

The Top Ten Strategies For Managers Of Mobile Workers:

Surviving and Thriving in the Emerging Mobile Workforce

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Where Are We Today?

CIRCA 1980

The hall erupted in a sea of applause. James made his way to the front of the ballroom. Waiting to shake his hand and give him the esteemed Outstanding Corporate Citizen Award for 37 years of service was the CEO of Typical Enterprises.

James Gander was proud to be a third-generation employee. His father and grandfather had worked in the same facility. He would have never guessed that a high school summer job filling bins on a production line would have turned into his current position as an Account Services Manager. Sure, he had seen changes. Assembly had replaced manufacturing, and quality and service had become the cornerstone of the company's competitive advantage, but for the most part James had worked with the same group of people. Typical Enterprises was as much a part of James' family as his six grandchildren.

CIRCA 2010

Cecilia rubbed her eyes. Getting up at three in the morning for a conference call halfway around the world was never in her job description. It had been days since she had actually seen or talked in person with any of the fifty people on her staff. As she typed in the web address of the virtual meeting she saw an instant message pop up.

Tony who had just joined her team six months ago was texting her his official two-weeks notice. Since he was based in Australia and Cecilia worked in Palo Alto, he had notified Human Resources on Monday (Sunday for Cecilia) that he would be leaving. Cecilia thought it was considerate of Tony to text her before the meeting so she would not be blind-sided. She was excited Tony would get a chance to try his hand at a new career. At least she had thirty seconds to collect her thoughts before announcing the information to her team. Days like this made Cecilia wish she could just crawl back into bed. Then she remembered that today she was telecommuting, so at least she could surround herself with the comforts of her home as she prepared to tackle whatever onslaught of fires was sure to come her way.

However disorienting and maddening the pace and rules of our contemporary work life may be, let's understand a few things: there's no turning back, it doesn't have to be a bad thing, and there are things you can do to set yourself up for success even in the face of all the challenges.

Our approach in this white paper will be to tackle the challenges head on. This is not a Pollyanna attempt to convince you of things you already know. Life in organizations is different.

Background

As the authors Christopher Locke, Rick Levine, Doc Searls, and David Weinberger pointed out in their classic book *Clue Train Manifesto*, the boundaries of an organization have become porous. Today's organizations are part of elaborate interdependent networks of suppliers, partners, vendors, and migrant employees. Forget about the gentle notion of touch points with customers; organizations are bombarded with meteoritic impacts of a social and economic variety. There are no institutional walls to protect the inner sanctity of organizational practices. According to the authors, this has led to an acceleration of emergent and "smart" markets that in many cases have outpaced the adaptive capacity of organizations. In other words, the speed of information and the number of interactions between people has made many of our old organizational sense and respond tactics obsolete. By the time we measure or capture the information we need to inform organizational strategy, things have

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already changed. Our organizational identities are fragile. Even chameleons and camouflaging octopi are not this sensitive.

Examining factors leading to competitive advantage over time provides insights into some of the major drivers of organizational transformations.

FIGURE 1



Each step on this pyramid represents a major shift in the competitive advantage of an organization. Going back to the turn of the century, economies of scale and manufacturing led to price advantages. When price was equalized in the market, quality and service became the new differentiators. Producing widgets with fewer defects and/or providing value-added services to enhance an enterprises' product offering allowed them to compete more effectively.

The explosion of information technology led to the central role of data in an enterprise. Collecting, disseminating, and managing data in cost-effective ways, aligned with continuous improvement of an organization's business processes, were key measures of viability and growth. Information technology became a critical success factor in evaluating organizations. Organizations unable to leverage automation and information technology to reduce costs and realize new opportunities were at a huge disadvantage.

The next phase of competitive organizational evolution revolved around knowledge. This has been elusive, partly because knowledge in essence is unstructured data. Unlike the 0s and 1s of this document that can be digitally stored as one self-contained document, knowledge sits in the minds and experiences of people. Therefore,

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it neither lends itself to being easily packaged and stored in centralized repositories nor can it be marked up with metadata (the data that label and describes the data stored in the repositories). There are some excellent examples of enterprises that have learned how to tap into knowledge to spur innovation and create competitive advantage. Design industries offer excellent examples. Through math-based, knowledge driven CAD/CAM (computer aided design, computer aided manufacturing) initiatives automotive manufacturers have been able to significantly reduce design time cycles, costs of producing prototypes, and increases in safety. In these cases the information technology paradigm morphed well to match these data-driven knowledge opportunities. The short tenure of actionable knowledge strategies is less a function of failure and more an indicator of exciting times that lie ahead.

Cultivating and nurturing a complex and rich collection of relationships is paramount to success. In the future, employees will create value through interconnected relationships. These relationships will need to be capable of and organizationally empowered to synthesize information in real time to fabricate new products, services, information, or relationships to respond to real-time, emergent market needs.

Unlike some of its predecessors, this competitive necessity is happening at blistering speeds. An exponential increase in mobile workers around the world is a key indicator. This is a “make or break” shift organizations will need to embrace. As Plato said, “Necessity is the mother of invention.” Strategies for managing relationships with a mobile workforce are one of the central topics of this paper.

According to IDC...

- U.S. mobile workforce expected to grow to 73% of total U.S. workforce in 2011
- Across the world 30.4% of the workforce will be mobile in 2011

* Source: IDC, Worldwide mobile worker population 2007-2011 forecast, Doc # 209813, December 2007.

The statistics paint a sobering yet dynamic picture. A mobile workforce will be the norm not the exception. “Mobile worker” can be a catch-all phrase for many different ways of understanding the changes in the workplace. Each of these has implications for how we approach our role as managers. Let’s take a quick peek at some of these nuances:

TABLE 1

INTER (Between Organizations)		INTRA (Within Organizations)	
Companies	People work for many different companies.	Teams	People work on multiple teams. Reporting structures may remain hierarchical but actual day-to-day working relationships are matrixed.
Jobs	People change jobs with much greater frequency.	Locations	People change job sites and working locations with greater frequency.
Careers	People acquire additional skills and experiences to enter new fields, industries and professions.	Projects	People move from project to project even before one is completed.
PHYSICAL EXAMPLES OF MOBILITY			
	Telecommuting	People work out of home offices or other satellite spaces.	
	Non-Co-located	People manage and work with more people who are not in the same location – in some case not even the same country.	
	Vendors & Partners	People manage increasingly complex and constantly changing chains of vendors and partners to perform the work necessary to fulfill their job responsibilities.	

The IDC statistics on mobile workers focus on telecommuters, virtual teams, and non co-located workers. This paper also focuses on these three common categories of mobile workers. Being mindful of all the ways we have become more mobile will help us be more effective at managing all of our work relationships.

The Manager’s Perspective

The pace of change has accelerated. First the good news: If this realization is creating concerns for you and your organization, you’re not alone. According to the Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp), “a huge majority of companies foresee an increasing use of virtual teams in the coming years, and more than a third of managers are worried about the development.” Outside of work employees are spending more time interacting with each

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other using the tools of mobile work (i.e., cell phone, mobile computing platforms, social media websites, Web conferencing, Wiki's, etc.). The balance between work and personal time is dynamic. The standard 9-5 day job is rare. We live our lives switched on and plugged in. This creates an expectation. People expect work to support a more fluid style of life.

Now, the bad news: If you can't see it, monitor it, or measure it, how do you manage it? Notice the word "it." As managers, much of our work is object-based. We interact with people to get "it," done. Although people are needed to do the work, managers' performances are measured by the output of people who work with them. Do you remember the classic opening scene in Charlie Chaplin's silent film *Modern Times*? In the scene Charlie Chaplin is working on an assembly line. When management decides to increase productivity by installing eating machines, Charlie is the lucky guinea pig. Charlie's experiment is a fiasco — imagine food flying all over the place. This caricature illustrates a vital truism. Managers must maximize the performance of employees to help the organization achieve its objectives.

How do mobile workers impact our management practices? In the next three sections we will look at the benefits of mobile workers for managers, the challenges of managing them, and strategies for success.

According to Nemertes...

- Nemertes estimates that the number of virtual workers has increased by 800 percent within the last 5 years.
- 60 to 70 percent of all employees work in locations different from their supervisors.

<http://www.nemertes.com/>

Benefits

We may need to embrace the cliché, "If you can't beat them, join them." Knowing the benefits of managing mobile workers counter-balances the risks and challenges. Here are some positives to consider:

- Broader Range of Influence

As a manager of non co-located employees, your reach inside an organization increases. Working with employees in various offices, branches, and locations gives you access to people and information in these places. You acquire another set of eyes, ears, and hands. This works as a benefit to you in two ways. First, your scope of influence is expanded. Your initiatives, priorities, and needs around resources and political support gain a wider audience. Second, your intelligence and ability to understand dynamics shaping your organization's strategy and decisions is increased. Mobile workers expand your scope of influence by sharing information and their perspectives while acting as a potential mouthpieces and advocates for your agendas.

- Larger, More Diverse Teams

Mobile workers can give you access to a wider range of talents, knowledge, and experiences. Since work becomes more project- and team-based, you may find yourself with a revolving door of diverse talents that might otherwise remain unavailable to you. Mobile work naturally encourages greater cross-pollination

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of functional areas. The size and quality of your network directly affects your effectiveness in today's organizations. Diversity is not a luxury — it's a must-have strategic tool that needs to be cultivated. Mobile workers can infuse homogenous sub-cultures of your physical sites, functional areas, or long-standing teams with fresh ideas and innovative practices.

- **Motivated Employees**

Today's employees want flexibility. Organizations that support mobile workers see increases in their recruitment and retention numbers. Barring the challenges of isolation and communication which we will discuss in a moment, the vast majority of employees, especially the younger generation, are more motivated in a flexible, mobile working environment than a traditional one. Engaged employees are committed employees. Compliance is not enough. The speed of business demands that workers, whether they are transient or stable, feel personal commitments to their performance goals and see and understand the link between these goals and the organization's bottom line imperatives. Success as a manager rests on the shoulders of motivated employees. Offering flexible working options to employees whenever possible will contribute to the motivation of your employees and the success of your organization.

- **Decrease in Transactional Oversight**

Mobile workers shift managers' attention from activities to deliverables. Day-to-day oversight of tasks is difficult with remote workers. This can be tough for detail-oriented managers who thrive on tightly coordinated and orchestrated workflow routines and interactions with employees. A transactional approach with remote employee is not sustainable and may lead to rapid dissatisfaction and frustration of both employees and managers. However, for many managers, even ones with a more detail-oriented management style, a decrease in transactional oversight has meant more time to focus their energies in new directions.

- **Increase in Strategic Bandwidth**

Less time spent overseeing employees' activities means more time to be strategic. Managers can be proactive instead of reactive. When managers are freed from the daily minutia they can spend more time crafting new visions, building political support for important initiatives, and expanding their social networks. All of these things increase managers' value to the organizations. Future competitiveness depends on this shift. Organizational cultures that impede their managers from assuming more strategic roles will lose market share and eventually become extinct. The rise of mobile workers is catalyzing these mission-critical changes.

- **Collaborative Relationships with Authority**

Mobile workers thrive with collaborative relationships. The exigencies of managing mobile workers lead to the adoption of more dynamic styles of communication and interaction. On the other hand, distance works as a buffer. Overly collaborative relationships, if not managed well, can erode authority and make dissension more difficult. In this way, managers get the best of both worlds. Managers can maintain their authority while being more collegial. This balance works extremely well with most workers. They enjoy the interaction and respect inherent in collaboration and also benefit from boundaries and structures generated by a manager's positional power. There are anecdotal reports of difficult manager/employee relationships improving as a result of increased distance and changes in the interactive dynamics.

Challenges

Painting a rosy picture of mobile workers without examining some of the risks and challenges would be irresponsible. Risk and benefits are often closely related. A benefit for one manager may be a risk for another. In the next two sections we look at a few of the risks and challenges associated with mobile workers.

- Potential Decrease in Productivity

Fears abound on this one. Can someone really work at home and be productive? What about all of the distractions? Then there are moments in projects or employees' job responsibilities that require tight synchronization that is next to impossible to coordinate with the separation of distance and or time. If Cindy takes thirty minutes in the middle of her day to do yoga will that make her less productive? Opinions may vary but from Cindy's perspective the answer is obvious. As long as people do not abuse the flexibility extended to them and we design workflows that support mobile workers, this concern of a decrease in workers' productivity may be more irrational than many of us want to admit. Tied to loss of productivity is a deeper and more difficult issue: the loss of control and oversight. If you are migrating from a traditional workforce to a mobile one, you undoubtedly are reinventing your job as a manager. What you managed before was concrete. What you manage now is less tangible. This is not trivial. Essentially, managers are faced with no longer knowing how to do their jobs. Managers know their business but they are foreigners in an alien world of work. Well-designed workflows can mitigate some of these issues. Managers also need to reengineer their jobs and negotiate new performance management metrics with their bosses. Most of all, managers need to be patient with themselves and others. Mobile workers change the way we manage. It takes time to sort out all the rules of a new game and their implications.

- Influence Replaces Positional Power

Positional power exerts less influence with mobile workers. Without the daily four walls of an organization, remote workers are unlikely to perform their jobs in prescribed ways. Managers need strong influence skills. Since influence skills are relational in nature it takes time to cultivate the trust and interpersonal connections associated with them. Time is not always on our side. Lapses in management styles that revert to more coercive techniques may achieve short-term objectives but ruin managers' chances of building strong two-way influential relationships with employees. There are no short cuts and the amount of energy and creativity it takes to cultivate influence with remote workers is one of the most difficult aspects of managing mobile workers.

- Fragile Project Dependencies

Coordinating deliverables with offsite employees, contractors, vendors, and partners is a risk familiar to all project managers. These risks need to be identified at the front end of a project and managed throughout its life cycle. As a general rule, the greater the number of dependencies assigned to resources less in your direct control, the larger your contingencies need to be. Even non-project-related work will naturally be prone to more delays with mobile workers. In both of these instances central project management can be subdivided into smaller areas of ownership. Create informal subgroupings around clusters of resources tied to a deliverable. This gives autonomy and increased flexibility to the people most affected by project dependencies.

- Information Sharing

The reduction of face-to-face interactions hampers information sharing. Many organizations are culturally challenged when it comes to sharing information. Isolation experienced by mobile workers compounds these tendencies. Technology can play a powerful role in addressing these challenges and can even nudge cultures towards more information-sharing practices.

Top Ten Strategies for Managers of Mobile Workers

Given our discussion of benefits, risks, and challenges associated with managing a mobile workforce, here are ten strategies:

<p>1. Focus on building relationships.</p>	<p>You are now in the business of managing relationships. Once a quarter audit your time. How much time are you spending engaged in activities meant to foster stronger relationships with your mobile employees? Rate each relationship on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is weak and 10 is very strong. Craft a strategy for continuing to develop your strong ones and triage the weak ones. Ask yourself why they are weak and what you can learn from them. Avoid finger pointing and hold up the mirror to reflect on your own opportunities for improvement. Extreme cases of under-performance do not warrant time or effort. These however are few and far between.</p>
<p>2. Streamline communications.</p>	<p>Consolidate and prioritize communications. Use email and IM (instant message), texting, blogging, threaded discussions, etc. for relationship-driven communications (i.e., staying in touch and being personal). Communications of an important nature should be cohesive and never delivered in fragmentary pieces that have to be cobbled together by the receiver. Mutually assess the communication preferences of yourself and your team members to develop a communication plan. Avoid assumptions and revisit your plan on a regularly basis especially when the nature of the work is about to change.</p>
<p>3. Incorporate less didactic forms of communications.</p>	<p>Determining the right amount of detail and when to provide detail is an ongoing responsibility of a manager with a mobile worker. As a general rule, less is more. This leaves bandwidth for the times when lengthy, explicit instructions and information are essential for the work at hand. Try working with more story-based forms of communications. Sharing tidbits from the field and office in the form of stories, anecdotes, case studies (use cases), jokes, innocent productive gossip, and even metaphors will relay context, encode key pieces of information, and give mobile workers a sense of inclusion.</p>
<p>4. Spend more time listening.</p>	<p>Obvious, but counterintuitive. When you are out of easy reach and you are tasked with managing the performance of others it's easy to get sucked into the trap of needing to transmit lots of information. In most cases the opposite is what is most productive. Make listening a priority. This is the hardest and most tiring aspect of managing others. It is also the single most important thing you can do accelerate the development of strong relationships. Listening is not enough. Keep an open mind. Be present and try to enter the perspective of the speaker. This will help you ask effective questions and identify what direction to go with your own needs and agenda. You'll be surprised at what emerges.</p>

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<p>5. Let mobile workers define communication and reporting practices they want to follow.</p>	<p>Structure is critical. Adopt rules of engagement that place people at the center of their own decisions. Managers provide the boundaries and constraints but let employees define the working and communication styles, tools, and processes that will help them perform at the best. Set expectations on two fronts. First, treat these employees' defined practices as privileges that can and will be modified if key performance metrics are not hit. Second, let employees know there will be times when a projects or work require less flexible, employee-driven communication and reporting practices.</p>
<p>6. Manage deliverables not activities.</p>	<p>Lots of project-oriented work is well suited to mobile workers. Even roles that are more task driven can be effectively managed if they are broken into deliverables. For mobile workers this may mean collapsing some of the activities of a business process or workflow that had manual checkpoints and controls associated with them into deliverables. Automation where possible can be used or batching activities into larger groups can transform task oriented jobs into deliverables. Realize that there can be many facets of people's jobs that need to be adjusted to accommodate a mobile work style.</p>
<p>7. Engage in more frequent and informal performance management activities.</p>	<p>When you manage mobile workers, relationships are at the heart of your job. Performance management does not need to be a loathsome, "<i>administrivia</i>" obligation. Designing some unstructured, informal ongoing dialogs with mobile employees about their performance goals and personal development plans is a great way to strengthen communications, and shows an active interest in employees and relationships. This might look and feel very different from one employee to the next. This is another tangible way managers can adapt their style to match the needs and preferences of employees. It works best when the performance management conversation flows in both directions.</p>
<p>8. Give complete trust until given a concrete behavioral reason to do otherwise.</p>	<p>According to a recent survey conduct by HR.com and ic4p, listening and trust are the two most important factors to virtual and remote teams. Without trust, relationships are bankrupt. Abuses of trust can always be found but these occur in spite of whatever systems we put in place. Mobile workers thrive when managers give them complete trust. In some respects managers of mobile workers have no other choice. Use trust to create strong relationships. When some concrete behavior and not just someone else's word of mouth shows that trust has been violated, then take it away, but not until then.</p>
<p>9. Use adaptive management styles tailored to individual workers.</p>	<p>Every employee is different. Mobile workers make it easier for managers to take a more personalized approach in how they work and interact with members of their team. It takes more work and effort on a manager's part but the results can be phenomenal. Understanding what enables each employee to perform at his or her best is the most important responsibility of a manager.</p>

10. Leverage technology.

Technology drives and supports managing mobile workers. Using technology well is not as simple as it appears. Standard models of communication and transaction should not always be mapped in a simple one-to-one way. Communication and collaboration technologies offer new and exciting models. These need to be purposely exploited in order for organizations to realize the full extent of benefits these wonderful new capabilities and features offer.

Beyond email, IM and phone, Web conferencing plays a key role in virtual team enablement. Take an inventory of “stuff” you need to collaborate on with your virtual team. If the list includes Word docs, spreadsheets, software applications, or anything else on your desktop, Web conferencing will be critical for collaborating in real time. You’re projects will lag if you can’t be on the same page with mobile workers.

About the Author



Terrence L. Gargiulo, MMHS is an eight-time author, international speaker, organizational development consultant and group process facilitator specializing in the use of stories. He holds a Master of Management in Human Services from the Florence Heller School, at Brandeis University, and is a recipient of Inc. Magazine’s Marketing Master Award, the 2008 HR Leadership Award from the Asia Pacific HRM Congress, and a member of Brandeis University’s Hall of Fame. He has appeared on Fox TV, CN8, and on CNN radio among others.

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