Motivating Remote Employees Using OKRs

As companies embrace hybrid work models, objectives and key results help employees avoid burnout.

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If our collective increased productivity during Covid-19 tells us anything, it's that remote work's reputation as being the "lazy option" is no longer accurate. As remote work or hybrid work becomes the norm, companies are figuring out how they'll begin measuring traditional in-person metrics like participation and engagement.

While we've become more efficient, more agile and better at delivering results than ever before, skepticism of remote employees' commitment still persists. However, for knowledgeable workers, especially ones at small companies, productivity is the lifeblood of success. We constantly need to do more with less and make sure that nothing goes to waste.

Unsurprisingly, this has led to a devotion to key performance indicators (KPIs) as a way to measure productivity. They're measured daily, talked about in team meetings, projected onto TV screens or pumped into Slack channels. Goals are set around increasing or decreasing KPIs and companies can lose sight of the big picture in search of a quantitative way to show that employees are working hard. Now, KPIs aren't objectively bad, but the focus on output doesn't deliver the same results as a focus on outcomes.

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During the Covid-19 pandemic, companies increasingly implemented surveillance and tracking software, believing that it would improve team productivity and efficiency while everyone was working from home. There was also an uptick in companies using monitoring software to record internet browsing of employees and active work hours. Some even went as far as seeking to watch over workers themselves, mandating always-on webcam rules and multiple check-ins per day. All of this is leading to burnout.

Multiple studies have found extrinsic motivation isn't effective for workers. Employee surveillance software and micromanagement incite fear that employees aren't being productive, add additional pressure and destroy morale across the team. Digital supervision not only removes privacy, but it breaks the trust built between managers and employees.

Enter the alternative — Objectives and key results (OKRs).

OKRs help focus and align the organization, as well as develop a set of productive behaviors that will create an intrinsically motivated culture. Through the OKR process, employees define the outcomes they'll achieve, which empowers autonomy and motivation.

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Creating intrinsic motivation is also essential to building a lasting team. The median tenure in the overall workforce is approximately 4.2 years, whereas at startups the median drops sharply to only 2 years. With startups singularly focused on being able to maximize output, it's not a surprise that companies end up falling into a burn-and-churn model of employee relations, losing critical talent in service of doing more and being able to directly point to a rising metric. Add

in the ever-present eye of their employer watching for any decrease in their productivity, the burnout rate can only increase.

OKRs focus on outcomes over outputs. It's a way to treat your problems, as opposed to the symptoms, and gives teams the flexibility to experiment and innovate in more creative ways. Beyond that, it allows for a more human approach to keep team members striving for their best. It also reinforces a positive behavior of providing consistent reflection and iteration around your goals, sharing progress updates and keeping goals collaborative, all while maintaining autonomy and trust.

So when you're putting together your goals for the quarter, skip the rote increases in KPIs and instead focus on the overall outcomes you want to deliver. We encourage teams to set their own OKRs and align them with the company's, giving them a chance to choose the outcomes that they can best deliver while still balancing their regular work.

Not only does this continue to shift the expectations to be more flexible, but it also drives the sense of purpose and ownership over their own goals. Remote work affords the opportunity to improve productivity for the good of your teams, but only for those companies willing.

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