdated processes and technologies or a secretive culture. Managers should identify the organisational performance issues that are impacting the individual's performance before pointing the finger.
3. **Fact over emotion.** Try to separate emotions such as anxiety, anger and frustration from fact before entering into a discussion with the underperformer.
4. **Taking responsibility.** Consider whether you have been clear in your expectations from the employee and if you have provided adequate resources, coaching and feedback.

Once the issue has been identified, engage the underperformer by asking what they might improve or any lessons that can be learned. Reassure them that missteps are okay when corrected and reiterate that you're there for guidance.

Hattingh also stresses the need for dispensing regular feedback to iron out any performance issues.

"You don't want an employee who's underperforming to be surprised that they're underperforming," she says.

"It's important to highlight any performance issues in these weekly check-ins, and how the employee can work towards achieving their goals and OKRs. Ensure they are alerted to anything they might need to improve in real time, and coach them through where and how they can improve."

### Reward and recognition

[Regular recognition and reward of performance](#) is essential when managing a remote workforce, says Hattingh. Rather than reserving positive feedback for reviews, "you want to be doing this on a daily basis through a technology platform".

"We do shout-outs through our platform and people are on that all day thanking team members," she says.

"We also have value champions awards which have a monetary value associated with them when employees have really gone above and beyond to live or display a company value. This is called out on the platform to all employees."

Hattingh says there has been a big uptake on their platform since employees have been working remotely, which has led to an increase in employee engagement levels.

### The annual review

Still planning on going ahead with this year's formal annual review? McEwan recommends moving the goalposts.

It's likely much has changed since these goals were set, and employees may be dreading their review as their goals no longer apply.

McEwan suggests a focus on employee contribution rather than traditional performance measures.

"We need to shift the focus to how our employees have behaved, how they have reacted to what we've thrown at them, what they've contributed, not just to the organisation, but to their peers and colleagues."

But checking in on how employees are faring would go a long way, too.

"The performance review is also a wonderful opportunity to say, 'what do you need, how are you going, how are you finding the balance of work and life, do you have everything you require to get your work done, is there any clarity that should be provided on what should be focussed on?'

"In fact, I'd say this is what reviews should be about anyway," says McEwan.