

I've Worked Remotely For Over 20 Years – 5 Common Mistakes Companies Make When It Comes to Remote Operations

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SOPs, or standard operating procedures, are a must for any company – remote or otherwise. However, when working with an entirely remote team, some special considerations need to be put in place. Directing and working remotely for over 20 years, I have a unique perspective on this that I would like to share.

1. Out of sight, out of mind

It is common practice to share standard operating procedures during onboarding with new hires, but past that, most companies never mention operating procedures again – unless, of course, there is a change that needs to be made. It is a good idea to have employees review procedures regularly, even if no edits have been made. I recommend reviewing them quarterly in a meeting, or perhaps you could send a survey out a couple of times each year that requires employees to review standard operating procedures and provide feedback on areas they believe can be improved.

I once worked with a team that sent out a survey once a year to employees, and to encourage participation every employee received a \$50 gift card for completing the survey. Not only did all the employees fill out the survey, but that team had

the best standard operating procedures because they were consistently updated and reviewed. Get your team involved, and don't just put operating procedures out of sight and out of mind after onboarding.

Related: I've Managed Remote Teams For 15 Years – Here Are My 3 Most Important Leadership Lessons.

2. Ignoring the need for flexibility

Remote work allows employees to have more control over their schedules and work environments, but many companies still adhere to rigid structures that don't accommodate this flexibility. This lack of flexibility can hinder productivity and creativity, as employees may feel restricted and unable to adapt to their unique circumstances. Common working hours are a good start to establish, but keep in mind this is not meant to be the typical 9 to 5 where an employee is at their desk all day.

In my opinion, it is crucial to include in your operating procedures when you expect someone to work. You can mention a time limit such as a minimum of five hours daily, or you can offer specific hours such as 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. The best way to do this is to outline a set of hours that everyone needs to be working at the same time, regardless of time zone – and be sure to let everyone know what time zone they should be referring to! A default zone should be used for everyone, like central standard time.

3. Inadequate communication procedures

Without clear and efficient communication channels, remote teams can struggle to stay connected and aligned. This can

lead to misunderstandings, delays and decreased productivity. It's important for companies to establish effective communication protocols, such as regular check-ins, team meetings and utilizing communication tools like video conferencing or messaging platforms. Additionally, providing guidelines on expected response times and communication etiquette can help remote workers feel supported and connected.

Another company I worked with offered incentives for those who responded faster than the required time on a regular basis. This ranged from a special bonus to extra time off, and it applied to both internal and external communications. This was outlined in their operating procedures so everyone knew how long they had to respond to messages for coworkers and customers alike. It created a very collaborative environment where everyone was connected and stayed on top of things. It was highlighted in the procedures that everyone would use a single platform to communicate (which, for this particular company, was Slack).

4. Failure to address technical challenges

From unstable internet connections to outdated software, these issues can severely impact productivity and hinder remote workers from performing their tasks effectively. Failing to address these technical challenges not only frustrates employees but also prevents them from reaching their full potential. A good procedure to have in place is what to do when technology does not work – should employees call someone? Send a text? What steps should be taken to let the rest of the team know when something is not working?

The best way to tackle this issue is to include contact information in your operating procedures. That way if someone's computer crashes before a meeting, they can

call/text/email the right person to let them know what is happening and ask for what the next steps should be. Include a grace period too; for example, let your employees know that if they are not able to get their computers up and running 10 minutes before a meeting they should reach out to their manager.

Related: Remote Work Is the Great Equalizer in the Workplace. Here's How It Will Make Your Business a Better Place to Work.

5. Insufficient training and onboarding procedures

Many remote companies tend to throw their new employees into the metaphorical deep end and hope they learn how to swim on their own. While some personalities can handle this, it is extremely difficult and stressful for any person to try to figure out how to operate within a company like that. It is incredibly important to have standard operating procedures for how to onboard a new member to the team from getting them logins to training them on how to use the software given to them to do their job.

Your procedures do not have to be overly detailed here, just a general outline for everyone to follow. For example, step one for remote workers should be getting your new team members all the logins they need. Step two should be training on how to use the systems they will work in daily such as instant messaging software and time tracking software. From there your company can customize the steps as needed.

Standard operating procedures unite employees and give them direction within a company, and when working remotely, it is extra important to keep them up to date and in front of everyone so that your employees know what is expected of them and how to handle problems.

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