Ease the Transition to a Virtual Office

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Associations should consider four human resources issues when changing to a virtualized workforce environment.

Many associations are recognizing a need for a virtualized workforce environment. Often, it can help an organization save money—there isn't a need for physical office space—while giving staff greater flexibility to work from wherever they prefer.

Many organizations have already seen positive experiences from virtual and remote working environments. After following several online discussion threads on the subject, we identified a need for a community for virtual association professionals to network and discuss ways of developing resources.

In May 2017, the Virtual Association Network was formed. Since then, VAN has administered two benchmarking surveys to gather data and provide information to associations that operate virtually, as well as those looking to transition to a virtualized environment. These two surveys yielded a solid base of information about human resource management and operations support for virtual associations.

For associations considering a shift to a virtual workforce, either partially or completely, here are four important data points relative to human resources management that are critical to making a smooth transition.

Hiring. Virtual associations can significantly expand their recruiting to encompass a much larger set of candidates—regional if not national. Sixty-four percent of VAN survey respondents indicated the hiring process often includes a combination of in-person and virtual interviews. The subsequent onboarding process of new hires is accomplished in much the same way, with 59 percent of respondents indicating a combination of in-person and virtual meetings. Ensuring that appropriate technology is available and utilized for interviews and onboarding is essential.

Frequency of in-person meetings. With staff potentially spread out all over the country (58 percent indicated their employees reside in three or more states), it is imperative to incorporate a few in-person meetings annually to build camaraderie and address key strategic and operational issues that are best discussed face to face. Sixty-three percent of respondents indicated they bring staff together physically three times a year or more for all-staff meetings lasting at least a day, and frequently longer.

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Staff management and supervisory techniques. For the majority of associations (71 percent), there is no difference in techniques used to manage employees who work virtually and those in a brick-and-mortar office. Metrics are often used to assess the performance of individuals or teams, with 30 percent

utilizing key performance indicators and 40 percent leaving it up to the manager's discretion. Many respondents offered comments similar to this one: "I expect employees to do their job, and I hold weekly calls related to metrics and job responsibility."

Handling of other responsibilities. More than half of survey respondents (55 percent) indicated their associations do not allow, or allow very limited, care for children or other dependents during working hours. The majority of remaining respondents (35 percent) indicated there are no restrictions as long as work is accomplished on time and meets expectations and as long as virtual meetings are not disrupted.

Finally, this research uncovered some confusion over what constitutes a "virtual association" compared to associations that allow some level of telecommuting. This categorization is a critical point, as research has shown individuals entering the workforce are often looking for positions offered on a virtual basis, not just flex-work or work-from-home options a few days each week. Clarification of these categories is needed so that organizations can clearly describe their workforce environment.

VAN is also discussing how it can help accumulate and disseminate knowledge about the management of virtual associations—not just for human resource management, but also in other operational areas, like accounting, technology, and workspace policies.

With employees located in different states, virtual associations often need to meet additional legal and governmental requirements, which may place a burden on organizations with fewer than 10 employees. Best practices for working with contractors and the legal differences between an employee and a contractor will be addressed in future VAN discussions.

Tags:

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