

Projects & At-home Workers



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Overview of the techniques to use when managing project team members who work remotely or at home.

Planning and Culture for the At-Home Project

The trend toward more at-home workers challenges and creates demand for project managers who can adapt their PM skills to this unique environment. As organizations move workers home to reap the facility cost savings and gain productivity and quality improvements, project managers must respond with techniques adapted to this unique work environment.

At-home Work

Managing at-home workers requires new management, control, and leadership techniques whether the employee is performing work with:

- ❑ Tangible output: data entry or document processing
- ❑ Intangible output: programming, analysis, legal research, engineering.

When we cannot use a count of something like pages or keystrokes to set expectations and measure achievement, managers must use project management techniques specifically adapted to at-home work. Before getting into the details and differences, it is important to note that my focus is full-time at-home workers, not people who work at home a few days a week.

Peek-a-boo Management

When we study the functioning of in-office departments, we find significant reliance on informal control, which often surprises clients who are preparing to move work home. Managers and their employees rely to a very great extent on direct informal contacts to communicate information and expectations and to assess progress and performance. The old saw about 90% of communication being non-verbal is certainly true. We always see that the majority of the control and monitoring happens outside the formal project management system.

"Peek-a-boo management" is the way we describe these in-office management systems. The manager sees the pace of work on the way



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to a meeting, leans over a cubicle to listen in on a conversation and asks, "How are things going?" on the way to the restroom. Seeing an employee gossiping by the coffee urn for the fourth time in a morning makes a PM worry about performance. Seeing someone already at work when the manager arrives in the morning is reassuring.

Likewise, the employee uses that mini-meeting in the hall to ask a question or try out an idea and get the manager's reaction. Non-verbal cues in these face-to-face contacts guide the employee's work more than either the manager or the employee consciously realizes. An unconscious frown from a manager who leans over a cubicle to listen in on the discussion of an idea can kill that approach without anyone saying a word.

Managers don't mention "peeking" when they describe their formal control systems. My point here is not to criticize these in-office techniques, but rather to emphasize how much the at-home worker and the manager lose. The fact that the manager does not have direct physical contact with an at-home worker requires the manager to communicate in different ways to the employee. We need to design at-home management techniques to replace the informal guidance and cues received in the office so that the at-home worker does not suffer from information deprivation.

The failure to address this issue is the primary reason that most full-time at-home work programs fail. The failure comes from the assumption that we can manage at-home workers with the same process we use in the office.

Planning and Budgeting for the At-Home Project

With in-office projects, the planning focus is often on the first few activities to be completed with little clarity provided by sponsors, stakeholders or the PM about the achievement that the project should produce. This process is bad in the office, but at least the PM and the team have Peek-a-boo management to fill in the holes in the plan as they go. For the at-home worker, this process is devastating. They work on their tasks in a void with little opportunity to "fill in the blanks."

Assignments and Monitoring with At-home Team Members

Many organizations manage projects with only task durations and estimated percentage complete. They plan a project with the idea that task "A" requires three weeks of work and Task "B" will require a month. In the office, this approach is okay because the manager uses Peek-a-boo management to make sure that the employee works at an acceptable pace.

For the at-home employee, we must monitor performance in relation to hours worked. Task "A" is estimated at 120 hours of work and we track those hours of work against the progress checkpoints in the assignment. With in-office employees, we may ask them to report their work progress once a month. Again, between such formal contacts, managers rely on informal interactions to get progress reports. With the at-home worker, requiring at least weekly updates are necessary; though reporting status of work daily or twice a week is more effective.

Addressing Culture, Leadership, and Communications

With the mechanical foundation described above in place, the project manager can proceed to build on it. Adaptations in leadership style, project team culture, rewards and punishments, discipline, evaluation process and other issues must be different for the at-home worker. But these adaptations rely on the foundations of planning and monitoring. No amount of "soft" skill will compensate for a poorly designed foundation.

To learn these techniques look at our course and [**Achievement-driven Project methodology.**](#)