Northern Illinois University employees quickly found themselves facing new working conditions as the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic closures moved non-essential employees home. As stressful as this move was for employees, for supervisors it presented additional challenges as this is the first time many have supervised employees remotely. Supervisors need to be able to ensure tasks are completed in a timely manner, make sure issues and concerns are addressed, and need to be able to keep their team members engaged. At the same time, supervisors need to be flexible with their employees who are juggling working from home and many who have family members fighting for their time and attention.

Our office has created this document to assist you with providing some advice to help you work your way through this unprecedented time.

Planning to Work Remotely

As employees began the move to work from home, supervisors needed to quickly establish plans for how work processes were going to continue away from campus, set-up plans for maintaining contact with individual employees and the whole team, make sure employees were going to be able to use technology from home and other concerns. Let’s review a few things to consider when establishing a plan for working remotely. What should you consider with your individual employees and your team as a whole?
Planning with individual employees:

- Determine which tasks your employee will be able to complete from home. Establish a timeline of completion with the employee.
- Work with the employee to determine what the regular work hours will be. Determine if they will work their regular work schedule, work an adjusted schedule (family may be home) or if they will use their benefit time.
- Decide upon an agreed upon way to contact your employee - will you use email, phone, or a remote work tool (i.e. Microsoft Teams, Zoom, etc.).
- Let your employee know how to best contact you with questions or concerns.
- Discuss with your employee what they can expect from you during this time.
- Review additional projects or training opportunities which your employee could participate in if they have extra time.

Planning with your whole work team:

- Decide with everyone the best way and time to meet together as a team.
- Determine if your meetings occur daily, weekly or every other week.
- Clarify the method you are going to use to meet as a group (i.e. Microsoft Teams, Zoom, etc.).
- Explain to employees what you will be expecting them to report during the meetings and what you will be sharing with them as well.

Technology

You need to check with your employees to ensure they have the technology they are going to need to be able to work effectively in their home setting. Determine the technology they are going to need:

- **Computer, monitor(s), email access, and phone**
- **Internet access, VPN, file sharing tools**
- **Access to the NIU network**
- **Software to work remotely**
- **Will you require the assistance of DoIT to help your employee get set-up at home?**

Other aspects to consider:

⇒ Do you have any employees who may help addressing a technical accommodation?
⇒ Will you have to find or provide training for your employees to use new software or tools?
⇒ What will happen if your employees have technical issues while at home? Who will they contact?
⇒ Decide if your team will require any special technology to collaborate remotely.
⇒ Remind employees of DoIT security and safety policies and procedures. Authentication process.
⇒ Discuss how you will assist your employees if technological issues arise.
⇒ Make sure to get inventory numbers for all equipment employees take home for use.
Communication

One of the most important things you can do as a supervisor is remain in contact with your employees while working remotely. For your employees, you are going to be one of their most important resources - supplying updates regarding job duties/tasks, providing clarification for university news, and for some possibly being their only outlet to others outside of their homes. With this in mind, try to be available to your employees during work hours and remind them the lines of communication are open for them to contact you.

Another excellent way to communicate with your employees is during your meetings with them. Not sure what you should be asking during these meetings, try some of the suggestions below:

√ What tasks need to be completed?
√ What projects might not be able to be completed not being on campus?
√ What is going well with the employee?
√ Where is your employee facing challenges?
√ What does your employee need from you to help them be successful or better complete tasks?
√ What projects have you wanted to work on that you’ve not been able before now?
√ Are there any trainings, webinars, or other professional development that interest you?

Everyone has different ways of communicating, so don’t expect what will work to start conversations with one employee to work with another. Be flexible and open to the fact that some employees will like to have a virtual meeting, while another might request a phone call only.

As important as the conversation sharing is for your employee, listening is also important for you as a supervisor. Listen what your employee has to say. Listen for feedback. Listen for understanding. Listen for other concerns you employee might be willing to share with you.

Keeping Your Staff Engaged

Your employees are seeking to engage with you and their fellow colleagues while working remotely. What are some things you can do to continue to engage your team?

Starting with communicating, ask your employees how they are doing. Don’t stop celebrating those events you would’ve when working on campus, like birthdays, work anniversaries, good work done by one of your team, births, or other team events. Give your meetings a theme (i.e. continuing “Red & Black Fridays”).

The most important thing is just finding ways to connect your staff members.
“Onboarding” is the process of supervisors integrating a new employee to their position. Employees learn the duties of their job, rules/regulations, and day-to-day expectations of their new role. “Reboarding” is the process of bringing an employee, or in this case, employees back to their position. Supervisors need to think about everything which will need to occur to return employees back to daily work on campus. What are some considerations you should probably be thinking about to prepare for the day when employees return to campus?

- We know things may be different working in offices moving forward, but no one is sure how at this point. Supervisors need to be flexible and ready to adjust to possible new changes.
- Think about the time it will take to physically move employees back to campus. This might take more than a few hours and time should be dedicated to getting employees set-up again in offices.
- There may be some employees who may not immediately return to campus, supervisors need to be prepared for possibly returning to campus, while some may wish to remain home.
- There may be some stress for your staff returning to campus, supervisors need to be prepared to assist those who may have concerns regarding returning to work. *(Remember the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is here to assist employees.)*

Expect the university to offer directives on how the return to work process will occur and make sure to communicate expectations to your employees. Again, be prepared to have lots of questions and be sure to utilize your resources to assist you.

**Final Considerations**

This has been an unprecedented time for the university and others around the world as we all try to maintain normalcy in changing times. Best practices have been offered to you in this document, but we’d like to offer you a few more suggestions before we conclude.

- Trust that your employees are doing the best job they can at the moment. They are stressed during this time and you may be as well. Address any concerns as they arise with your employee, but allow them to do their job.
- Remember that you may need to be flexible during this time as things change from day-to-day and even moment-to-moment.
- As much as your employees need to be even more mindful of work/life balance at home, supervisors need to as well. It’s easy to spend all day working now that home is the office, but remember you need to mentally and physically take care of yourself as well.
- Utilize the resources that you have on campus shared from the university's main webpage to assist you while supervising remotely.
- Give yourself, and your employees, the grace to make mistakes, but learn from them and move on. We are all learning to work through this together.