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Thriving remotely: a small-business guide to overcoming remote work challenges



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Remote work has become popular since the COVID-19 pandemic, reshaping the business landscape and offering flexibility, cost savings, and access to a diverse talent pool. A September 2020 survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that more than two in five employing businesses (43 per cent) in Australia now have staff teleworking, a significant increase from 28 per cent before the pandemic. Remote work presents unique challenges, especially for enterprises that often operate with tighter budgets and smaller teams.

Understanding the risks

Remote work introduces several risks that businesses must navigate carefully. Awareness and preparation are key to leveraging remote work effectively. Some of the risks are:

- **Data Security:** Employees working remotely often access and share information over networks that may not be secure, increasing the vulnerability to cyberattacks, phishing, or unauthorized access. Businesses may lack adequate technology or policies to safeguard their data.
- **Communication Breakdown:** Relying solely on technology for interactions across various time zones and locations can lead to misunderstandings, delays, and conflicts, especially for businesses that might lack sophisticated communication tools.
- **Decreased Productivity:** The autonomy of remote work comes with distractions, isolation issues, and a potential dip in supervision, which can impact productivity. Businesses may struggle with establishing systems or metrics to monitor and enhance employee performance effectively.

Recognising these risks is the first step toward turning remote work from a threat into an advantage. By implementing focused strategies, businesses can mitigate these risks, ensuring that remote work serves as a powerful asset for growth and innovation.

Mitigation strategies

To ensure continuity and efficiency, businesses must adopt practical, proactive strategies to mitigate remote work risks. These measures can also safeguard the company's most valuable assets—its data and people.

1. **Investing in Secure Technology:** Allocate resources to secure and reliable technology that supports remote work. Essential tools include encryption, VPNs, firewalls, antivirus software, and cloud services for robust data protection and storage. Educating employees on data security best practices is also indispensable, such as using strong passwords, avoiding public Wi-Fi, and reporting any suspicious activities. This investment in technology and training is not a cost but a safeguard against potential financial and reputational damage from data breaches.
2. **Establishing Clear Communication Protocols:** Implement clear and consistent communication protocols, utilizing appropriate tools for various needs. For example, video conferencing is ideal for team meetings, instant messaging is suitable for quick discussions, and project management software is useful for tracking tasks. Setting clear expectations around communication frequency, availability, and etiquette helps prevent misunderstandings and ensures that everyone is aligned and informed, fostering a cohesive remote work environment. The Australian government

recommends using these tools to facilitate communication and collaboration.

3. Enhancing Cybersecurity and Data Protection: Take proactive steps to enhance cybersecurity and data protection when working remotely. For example, use the free cybersecurity toolkit developed by the Australian Cyber Collaboration Centre (A3C) and the Global Cyber Alliance (GCA) to stay safe online. Additionally, implement strict cybersecurity measures like using strong passwords, enabling two-factor authentication, and using a virtual private network (VPN) to encrypt data.

Conclusion

Remote work is a growing trend that offers businesses a chance to innovate and grow. To succeed in this digital-first environment, businesses need to address the risks of remote work and adopt best practices for security, communication, and culture. These are not just strategies, but investments in the future.

By seeing remote work as an opportunity rather than an obstacle, we can transform our work style and achieve more efficiency, satisfaction, and success. Let's embrace remote work and create a flexible, and dynamic business world for everyone.

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