
The 5 Major Risks of Managing a Dispersed Workforce

Objectives

- Status quo of the “dispersed” workforce
- Benefits of dispersed workforce
- The Five Risks and Mitigating Strategies
 - Accountability
 - Communication
 - Presence
 - Technology
 - Career Development
- Practical Take-Aways

“We don’t telework at the Bureau.”

“We can’t telework.”

“Our mission doesn’t allow the flexibility for telework.”

“The Division head won’t allow people to work remotely.”

“Security/IT won’t allow it.”

“It’s not fair if some get to work remotely and others don’t”

“You have to be here [in DC] to receive the benefits of the higher salary that comes with a HQ position.”

When we say “Dispersed Workforce” ...

- Dispersed = full-time remote = working elsewhere = NORMAL
- The FBI is spread out geographically over a wide area –
 - 56 FBI Field Offices/368 Resident Agencies
 - 63 FBI Headquarters Remote Sites
 - 80+ overseas offices
- Nearly every FBI Division has some subset of individuals working at a geographical distance from the main presence.
- Pre-COVID – a few “only-lonelies” and teleworking as short-term accommodation. “Not our culture.”
- Future State – Team Hate It vs Team Love It

Benefits of a Dispersed Workforce

- Put the people where the mission requires
- Increase access to talent pools
- Increase productivity by clustering employee groups to take advantage of economies of scale, changes in technologies, new procedures, etc.
- Establish broader enterprise coverage to make connections with existing or potential stakeholders.
- Provide increased job satisfaction through career choice options, flexibility and better work-life balance. (Always put this one last when making your pitch to exec management.)

Risk #1: Ensuring Accountability

Challenge: It can be difficult to hold people accountable when you can't see them working at their desk everyday.

Risks: Missed deadlines, low productivity, and poor performance.

Mitigating Strategies: Set clear performance expectations, follow up, and track progress and workload.

Best Practices:

- Scheduled discussions of progress and achievements
- Clarify how you want to know if deadline is at risk.
- Use digital collaboration or project management tools.
- Prep folks for feedback prior to needing it
- What is threshold for “this isn't working for me”?

Risk #2: Clear Communication

Challenge: Office communications is often organic/ad hoc. Remote employees can feel left out of loop/less valued

Risks: Team cohesion, damaged relationships and high turnover rate. Feeling that “they’re just not on the same page.”

Mitigating Strategies: Share information often and regularly through multiple means. Clarify responsibilities.

Best Practices:

- Ensure remote team gets materials ahead of time.
- Meetings/brainstorming sessions should be digital.
- Formalize communication more than you ordinarily would – written action items, meeting minutes, etc.
- Clarify how YOU want to receive important comms (method)

Risk #3: Establishing Presence

Challenge: “Leadership by walking around” and “open door policy” doesn’t work when you can’t walk there & your door is far away.

Risks: Collaboration, cooperation, cohesion and engagement suffer

Mitigating Strategies: Stay abreast of remote team’s needs, cadence and energy. Establish a virtual presence. Create a virtual culture.

Best Practices:

- Hold periodic virtual team all-hands meetings AND allocate funding for site visits (both directions)
- Establish places to collaborate and share online
- Ensure non-work online moments for remote/virtual players to have their “drive by” encounters.

Risk #4: Technology Fails

Challenge: Technology is unpredictable, fluid and changes rapidly yet critical for remote employees' integration.

Risks: Connection, accessibility and teamwork. Work failures.

Mitigating Strategies: Leverage existing technology to connect with employees. Have backup plans for technology failures, such as phones and after action meets.

Best Practices:

- Establish rules for when cameras on/off.
- Utilize all available technology with multiple modes.
- De-escalate frustration with technology challenges.
- Group email lists are dinosaur technology but still useful

Risk #5: Harder for Career Development

Challenge: Identifying equitable developmental opportunities for remote employees to advance.

Risks: Stagnation and lack of innovation, geography can limit opportunities.

Mitigating Strategies: Understand teams' career aspirations. Carve out a budget for developmental assignments as needed.

Best Practices:

- Recommend training courses, details or developmental opportunities
- Remote assignments “in place” to other parts of the organization

Practical Takeaways

- “It’s the future. Deal with it!” – Accurate but not super helpful. Gauge managers’ comfort level and work with them on strategies for success.
- The pendulum of preference will swing back and forth, so prepare a range of options for managers more or less comfortable with remote/distributed work.
- Take extra care of managers who inherit a remote/teleworking team. Do they need extra guidance/training?
- Culture/team feel/relationships will need a helping hand to flourish and you have to take proactive steps to inculcate a strong team presence.
- Technology will always help you and always be the worst thing about it. Have multiple workarounds.
- DE-ESCALATE inevitable through shared acknowledgement of the experience, its benefits and its limitations.

Practical Takeaways

- If the balance of power is with you, the responsibility is too. You must do the adulting and communicate.
- Communicate multiple ways, multiple times, via multiple modalities/platforms. Assume 20% signal loss rate and try to offset with more frequent communication.
- Write things down and put them somewhere people can see them asynchronously.
- Laser in on new employees/managers who may be new to the arrangement and proactively check in. Are they feeling adrift?
- Have a sanity check/problem solving/venting partner to brainstorm with when things don't seem to be working.

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Questions?

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