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Accountability in a Virtual Work Environment (Blog Post)

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With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, many child welfare supervisors suddenly were managing a virtual team with little or no preparation. Maintaining accountability when staff telework (i.e., work from home) poses challenges in defining and measuring productivity. These challenges can feel different from managing performance in an office environment. Supervisors needed to navigate between emphasizing process (*how* the work is done) and the achievement of specific outcomes (*what* gets done).

Some agencies may require daily activity logs to help supervisors manage their team, which emphasizes process. An over emphasis on process can lead to workers feeling micro-managed. Keeping track of time and activities in detailed logs can take an inordinate amount of time that could be spent on other activities. In contrast, simply providing broad outcome goals may not provide enough structure for some staff, leading to missed deadlines and delays in casework services. Further complicating this balancing act is the complex nature of the child welfare job. Child welfare workers face elements of compliance, such as following standardized policies and procedures and meeting timeliness standards, and activities where progress is more difficult to define and measure involving a high level of critical thinking, autonomy, creativity, and professional expertise.

Getting it right is important for reasons beyond simply monitoring how many hours are worked or if goals are met. According to the [U.S. General Services Administration](#) (GSA) “Rigid monitoring of employees’ daily activities hinders productivity and creates an environment of distrust...”. In addition to impacting supervisor - worker relationships, the wrong management strategy can undermine employee perceptions of control and autonomy which have been linked to job satisfaction and motivation. According to a [2014 white paper](#) from the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, “When employees are granted flexibility, they gain control over how their work is completed and may experience positive outcomes as a result”. One such positive outcome linked to greater control and flexibility is a reduction in turnover ([Does Enhancing Work-Time Control and Flexibility Reduce Turnover? A Naturally Occurring Experiment](#)).

The following recommendations draw from the literature on management, telework, and accountability:

1. **Recognize that issues involved in monitoring performance may not be unique to telework.** For example, does the agency emphasize compliance versus outcomes? Is there a need to enhance supervisors’ and managers’ performance management skills regardless of whether work takes place in the office or at home? Regardless of environment, effective managers need to have regular, meaningful, task related conversations, seek feedback from a range of people and develop informal communication paths ([GSA, 2011](#)).

2. **Know your staff and the type of structure they might need.** Recognize that one size may not fit all when identifying strategies to monitor telework performance. Just as some staff need more support and closer supervision in the office, staff working at home will likely vary in the degree of structure they need to accomplish tasks.
3. **Include workers in decisions about how to measure productivity.** Have conversations with staff about what they feel are meaningful outcomes to track, reasonable timeframes, and what factors facilitate or hinder reaching those outcomes.
4. **Build an environment of trust.** Avoid overly rigid and process-based accounting. Set performance goals and allow staff flexibility in how they meet them. Consider more structure such as setting intermediate goals and more frequent check-ins if staff are not able to produce timely and high-quality work.
5. **Communicate frequently with staff involved in telework** to share information, discuss casework, and develop staff knowledge and skills in addition to providing feedback on performance. Encourage peer-to-peer information sharing and team building activities to prevent isolation and maintain staff engagement.
6. **Develop a framework for measuring worker productivity.** Measures should:
 - a. Focus on outcomes over process
 - b. Be agreed upon with worker input
 - c. Be contextually valid (focused on important agency goals)
 - d. Be fair and perceived as fair by those involved
 - e. Be customized to the needs of individual staff
 - f. Include multiple data sources, both objective and subjective and quantitative and qualitative

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how many supervisors work and manage their team. The QIC-WD is committed to sharing and translating research into useful tools to strengthen the child welfare workforce. The following QIC-WD resources address issues related to managing in a virtual environment and coping with the pandemic.

- [Coping in the Time of COVID: Interpreting the research to help the child welfare workforce build an understanding of pandemics, learn how to cope with stress and develop strategies to manage your personal life](#) – a series of blog posts and webinar clips that address various topics
- [Washington Progress Update – Telework in Action](#) – a blog post describing Washington State’s experience implementing a telework initiative and links to their handbook and assessment tool
- [Learning Together: Strategies Used by Child Welfare Supervisors to Manage a Virtual Workforce](#) – a list of strategies compiled from the comments and contributions of participants in a national webinar
- [Supervising Child Welfare Professionals Virtually during a Pandemic](#) – a blog post designed to help supervisors support their staff and links to additional resources