EARN conducted a series of focus groups in the fall of 2021 with employer members of the National Industry Liaison Group (NILG) to better understand how the shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted performance management practices, and the implications for candidates with disabilities.

Employers report that developing performance management practices for a remote workforce has been a gradual process. One thing is clear—there is no one size fits all approach. Performance management is by nature an individual process, but there are some strategies that can be used to enable better remote performance management practices overall, and make it easier to identify and respond to the need for workplace accommodations.

Challenges

Employers cited several common challenges with regard to remote performance evaluation practices which needed to be addressed:

• **Dealing** with decentralized human resource (HR) units and processes, which can create inconsistency between units or departments.

• **Developing** processes for responding to remote accommodation requests.

• **Addressing** a lack of flexibility in the evaluation of performance in the public sector.

• **Handling** an increase in accommodation requests overall.

• **Handling** requests to work remotely part time, as opposed to taking medical leave.

“People who weren’t successful [remotely] already had issues before, for the most part. On the other hand, some people who had issues with lateness and absenteeism before [remote work] did better.”

- Focus Group Participant

Many employers found that lifting pandemic restrictions created unanticipated workplace tension which needed to be managed, especially regarding masking and vaccines. When certain roles were brought back onsite while others were allowed to remain remote, some employees expressed dissatisfaction with their work location. There was a prevailing sense that the workforce is more overwhelmed than it was in the past. Employees with and without
disabilities frequently described themselves as ‘changed,’ and less able to manage a work/life balance, as a result of the pandemic. This shift has required extra attention to mental health and wellbeing as an aspect of performance.

**Solutions**

While the shift to remote work resulted in performance improvements for some employees, for others, it required greater attention to performance management and employee engagement. Employers developed many creative approaches to monitor performance and maintain connections with remote workers:

- **Creating** new and fun employee recognition programs that were inclusive of remote workers.
- **Allowing** employees to acknowledge the work of others publicly (virtual “thank you walls,” team rewards for performance, etc.).
- **Establishing** special metrics for remote performance in order to create objective measures and avoid evaluations based on hunches or assumptions.
- **Establishing** more frequent and purposeful check-ins with employees.
- **Increasing** focus on wellness and self-care as an aspect of performance.

**Future Considerations**

All focus group participants agreed that people who naturally thrive in in-person work environments may need more coaching to work successfully at home. Employers observed that an employee with a disability is just as likely to prefer remote work over in-person work as their colleagues without disabilities. However, it can be difficult for employers to ascertain when accommodations or assistive technology should be considered when people work from home. Processes for evaluating whether accommodations are needed should be standardized for all remote employees, as well as policies for procurement of in-home devices and materials.

Learning to effectively manage the productivity, engagement and ‘soft skills’ of remote workers can lead to improved retention of valuable employees. It is important to ensure that remote employees feel connected to organizational culture, are receiving equal benefits and privileges of employment, and have access to accommodations as needed.

“We’ve learned there are different ways of doing jobs. Some people in certain roles are overworking and run the risk of burning out. We’ve had to be intentional and force managers to consider the environment we are in and offer support.”

- Focus Group Participant

“We discovered that the recent college grads felt unappreciated and we noticed quality issues. We developed [an appreciation system using ping pong balls]. When the jar was full of ping pong balls, the team got rewarded.”

- Focus Group Participant
Learn More

Practice Brief: Leveraging the Shift to Remote Work to Increase Employment of People with Disabilities (PDF)
This brief explores how the sudden and massive shift in the way business is performed has revealed a path forward to the future of work and how this could create new opportunities for people with disabilities.

Performance Management
This webpage helps employers understand the important role feedback plays in helping all employees, including employees with disabilities, advance in their careers.

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