Tips for virtual managers

As technology continues to evolve, there's an increasing tendency for people to work remotely. More and more, it's becoming common for workgroups to form across long distances.

An employee might report to a manager in California and have team members in New York and Florida. Many companies see the value in hiring based on talent first and location second.

Managed well, a team with some or all of its members reporting virtually can be a great model. Here are some tips from managers who know how to build community and collaboration in a virtual team:

Use technology to connect. E-mail's only the beginning. Instant messaging allows for real-time discussions. Desktop sharing is great for training and problem-solving. For meetings, you can get applications that act like phones through your computer hardware or use a phone conference line. Participants can share computer white-boards. Then they can type notes everyone else can see. If you add webcams into the equation, it's not that different from sitting in a meeting room together.

Reach out. Cultivate a relationship with everyone on your team. When working at home, it can be easy to get "in the zone" and accomplish a lot — but miss out on getting to know your teammates. Just remember, if you were sharing the same office you'd be exchanging pleasantries every day. Don't be afraid to recreate that in your virtual environment.

Help your team members connect with each other. Have regular meetings and start with ice-breakers or team builders. Let team members take turns leading projects, and have them work together in rotating sub-groups.

Host social events — virtual style. You can have social hours (or half-hours) for:

- Holiday parties
- National Customer Service Week luncheon
- Spring "picnic" event
- Birthdays and more

Keep the basics in mind, too

Some things remain the same, no matter where your team works. Such as:

Trust and accountability. Trust your employees to do their work and hold them accountable to meeting their deadlines.

Flexibility. Teleworking offers flexibility that can make it easy for team members to miss less work. But be sure your employees are available when you need them to be. Keep open communication with employees so when things do come up you'll be able to meet business needs.

Coverage. Be sure the team identifies backups for when they're going to take time off.

Contact information. Create a contact list for everyone on an internal site and in print in case internet/computer connectivity is lost. The list can include work phone, cell phone, home phone and personal email. You may not be able to walk over to your team member's cubicle, but you should always be able to reach each other.