Managing a dispersed team

Managers

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Contents

Managing dispersed, flexible teams

With the NSW government's commitment to decentralising and making all roles flexible by 2019, employees are increasingly able to work in a variety of locations, often dispersed from their colleagues. This guide is for managers who find a scattered team has become the new normal, and need to adjust their managerial style and the team's way of working together to adapt.

Tips for troubleshooting

Issue	Solutions
A team member is not meeting expected performance targets Page 11	Identify any obstacles to good performance (ICT issues, communication breakdowns, external delays, wellbeing) and address those upfront. Discuss KPIs and negotiate a reasonable workload that both parties can agree on and put it in writing, including expected timeframes and reporting systems. Set up regular check ins, even daily, to support and encourage performance.
A team member is working too much and is stressed Page 14	Clearly communicate and role model what a reasonable workload and hours of work look like. Discuss health, safety and wellbeing, including how to separate work and non-work time. Monitor overuse of ICT and excessive work outside rostered business hours, unless there is a flexible work arrangement in place that includes working outside regular hours. Set up regular check ins, encourage ongoing discussions about work/life balance.
ICT is not working Page 8	Plan ahead and have work arounds in place so that work can continue. Provide team members with adequate training and opportunity to develop their skills in using the technology. Be consistent with the collaboration technologies your team chooses.
There is tension between team members Page 6–7	Address the issues up front by meeting together face to face, encouraging use of constructive challenge to de-personalise the issues and work together as a team to find solutions. Schedule more face to face time as a team, including social time or team bonding activities that build team cohesion, and be deliberate about running inclusive meetings.
One team member seems particularly withdrawn Page 13	Proactively include the team member in meetings so that they feel they belong, are heard and have an important place in the team. Encourage the team member to build peer support networks, and to check in with each other daily, or work from a regional shared office space. Regularly visit the team member in person if they are working remotely, and see if they're OK.

What is a dispersed team?

A dispersed team has the majority of its members working in separate locations, with less opportunities to talk or collaborate face-to-face.

This can be for a number of reasons: their roles may need them to travel to multiple sites regularly, require them to be permanently based in different locations for effective service delivery, or they have a flexible working arrangement that means little opportunity for direct interaction (e.g. being permanently based from home in a remote area). They can be office-based, in frontline, citizen-facing roles or a combination of both.

While dispersed teams are not new (many rural or regionally based employees have always done it), the introduction of flexible working and activity-based working makes these teams more likely to occur.

As a manager, if you find most of your team are out of the office more than 2.5 days per week, you will need to adapt both your management style and the way the team communicates, collaborates and connects to use a 'dispersed' approach. This guide will help you do that. It builds on the toolkit we have provided on managing flexible teams.

Members of a dispersed team could work:

- In the field (at clients' homes, at project sites, at inspection sites, 'on the road' between sites); and/or

- From home regularly (e.g. two or more times per week);

- In an office that is in a different location but part of the same organisation;

- In an office that is in a different location and part of another organisation.

If your team is still mostly (3 days/week per person or more) in the same office location, taking a dispersed approach may not be necessary; see the PSC's _Building a flexible working culture (conversation guide for managers)_ for tips for managing occasional remote working in these teams.

How do I set up a dispersed team?

If you are setting up a new or newly dispersed team, there is some extra work needed over and above your normal manager 101s, which is the focus of this guide.

In this section, we'll discuss the tasks at the beginning, while in the next section, we'll discuss day-to-day communication and technology. Up front, you will need to:

1 Diagnose your own skill as a flexible manager, and establish your teams' capability.

2 Put in place clear expectations on the work to be done, and how you will ensure client or service needs are maintained or improved.

3 Discuss with the team how it will know if it is functioning effectively.

As a manager, you'll need to consider how confident you are with efficient and effective communication skills; setting up clear outcomes from the get-go that you will manage by, instead of relying on regularly seeing people to drip-feed detail; setting up opportunities for peer connection and collaboration, and using technology effectively. See the PSC manager skillsets for flexible working to test your confidence, and the accompanying self-paced development guide for any areas you'd like to improve.

If you're recruiting for this team, you may want to consider including demonstrated skills in self-management and self-motivation in the way you assess if all candidates will be suitable for their given potential role. For employees already in your team, plan with them how they can develop these capabilities if they do not already have them. The PSC guidance on skillsets for employees, and matching self-paced development guide, can help.

You will then need to establish how the team works as a whole when they are not co-located; how will they know what work needs to be done, and when each other can help? Lead an open conversation about your team's goals and KPIs, and how you can continue to meet client needs and maintain or improve the service your team is responsible for in your new form.

Agree on quantifiable measures of performance as a team (e.g. projects completed on time, client satisfaction, team engagement, support for team goals), and build or update your performance plans accordingly.

How do I set up a dispersed team?

💡 Tips for getting off to a good start

Make time to meet with each team member at their usual work location.

At this meeting, spend some time discussing:

• Their current work arrangements, including standard hours of work and any special flexible work arrangements (for example, different start and finish times, part-time).

• Their performance plans and development goals, and how they believe their work will develop both.

• Their skills, knowledge and experience, as well as their special interests.

• Whether they have joined, or work together to find, any pre-existing network of support (for example, hub office managers, HR contacts).

As a team, discuss and agree:

• How your team will keep each other in the loop.

• When and how you'll meet as a team (online or phone).

• Any key contacts or stakeholders who will need to be advised how the team works.

• The team's view of culture, morale and job satisfaction levels (some HR metrics such as turnover or absentee levels may help with this).

When setting new team norms (or guidance) for interaction, be consistent and give everyone in the team an opportunity to say how it should be. This buy-in will make it easier for everyone to keep it up over time. You don't need to document them, although it can be helpful for when you later review them as a team to see if they're helping or need improvement.

The team's size will also influence its culture and sense of connectedness when working remotely. If some team members are located in the same space, you can be less prescriptive about how they will communicate, as collaboration is more likely to occur naturally. Use your judgement to decide what is possible for each role and each team situation.

If team members leave the team and are replaced by new people, use this as an opportunity to refresh the team norms so that they continue to work for everyone, including the new team members.

2.1 Communication

Good team communication means everyone has the information they need to perform in their roles, resulting in better productivity and feelings of inclusion for everyone in the team.

Agree on the processes for communication you'll all use as a team:

- What's the minimum contact you'll have with each person (one-on-one meetings and will they be online or in person?)
- How you will share information and stay connected on important matters with each individual and the team?
- How team meetings will run, and if you'll use phone, MS Teams or another video solution.
- How will the team use email, MS Teams, Skype or phone conferencing to share information, meet and keep in touch with developments, etc.

The answers to these questions will depend to an extent on your access to the various communication technologies available.

Tips for working together as a team

- Develop an understanding of 'how we work' and stick to it. This can include how often you will check in with each other, how you will know when each other is working and where you are, and how you will see how each other is going when the team can't always rely on non-verbal cues as a clue.

- Regularly discuss how the team is working, emphasizing the importance of keeping in touch with each other for team cohesion.

- Refresh when there is staff turnover or if things are not working well.

Making it work day-to-day

2.1.1 How dispersed team meetings are different

Online/phone-based team meetings are much like face to face in the preparation required with one key difference: this preparation becomes crucial for keeping the whole team engaged and participating, instead of just good practice.

So at least two days before every team meeting, circulate an agenda that includes:

- Key topics, time allocated and who will lead discussion.
- Who will be attending or sending apologies.
- Any content people must prepare or read beforehand.
- Any other relevant documents or information.

Then discuss and decide on how the meeting will run:

- How will attendees signal they want to speak or respond to a question.
- What is the etiquette for listening to others.
- Do you expect all microphones/cameras to be muted or off?
- Will you use chat for questions?
- Is there an opportunity to invite everyone to contribute, even if they're normally quieter?
- Is the technology accessible for all colleagues?
- Is it useful for everyone to have a role, e.g. a time keeper, a note taker, chat monitor?

Critically, don't preference colleagues who are physically present with you over those who are on the phone or Skyping in. Make sure everyone has the chance to contribute their opinion, regardless of where they are. One way to practice this is to run the first few meetings with everyone dialling in, even if a few of you are in the same location that day. It quickly builds your skill in this alternative approach.

It will also be helpful to include a periodic discussion about the way your team works, to evaluate the impact of being dispersed and/or flexible working on your team (e.g. "how is everyone finding their flexibility going? Has anyone had trouble staying in touch or passing on information?").

Include an open discussion about trust as a two-way process:

- As a manager, you trust your colleagues to do their jobs, and to be open to feedback, and they earn this trust by showing you how they do this.
- Staff trusting you to provide competent direction and guidance, and constructive feedback on performance, which you earn by doing these things consistently.

And as a manager, try to keep monologues to a minimum when presenting information to the team, especially if you're updating them. Allow more time for questions and discussion than usual.

💡 Tips for communicating and staying connected

- Ask everyone to share their online diaries, and update them with locations, leave days and availability.

- Remind everyone when you have a change to your usual work pattern, and when you're available.

- Be transparent with your clients and stakeholders about the team's work arrangements.

Making it work day-to-day

2.1.2 Find opportunities for face to face time

Seek opportunities for the team to meet periodically in person, such as a quarterly planning catch-up. Make sure it is in everyone's calendar well in advance so that other events can be scheduled around it and try to avoid re-scheduling it unless absolutely necessary. See if it is feasible for everyone to grab a bite to eat at the end of it.

This will allow the team to put together a forward plan for implementation between these meetings, with an understanding that they will need to report back on their progress or perils at the next meeting. Simultaneously, it will help to build rapport and team culture as everyone gets to meet face to face and connect socially. Consider if any travel or accommodation expenses can be budgeted to support this.

In between meetings, encourage team members to visit each other's office to catch up if they're in the same area, or use workplace social media to build the networks that are more easily established when teams are co-located.

Tips for communicating and staying connected

Day to day communication

- Have dedicated time with each direct report.

- Check in with your peers and colleagues as needed— have a virtual coffee (online).

- Take responsibility for maintaining relationships and human connection.

- Ask team members to buddy up so remote colleagues are kept in the loop for staff news, events, etc.

- Use communications and technology wisely:
  - Use MS Teams, Zoom or Skype for Business to show availability, how to contact you, and to collaborate on work.

  - When your colleagues are working elsewhere, pick up the phone when you need to provide advice or clarify something, rather than rely on email.

  - Set up your email signature block with the days and times you work and contact details—in an accessible format.

  - Turn on your 'out of office' email and phone message and give details of who can be contacted in your absence, for days when you are not working.

Structure meetings and workshops as if everyone is participating remotely

- Ensure people are not 'invisible' when they work elsewhere—actively ask them for their perspective in team meetings, and include them in projects or tasks.
- Proactively design meetings and workshops to facilitate

2.2 Technology

No matter where we are based, we need reliable, easy to use devices (communications or IT) to get our work done and stay in touch.

2.2.1 Using hardware effectively

For those working remotely most of the time, additional requirements can often include reliable remote access to central IT systems, or workarounds agreed that everyone uses consistently; for example, planning your remote day so you don't need to use particular software or data. If this hampers their ability to perform in the role, you will need to work with your ICT team to provide an alternative.

Have some established work-arounds that everyone understands for when technology fails, to minimise disruption to productivity (and the level of team frustration!):

• Always set aside an extra few minutes before a video or telephone meeting to get the tech working at your end, and encourage colleagues linking in to do the same, so the meeting does not lose the first 10 minutes to troubleshooting.

• If your videoconference fails, switch to pre-arranged telephone conferencing facilities and email the meeting notes or slides to your team.

• If you think your access to a shared document management system could fail, save files locally on your computer, email them to yourself in your work account only, and remember to copy them back into the correct file location when you regain access—and have a buddy to help that you know will be based in the office that day.

• If your work email fails, pick up the phone and have a direct conversation instead. Making direct calls can be a quicker way to communicate at all times, and it builds rapport with your colleagues.

• If a videoconference is working but some people cannot access the meeting, use the platform to record it and send them the link afterwards. Some platforms such as MS Teams include an automatic transcript, to help with accessibility.

Even when the technology is available, a lack of confidence discourages people from using it. Encourage the more tech-savvy in your team to become 'champions' who help team mates wanting the support, especially if your IT team are not available to assist with training.

Making it work day-to-day

And ensure that your team is as aware about security (and cybersecurity) when working elsewhere as they are in the office—lock away papers, laptop security, etc. Check with your ICT team about cybersecurity as well, especially if using alternative Wi-Fi or devices. Build technology resourcing into your business plan so that hardware and software can be provided to your employees through an IT modernisation project or staged transformation over time.

Opportunities such as an office move can be used to shift to new technologies and to build awareness and adoption of technology as an enabler of flexible working.

Tips for collaborating

There are a number of great, easy to use collaboration technologies available that help people work together from different locations. When choosing a particular one, think about the key functionality you need the tool to provide for your team when selecting it; for example, the ability to work on a document together while at the same time holding a conversation about the topic of the document.

Use collaboration technology during meetings to:

• Report on project progress and prioritise actions.

• Mindmap or brainstorm 'how could we better…' ideas.

• Use a virtual whiteboard or visual management board.

• Field questions and collect responses during meetings or events.

• Gather feedback (edits and comments) on documents.

• Make and allocate decisions collectively.

• Co-create documents.

• Manage projects, to allocate and report progress of tasks.

• Take notes and record action items.

• Share and build resources.

Use technology between meetings to:

• Schedule meetings—provide participants with options for dates and times to meet.

• Manage projects, allocate and report the progress of tasks.

• Work in groups to complete tasks:

  ○ Communicate live using chat, audio or video calls.

  ○ Co-create documents—agendas, guidance, reports.

2.2.2 Choosing your technology tools

Pick one online platform that can be consistently used for online communication and collaboration. For example, if you choose Skype for Business, do not also use MS Teams, to give your team a chance to become confident with the one tool, and use it to its full capacity. See below a list of possible technology applications:

	Applications	Description
Note taking	One Note	Organising thoughts, to-do lists, and projects. www.onenote.com
	Evernote	Taking notes, clipping web pages and recording audio. www.evernote.com
	Google keep	Ideal for collecting images, drafting documents, and creating checklists. keep.google.com
Project management	Trello	Visual boards with project cards given to team members to track task completion. trello.com
	Asana	Create lists of tasks and subtasks that can be used for project management, goal-setting, brainstorming and meeting agendas. www.asana.com
	Team Ahoy	Simple and visual project management tool. www.teamahoy.com
Document sharing	Dropbox	Independent cloud storage application. Available across devices (mobile, tablet, computer). www.dropbox.com
	OneDrive	Cloud storage application own by Microsoft. Available across devices (mobile, tablet, computer). www.onedrive.com
	Google Drive	Cloud storage application own by Google. Available across devices (mobile, tablet, computer). www.google.com
Communication	Microsoft Teams	Instant messaging, video and collaboration system with ability to share documents, images and emails. It is an all in one application.
	Slack	Slack can be used if you don't have Microsoft Teams. It offers similar features. www.slack.com
	What's App	Informal communication application for quick text and images exchange. www.whatsapp.com
	Yammer	Ability to create private channels and share documents.

2.3 Adapting how you manage for performance

Setting clear expectations around what work needs to be delivered and how the work will be done makes leading a dispersed team much easier—your role evolves from the more tactical style of management you can be drawn into when co-located to a more strategic, direction setting and coaching role.

Doing this empowers team members to be responsible for the work that they have been allocated and makes it easier for them to monitor and report on their progress.

It will also help you to objectively assess their performance, and guard against the risk of inadvertently awarding lower performance evaluations because you don't see them working. Schedule 1:1 check-in meetings on a weekly basis to discuss your goals, upcoming projects and daily tasks.

Technology is useful here to help you and your team track day-to-day task performance, for example expected timeframe, budget spending and notes about the progress, which frees up your other conversations to focus on job performance and flex performance.

The main difference in managing the performance of a dispersed team is that you will need to shift from being reliant on the presence of your team members to monitor their performance and see progress, to instead using a management style that more proactively uses video or telephone conversations to build connections between yourself and the team and between team members, and using other technology to see how things are tracking.

Making it work day-to-day

2.3.1 What to do if a performance issue arises

Be alert to possible work and flexibility performance issues. Indicators of performance issues can include:

• A reduced frequency and quality of communication from a team member.
• Variability in job performance or reduced job performance.
• Reduced engagement with the team.
• Reduced interest in and participation in face-to-face interactions.
• Increased absenteeism.

Be observant, seek evidence and be careful not to jump to conclusions. Once you have enough clarity, seek guidance from your Human Resources business partner on how to frame the conversation, and set up a time to gently explore with the colleague your observations and possible concerns.

Don't assume that the staff member needs to return to co-location—working remotely (closer to home) may be part of the solution. You'll also need to consider and confirm how you're going to measure and monitor the areas they need to improve in, as again, you won't be able to rely on seeing them each day to know they're addressing things. Agree how you'll stay in touch, and be consistent in your approach.

📈 Performance factors for managers and employees to discuss & agree

Identify the work tasks that are best suited to working elsewhere and plan accordingly.

• Agree on work performance evaluation criteria:
  ○ Work objectives and milestones: are they specific, measurable and attainable.
  ○ Activities/tasks to be performed.
  ○ Expected results/outcomes.

• Agree on work priorities and deadlines.

• Agree on availability (can your team get hold of you?)

• Have an open discussion about trust as a two-way process:
  ○ Managers trusting staff to do their jobs, and to be open to feedback.
  ○ Staff trusting managers to provide competent direction and guidance, and constructive feedback on performance.

• Agree on the what and how of communication = quality communication helps to develop trust.
  ○ Focus on ensuring processes enable clarity in the meaning and intent of communication.
  ○ Ensure there is a healthy mixture of electronic and face-to-face communication.

• Establish a fall-back position—e.g. a buddy system for when people miss meetings, or are based in a different office regularly.

• Have regular discussions about work habits and work demands.

• For those needing extra support:
  ○ Consider a check in at the start and end of each day— what will be done, what has been done.
  ○ Identify how completion of tasks and achievement of responsibilities will be recorded and communicated.
  ○ Take time to chat and really get to know your team member, so they know they matter to you and they are not forgotten.

Making it work day-to-day

2.4 Looking after your people

2.4.1 Guarding against isolation

One of the most common concerns about dispersed teams is that team members will experience isolation as a result of being geographically separated from their team and possibly even their stakeholders. Team cohesion is crucial for an effective and engaged team of employees to succeed, but irregular face to face interaction, over-reliance on email, and a build-up of unresolved issues amongst team members can easily undermine this.

As a team, discuss what processes or habits you can build to mitigate against isolation.

For example:

Arrange team members into pairs or buddies so that someone working remotely has a regular point of contact with someone collocated with the majority of the team. This is particularly useful for when new starters join the team, to establish rapport more quickly.

Encourage team members to have 'catch-up' time at the beginning of meetings, which fosters stronger interpersonal relationships amongst the team. Kick off your meeting with an open question such as, "What did you do on the weekend?" Dispersed teams will be more effective when social bonds have been developed. It also helps to reduce feelings of isolation that remote team members may experience as people feel more able to share who they are as a person, not just what they are working on.

And if issues come up between team members or affect how the entire team is functioning, address the issues up front instead of letting them continue and undermine cohesion. Use constructive language and open listening to encourage people to raise the issues and work together to resolve them. Showing your team that you value their feedback, and that you take action to promote team harmony and well-being builds trust and engagement.

If you are concerned that a team member may be becoming increasingly isolated, explore if they can work from another public service location within reasonable distance from their home. Step up your check ins with the person to provide the social and professional support they may need.

This may particularly be the case if they're having a tough time outside work; for a brief period, they may need some increased contact and camaraderie. Ask your team to call each other when they are out on the road and when they have arrived home safely. Your organisation should have policies and procedures for employees travelling for work—check with your HR team and share them with your remote team members.

Tips for staying connected

Establish a buddy system.

Add social time to your team meetings.

Address any issues or tensions up front.

Use your networks if you need to source alternative locations short-term.

2.4.2 Work intensification

People working remotely can often feel like they need to work harder to 'prove' they can be trusted, and this can sometimes tip into overwork, particularly if they're regularly based from home (and the temptation to check emails and not switch off gets harder to fight). The best way to mitigate this risk is to proactively track your team's workload with them, but to also check in with dispersed team members to ensure that they are not being overwhelmed. This will help them feel valued and visible.

Don't create an expectation of 24/7 availability in the way you model your own approach to work; it will inevitably lead to burnout and high turnover. Communicate your expectations clearly to your team: you expect them to self-manage and use their wisdom to balance meeting deadlines with taking breaks and using flex leave to make up for the extra effort they have put in at times when required.

When you have check ins with your dispersed team members about their workload, also ask about their wellbeing, in a friendly non-intrusive manner. The 'R U OK?' campaign has been effective in making these more personal conversations more commonplace, and has provided a conversation guide for managers. See also the _Manager's guide to Building a Flexible Working Culture_ for more information about workplace health and safety when your team is working flexibly.

Similarly, when delegating work to the team, don't just look for employees who are immediately around you. This can mean that employees who are physically present could be inadvertently overwhelmed by ad hoc tasks as well. Instead, allocate work based on capability and capacity, not location. In addition, taking time to verbally acknowledge the work everyone is doing and sharing successes, perhaps in an all-team email or during a team meeting, will help the team know that the work is being evenly spread.

Similarly, be aware that team members choosing not to work remotely can often end up fielding a majority of enquiries because their fellow co-located colleagues in different teams consider them are the easiest person to locate. Encourage these team members to refer items to other members of their team so that they are not continually swamped. As far as possible, having clarity around roles and which matters are handled by specific team members will help your team send enquiries to the correct team member for actioning.

**Encourage your team to read the Employees Conversation Guide for Flexible Working, for more tips about self-management and working flexibly.**

Tips for getting the balance right

- Set realistic expectations.
- Have regular check ins about workload and wellbeing.
- Distribute work evenly and fairly.
- Be clear about roles and who responds to what.

Additional resources

The following resources may be helpful for you in understanding
what it takes to work in and manage a disperse team:

Source	Resource
NSW Public Sector Commission (2019)	*Inclusive Presentation Guidelines* (still being developed).
NSW Public Sector Commission (2019)	*Team-based Design Toolkit* (still being developed).
Victorian Public Sector Commission (2013)	*Managing a dispersed team in the Victorian Public Sector* and *tip sheet*. A comprehensive guide targeted at managers that examines a wide variety of aspects involved in managing a dispersed workforce. This includes 'how to's on performance management and development, heath and safety in and communicating effectively in dispersed team environments.
Harvard Business Review (2015)	*How to manage remote direct reports* This article recommends that managers create a series of norms to ensure team members are able to deliver the necessary work. These norms include "how quickly employees need to respond to email; what follow-up steps should be taken; and on which days check-in calls should occur etc.". The article argues that by building these routine behaviours, team cohesiveness will be maintained.
Deloitte (2015)	*Leading virtual teams—Best practice insights* Provides a series of practical steps that managers and teams can take to foster a better working environment within dispersed teams. It strongly encourages managers to provide more structure for their teams rather than less, including scheduling team tasks (who will do what by when etc.)
Google (2018)	*Distributed Work Playbooks* A short guide that outlines specific steps that members of dispersed teams can take to improve their working environment. It identifies four key groups that must work together to create a successful team, they are: dispersed employees, collocated employees, managers and leaders.
Slack (2019)	*The ultimate guide to remote meetings* Provides instructions on how to run a meeting that includes dispersed employees. It advises that meetings have a set agenda and allow time for casual conversation. The majority of the article focuses on simple actions, such as getting people to introduce themselves at the start of the meeting or outlining action items that have arisen during the meeting.
Entrepreneur (2015)	*8 Keys to Leading a Dispersed Team to Maximum Productivity* Focuses on attitudes that leaders and managers can foster within dispersed teams to assist them in working better. It emphasises that developing high morale and a positive attitude are very important in all teams, but particularly in dispersed teams where communication can be more difficult at times.

For more information
visit the **PSC website**.

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