Remote Supervision Strategies

Remote supervision in at least one of its forms is not new to many VR agencies. Often there are small or geographically remote offices where a supervisor may not be available to every employee on a daily basis. Another type of remote supervision involves supervising telecommuting employees (see sample telecommuting policies in the onboarding portion of this toolkit). Another form of remote supervision is where employees do not have access to a permanent state provided work office and where traditional telecommuting is not possible or not embraced. This last option is strongly discouraged as employees may have to spend much of their time obtaining space to meet with clients. Clients, and those organizations/companies lending space to this employee may obtain a negative perception about the professional nature of the employee and his/her organization.

No matter which form of remote supervision is chosen, employees should always have available all rules, regulations, policies and procedures at all times in all locations.

The strategies for remote supervision may vary depending on the type of employee:

- Employees who are dependable and independent needing little supervision: For these employees, the important step is to develop a comprehensive performance plan with reasonable goals and objectives so they understand what is expected of them. This performance plan should be their guide in the absence of direct supervision. There should also be an agreement as to the parameters around decision-making in terms of what items or issues need to be checked with supervision and which are okay for the employee to determine directly. When these boundaries are pre-established, it prevents future problems and disagreements.
- Average employees: Use the same strategies as above, but more frequent contact is likely required. In the case where frequent onsite visits is not feasible, other methods such as phone, email, Skype or similar systems should be utilized. Help these employees stay on track. If they get behind, they may try to hide their lack of progress which can create other issues.

Try to prevent this from occurring by establishing interim milestones which are routinely checked.

- Problem employees: If at all possible, do not allow problem employees to work where they will not be supervised and/or see if a transfer to another position is possible. If you have no choice in the matter, then in addition to the above ideas, consider the following options depending on the nature of the problem(s).
  - Have the employee send you emails upon arriving and leaving the office if attendance or tardiness is an issue.
  - If a local vendor or contractor is having an issue with the employee, check in with that vendor/contractor for feedback.
  - In addition to the use of milestones, divide tasks into smaller components and provide feedback as each small component is completed.
  - Provide extra training resources if necessary.

For all types of employees, surprise visits never hurt and could even be appreciated. Also, the more constructive the feedback the better as long as independent and productive employees do not feel micro-managed.

In addition to looking at the employee, management should also consider the competencies of supervisors who may be supervising remote employees. A 2012 paper by Morris and Connaughton for the Indiana Vocational Rehabilitation agency states that the following supervisory competencies are important in this context:

- Buy-in: Supervisors must support virtual work.
- Hiring Virtual Workers: Supervisors must be able to select workers that are good self-managers and are self-motivated.
- Communication: Supervisors must be effective communicators and have the ability to use numerous modes of communication.
- Trust: Supervisors must be able to build and maintain trust (made more difficult by the lack of consistent face-to-face contact.)
- Identification: Supervisors must be able to assist employees in creating a connection and identification with the organization.

- Knowledge Management: Supervisors should ensure that virtual employees have access to all necessary work information as well as organization related social information.
- Technology: Supervisors need to be skilled in the range of technologies associated with virtual work.
- Performance Management and Employee Evaluation: Supervisors must be competent in managing and evaluating employee performance that is beyond just measuring the amount of time spent at work.