The Changing Workforce

How to manage & lead a remote (or hybrid) team

by: Dale Stein, Technology Assurance Group (TAG)

On the hit 1990s TV sitcom, "Seinfeld," Jerry Seinfeld's best friend, George Costanza, is an irritable, cheap coward who somehow remains likable throughout their misadventures in New York City. He spends nearly every episode devising a new scheme to appear hardworking, noble and selfless in the eyes of others. Meanwhile, his moronic plans always go awry and put him in embarrassing situations. Unsurprisingly, he remains unemployed for the majority of the show, until he is just as shocked as his friends to discover that, miraculously, he lands his dream job working for the iconic New York Yankees.

For the first time in his life, he is thrilled to be part of an organization he truly believes in, working somewhere he can be proud of. However, despite this golden opportunity to rise to the occasion, George cannot help himself and returns to his old ways. Within a short time, he is already back to his old habits of chronically underperforming, "acting" productive and taking credit for others' contributions.

One day, Jerry is perplexed to hear that George's antics have somehow gotten him a promotion, so he asks how George pulls off "not doing very much" at work. And with glee in his eyes, George explains: "When you look annoyed all the time, people think you're busy." He then acts it out by letting out an exasperated sigh, burying his forehead in his palms. His friends agree: "Wow! You do look busy!"

Deep down this is what every manager, CEO or boss fears might happen if he (or she) embraces a remote or hybrid workforce. He fears he will be unfairly taken advantage of and will overpay for a bunch of lazy "George Costanzas" who are falling asleep on their couches and wiping Cheetos dust on their dirty sweatpants while simultaneously appearing to be working. This article will explain how to eliminate this dynamic within your organization while simultaneously laying the foundation for a more productive, collaborative, thriving business as the remote/hybrid workforce grows in popularity.

The most ironic part about this managerial nightmare is that everyone fears a remote/hybrid workforce will create these "George Costanzas." However, when managed correctly, the remote/hybrid workplace reveals how many "George Costanzas" already exist in our companies.

It Is Here to Stay

It is no secret that the remote/hybrid workplace is here to stay. Even though some companies are demanding people return to the office, a report by the ADP Research Institute, "People at Work 2022: A Global Workforce View," surveyed more than 32,000 workers and revealed that "two-thirds of the global workforce (64%) said that they have already, or would consider, looking for a new job if their employer wanted them back in the office full time."

While those numbers may seem a bit inflated, Elon Musk made waves when he acquired Twitter and gave his staff members the ultimatum to work "long hours at high intensity" or leave. Reuters reported on this transition and revealed that in response to a discreet poll on the workplace app Blind, which verifies employees through their work email addresses and allows them to share information anonymously, 42% of 180 respondents opted for "Taking exit option, I'm free!," a quarter (25%) said they had chosen to "stay reluctantly," and only 7% of the poll participants clicked yes to "stay, I'm hardcore." So, while the 64% may seem high, the Twitter example proves those numbers to actually be quite realistic.

Nevertheless, many companies will resist the future. However, they will face an uphill battle. As the majority of the workforce is expecting some element of remote/hybrid work, those who resist will have an even smaller employee pool to find talented individuals (Have you heard any other business owners complaining that "No one wants to work anymore"?). Not to mention they will probably attract lower-quality employees with shorter-term outlooks (i.e., "reluctantly").

This is understandable because when a company re-

fuses to embrace the future, it is essentially advertising to everyone: "We do not believe in your freedom. We do not trust you. We do not believe you are even capable of being responsible. In fact, since we expect you to lie, cheat and steal, we must tighten our control on you even more, instead of innovating a new, creative solution that is actually a win-win." So, even if resistant companies can survive in the short-term, the long-term negative effects may ultimately hurt them.

Interestingly, the problem is not the remote/hybrid workforce. In fact, it never was. The real problem is when we inadvertently create a culture that incentivizes the "George Costanza" style of "performative productivity" instead of results. Instead of pushing your employees to come back to the office against their will, what if there was a proven road map for responsibly transitioning to a remote/hybrid workplace that creates an atmosphere where every worker is incentivized to be as efficient as possible?

If you become known for leading others to a better future, what caliber of employees might you attract? At Technology Assurance Group (TAG), we were telling our private members to move to remote/hybrid more than 10 years ago, as long as they had the proper technology and best practices in place before doing so.

Since this messaging was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the early adopters were seen as brave innovators, guess which group of companies inevitably wound up winning all of the profitability growth awards at our annual conventions? Not only did many of these companies grow, but a handful exploded into a whole new stratosphere, achieving more than 30% EBITDA in incredibly competitive markets. This did not happen on accident. It was the result of combining the best practices for both remote worker management and remote worker technology tools.

The Best People & Technology Practices

If you want to make remote/hybrid work, you cannot just snap your fingers and expect everything to run smoothly without any supporting systems. You need to devise both managerial and technological systems that are inhospitable to the "George Costanzas" of the world, which obviously requires managerial clarity and modern tools.

■ **Best Practice #1: Put less emphasis on the number of hours worked and more emphasis on the quality/quantity of outcomes.** Why did we assume that just because someone is sitting behind his desk at the office, this means he is being productive? In order to start managing by objective instead of by observation, it requires management to more clearly

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define which key performance indicators (KPIs) actually reflect productivity that matters.

For example, as a business owner, which would you prefer to see: (1) Your employees running around the office chaotically, shuffling papers and being stressed out or (2) receiving 50 more five-star reviews each month over the next 12 months? What if you gave your employees the chance to take full ownership of projects and let them propose innovative solutions to you on how they could solve problems, while interweaving a really strong personal motivation into the success? Even if they stumbled at the beginning, do you think they would be more or less engaged with the company's mission?

What if you told them once they hit a certain goal (in addition to a handful of other appropriate ones) you outright do not care how much they work? Can you imagine how creative, resourceful and motivated they would be to get a task accomplished when they stand to benefit on a personal level, instead of receiving a pat on the back from management (in a world where career tenures are deteriorating at an almost laughable rate)? This obviously requires focused objectives and a gradual approach to build the mutual trust required to reach this sort of relationship, but the potential benefits could be staggering. Remember, "George Costanzas" cannot stand autonomy and KPIs.

■ **Best Practice #2: Provide the right technology tools that set employees up for success.** Your team's technology needs to address two main outcomes for the organization: (1) Make it easy for them to collaborate and (2) keep their devices secure and optimized.

Collaboration Tools: We strongly recommend that you do video calls with your remote team members so you get the necessary face time to maintain that personal connection we all know and love. Video calls allow you to discuss the intangibles and have those "watercooler" conversations, which are the hallmarks of a single physical location. We also recommend tools like Zoom, Microsoft 365 (including Teams and SharePoint), GoTo Meeting and Google Workspace (formerly G Suite) to keep everyone connected so they can collaborate effectively, no matter where they are.

Cybersecurity/Optimization Tools: A lot of companies overlook the importance of securing their networks as they transition. When you migrate to remote/hybrid, you cannot just send employees home to their unsecured home networks where they share bandwidth and computer access with their spouses and children. You do not want the security of your customer data in the hands of your employees' children.

A useful perspective is to think that if you have 24 remote

employees, you need to start thinking that you are an enterprise with 24 different locations, all of which must be managed responsibly. We recommend:

- Running a network security assessment to find any vulnerabilities.
- Confirming your employees have good internet providers (i.e., acceptable upload/download speeds).
- Confirming they have reliable Wi-Fi coverage. Video calls will reveal this.
- Installing SD-WAN to prevent "bandwidth hogging" while intelligently distributing company bandwidth across all of your multiple locations/employees.
- Implementing malware/VPN/DNS-level protection/multifactor authentication (MFA) to add layers of cybersecurity to fortify the network.
- Utilizing a cloud-based phone system for cost savings.
- Equipping employees with home printers and scanners.

Many managed print services (MPS) companies have recognized the opportunity afforded them by this great transition to remote/hybrid and are expanding their product/services portfolios to include these additional services to gain access to these streams of highly profitable, recurring revenue. With virtually every business owner trying to figure out how to navigate this brave new world, we can take a leadership position and profit from expanding our authority as trusted advisors for everything a client company may need to purchase to keep its office running.

Utilize the Savings

Over the years, we have found that every company should at least be able to immediately have 25% of their team working from home. With that in mind, you can cover your remote/hybrid expenses by reducing your square footage by 25%. When done properly, running a remote/hybrid team should increase your profits immediately.

By reducing the size of your remaining physical location, you can offset the costs incurred by adding new technology systems to support the success of your remote workforce. As an example, if you have a 10,000-square-foot location, we recommend reducing your square footage by the same 25% (so, look for a 7,500-square-foot location) to cost justify all of the technology necessary to support your remote team.

When you have a budget, a vision and road map to make it to remote/hybrid, it starts to become a concrete reality you can drive toward.

Tying it All Together

While it is easy to point fingers at the "George Costanzas" of the world for their character flaws, dubious integrity and

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self-serving nature, Gary Vaynerchuk, a pop-business icon who rose to fame by scaling his father's wine business from $3 million to $60 million before launching his own digital agency, which now produces more than $100 million per year in revenue, has a different opinion on the matter.

In a YouTube clip, with excerpts from a few of his interviews, Vaynerchuk comments on how much the entitlement of small business owners and managers annoys him when he explains: "You have people who own companies who are like, 'I expect my people to work the way I work.' Are you giving them the same money? What are you talking about?" He later continues: "They work for me, I work for them, but I'm getting different economics ... The biggest mistake people make and why they can't build scalable business is because they have selfish expectations of their employees."

The "George Costanza" work culture is a response to a workplace that rewards others arbitrarily, through mere observation, impulsive decisions or seniority instead of rewarding them when they consistently provide quantifiable contributions to the organization. While it might be normal to try to inspire others' hard work through our example, isn't George's plight one of the main reasons you became an entrepreneur in the first place? Didn't you have a strong desire to actually do the things that would matter? Things that would actually move the needle to directly impact your future — and to be compensated accordingly?

Maybe the remote/hybrid workplace transition is not something to fight, but rather a movement we can leverage for everyone's benefit to differentiate ourselves from our competitors so we attract brighter minds, more creative employees and a more exciting vision for our future than we previously imagined.

Revamping our organizations so we thrive in the remote/hybrid work world does require that we push for clearer objectives, that we reward results, nurture innovation, incentivize creativity and take responsibility for providing a pathway for others' lives to improve through their engagement with us. If we want a team that is fully engaged, inspired and motivated to make a significant impact on our company, we need to structure our employees' incentives properly, so that when each employee wins on the collective level, each employee wins on the individual level, too.

If we are educated and prepared, the great migration to a remote/hybrid workplace is a tremendous opportunity to transform our organizations from within so we attract higher-quality employees, increase employee retention

(without losing engagement), increase productivity and improve the quality of life for everyone involved. ∎

Dale Stein is co-founder of Technology Assurance Group (TAG), an organization of managed technology service providers (MTSPs). Collectively, TAG's members do $800 million per year in IT, cybersecurity, telecommunications and video surveillance. They are located in 148 cities across the United States andCanada, and are presently serving more than 780,000 SMBs. He is responsible for developing TAG's strategic planning and guiding its business development. In addition, Stein is the managing partner for TAG's MTSP, i-NETT. He is responsible for i-NETT's daily operations and serves as its president. Stein also founded Westec Security Corp. and served as its CEO. He can be reached at dales@tagnational.com. Visit www.tagnational.com.

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