

Compliance Today – February 2021

Remote working: How to work and manage for success

By Stephanie L. Sebastian, CHC

Stephanie L. Sebastian (stephanie.sebastian@yahoo.com) is Manager, Compliance & Licensure, Kroger Specialty Pharmacy, Lake Mary, Florida.

By now, many of us have been working remotely for nearly a year after being catapulted into the new world following the rise of COVID-19. For many, remote work was either a new concept or possibility that came so abruptly that it sent workers home with little to no instruction on how to successfully handle themselves, their teams, or departments when no longer sitting side by side in the office.

As a millennial and someone who worked remotely leading a team nationwide for three years starting in 2012, eight years prior to the mass COVID-19 exodus, this is where I tell you that for myself and fellow millennials, we sat half chuckling and half scratching our heads as we watched those that scrambled to devise plans. “But how will we ensure others are working?!” “How will we stay connected?!” “How will we continue to operate?!” The message was clear: leadership, accustomed to antiquated schedules and processes that require physical presence, was struggling with changing their rarely challenged views of *how we work*.

Let me pause here to offer a disclaimer that I was fortunate enough during this time to have a supervisor and department that was not sent into a tailspin and remained focused on putting people and families first. Our leader was open-minded and flexible, and a lot of what worked for us that I talk about in this article came as a direct result of seeing how successful our team and department was able to be *with the proper support*.

Also, I am not saying that the panic that ensued was not reasonable and the concern regarding how to maintain a business or manage a department was not real or warranted—there are certainly operations that depend on physical presence and cannot thrive without it. What I am saying is that it was evident that, for the most part, many leaders that could make changes in work processes had not given thought to new, different, and perhaps even better ways to work. While the pandemic will eventually end, there are some takeaways we can implement and continue after COVID-19 that will allow for a more engaged, successful labor force with greater employee satisfaction. Let’s discuss.

Productivity vs. presence: Challenge current ideals of the workday

Marie Kondo, tidying extraordinaire, summarized so beautifully, “People cannot change their habits without first changing their way of thinking.”^[1] While true for organizing sock drawers and closets, this also rings true for how we as Americans work and look at what is normal and acceptable for how to work.

According to *Wired*, the idea of an eight-hour workday was first articulated in the early 19th century, when a Welsh textile mill owner pushed for the reform of the 12- to 14-hour workday that was customary at the time. In 1926, Henry Ford further solidified a five-day, 40-hour workweek when he mandated it in most of his factories.^[2] Here we are, nearly 100 years later, still trudging along with a work process that has not been given much thought or pushback—for a century! To think of this in any other context would be absurd. Can you imagine following a process at work that is almost 100 years old without reevaluating it?

The other side to this argument is that employers are not getting 40 hours of *productivity* from an employee at an office. They are getting 40 hours of *presence*. In her article, “The 8-Hour Workday Is a Counterproductive Lie,” author Lizzie Wade notes that when she started tracking productive hours during the week, even during the most productive weeks, it amounted to roughly 35 hours of actual *work*. When she started discussing how guilty she felt about her lack of productivity with colleagues, she found that none of them were tracking 40 hours of work time. When you think about time employees spend in an office setting, how much of that is spent on breaks, chitchat, not being able to focus simply due to distractions, unnecessary meetings, and otherwise unproductive activities? How much time is spent on the commute alone? A study done by News 4 San Antonio found that Texans had gotten on average 10% of their workweek back thanks to telecommuting after COVID-19.^[3] While remote work environments are not conducive for all, many enjoy the relaxed environment, flexibility to work throughout the day at their own pace, and the increased productivity made possible by the ability to focus and additional hours gained back from former commute time. Personally, I have gained back at least 10 hours a week from commute time, with a minimum of five being reinvested into work time. Even if remote working on a part-time basis, it still is a winning situation for both employers and employees.

There is a fundamental difference between productivity and presence, and it is important to recognize, because if you can understand it, then the switch can be made to manage expectations, not hours. And expectations can be managed remotely, once set in place.

Communication and connection are key

When President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in 1933, the world was entrenched in the midst of the Great Depression. During this time, Roosevelt started having simple, open conversations with the American public over the radio. Despite the fact that he was sitting in the White House, these speeches were coined the “Fireside Chats” due to how intimate the connection with the audience ended up being as a result of Roosevelt’s comforting tone and simplistic word choices.^[4]

Communication has and always will be key, but *connecting* with your team while working remotely is central when lacking daily face-to-face office interactions. While video conferencing is ideal when associates are remote, it isn’t always available, and as such, there is an even greater emphasis placed on *tone* used during conversations and *words* selected to convey messages. It is important to ensure that we are not just talking but connecting with our team through these conversations—taking the time to ask how they and their families are doing and ultimately remembering there is a human being on the other end of the electronic device. Take the time to think about conversations prior to having them. Reread emails for tone when text is serving as the primary communication channel. Lastly, I strongly encourage taking courses and/or reading the plethora of books available on *how* to connect and converse with others, as these are not things that our society teaches in any formal manner. Prior to COVID-19, I was fortunate enough to have already explored these resources and found them useful in my everyday interactions. After COVID-19, however, these resources and the lessons learned were not just helpful, they were integral to my team’s continued success in the remote world.

Manage expectations, not people

Alright, I am going to crush some of your dreams with this, but we must get over the idea of a 40-hour workweek for all. I know for many it has been ingrained that time on the clock is the only way to manage fairly and that everyone must put in the same amount of time. Or, another common misconception and pitfall: the best workers are killing themselves to be the last one out of the office each day. This simply is not true. During my career, I have heard multiple times, “If you are only working 40 hours, then you are not working enough.” This is a broken, outdated mentality that needs to be challenged. Let me explain.

At one point in my career, I held a position that allowed for one other counterpart at my level. My colleague was routinely working at least two to three hours of overtime each day (we were salaried, so “overtime” is being used to refer to time over the expected eight hours), while I was averaging eight hours before logging off for the night. After a few months of this routine had passed, I received a call from our manager, who was concerned, as my colleague had alerted her to my “questionable work ethic,” since I was “leaving promptly on time each day” (because remember, leaving after eight hours and exactly on time is a bad thing when you are salaried). Our manager was trying to find out why there was such a difference with our workloads, where I was able to enjoy my evenings while my counterpart continued to labor on. She felt it was “not fair” to him that I only worked eight hours each day (40 hours a week). I was salaried, after all. Salaried workers don’t just put in 40 hours a week! Does this sound familiar?

I guarantee that every single person reading this article has either heard about, been pressured to feel, or is currently operating under the assumption that people are intended to live to work. As a millennial, I came of working age during the Great Recession. As a result of watching how quickly corporate America fed their own workers through a tree shredder during that time, it’s understandable why millennials joined Gen X with the mindset that we should *work to live*, not the other way around. This is where assumptions need to be challenged: working to live is not a bad thing. Also, just because someone isn’t toiling away each day for however long you deem appropriate, it does not mean they are a bad employee. It does not mean they do not do quality work. In fact, they may be one of your best employees.

In order to share my example, I must first talk a bit about my generation. Millennials grew up during the greatest technological boom our planet has ever seen. As a result, they are used to learning how to use something (like a computer) or look something up (like on a search engine to figure out how to do it)—by themselves. During the Great Recession, millennials did not have trainers for jobs. If lucky enough to find employment, they figured out how to do their job real quick while 7,863 people behind them were still trying to tell the company why they would do it better, faster. The reserve army of labor was brutal, and it was a sink-or-swim environment that conditioned millennials to become efficient powerhouses—that still enjoyed dinner with their family at night followed by hot yoga with goats (hey, I’ll admit, we have our quirks). Millennials work differently as a result of the fact that they were raised and have lived differently. And while I speak for a generation as an example because I have lived it, my point is this, and it’s applicable to all: not all workers work the same.

Remember the example I started with, about my colleague working extra time each night to finish his work? It turned out that my Gen X counterpart was an outgoing extrovert who spent a (good) portion of time each day catching up with multiple people he worked with. He was also the go-to guy at the office when anyone needed help with anything. He never said “no,” and because of it, he ended up as a part-time trainer, information technology specialist, and life therapist. There is nothing wrong with this. He is a great guy and a great worker, and despite his initial balking at my work ethic, I would work with him again in a heartbeat. I, on the other hand, am a self-proclaimed introvert. My cheery disposition naturally fools people to believe I am a people person when in fact I find being around people mentally and emotionally exhausting. In 2020, I learned my preferred lifestyle is called “quarantine.” There is also nothing wrong with this.

When my manager looked at statistics for workload alone, in most instances I had the same if not *more* work than my counterpart—I was just doing it at a different pace and without as many interruptions. And my manager did exactly what was needed—*nothing*—which leads me to my next point.

A common pitfall that many managers make is to manage hours, not expectations. When presented with scenarios similar to the one I just described, managers tend to think that worker B needs *more* work, not that worker A needs to adjust their social activities or become more efficient with how they work. Worker B is punished by having more work added to their expectations while worker A is rewarded for being simply who they

are. If this is how the situation is handled, you will demotivate and burn out worker B. Worker B may even start to miss deadlines or just not get as much done as they used to as they have no motivation to, and then managers assume worker B needs to be coached or “they aren’t themselves” any longer. I cannot tell you how many times I have seen this play out in the office, and managers shrug their shoulders and claim they just don’t know what happened to their once paragon of an employee.

In the article, “How the C-Suite can prevent burnout,” author Michael Levitt so articulately put, “Companies need to switch from the antiquated Industrial/Henry Ford assembly line mentality of what ‘work’ is, and switch to more task-based activities. Compensation should also match up with this by eliminating the 40-hour workweek model, and truly adapt a salary-based model where if employees can accomplish their tasks in 20 hours per week, awesome. If it takes them 40 hours, so be it. Anything longer would require additional training and/or a review of that employee’s work loads.”^[5] He continues to recommend that companies have human resources reevaluate job descriptions to determine what an employee’s tasks are and then assign tasks and deadlines for tasks, not time needed to complete it.

While we may not be able to reinvent the wheel with this article to readjust pay according to tasks instead of time, we can use this model to help us while working remotely and managing remote workers. This mentality shifts the focus and responsibility to management to ensure they are getting what they need when they need it out of employees instead of focusing on how long a worker has a green “Available” circle next to their name on a communicator. This same mentality can be used when in the office as well and ultimately allows workers to work however they need and however they are comfortable, regardless of who they are. Social butterflies, efficient introverts, rejoice! We can all work in harmony knowing we produce the same quantity within our own time.

How does all of this play into compliance?

For those of us operating a department or teams, the answer is obvious on how this helps. There is, however, the larger organization to take into consideration.

As compliance professionals, we know how imperative it is to maintain effective communication with our organization as presence tends to correlate to the likelihood of associates reporting compliance concerns. A compliance officer can host virtual Coffee with Compliance sessions that allow the same presence with the organization as they would have in a breakroom or walking about the office, or perhaps even more so if the compliance officer did not make it a point to get out and visit employees regularly. During Coffee with Compliance telecalls, the compliance officer can provide updates on what is new in the world of compliance both outside and inside the organization and ask for feedback from the teams on what is and is not working for them. As so many of us know, the connection we form with our staff is ultimately what leads them to feel comfortable stepping forward to say something when we need them to.

Lastly, while the audience reading this is mostly responsible for compliance departments, there is something to be said about best practices to bring to the leadership table and implement organization-wide. Employees who feel connected to their position or organization and its cause are also more likely to follow policies and procedures, as well as bring forward compliance concerns when they encounter them.

While working remotely may have been caused by a temporary interruption, it is worthwhile for organizations to evaluate what they can keep long-term that effectively serves their business and employees. I invite you to challenge some of your own beliefs about remote work (should you have them) and implement some of the best practices offered in this article for either yourself, your team, or, if you have the authority, your organization. Worst-case scenario, you can always resort to the good ol’ ways. But in the best-case scenario, you see increased productivity and employee satisfaction. Even as a compliance professional, I would say that is worth the risk!

Takeaways

- While COVID-19 forced a remote work world, there are good practices we can keep, moving forward with remote work.
- In order to change how we work and our current work habits, we must first challenge our thoughts and beliefs about what “normal” is.
- Productivity and presence are not created equal. The traditional 40-hour workweeks are largely focused on presence, not productivity.
- Workers work differently for a variety of reasons, and that is OK. Managers should be focused on expectations, not hours present in an office.
- Communication is important, but connection to your employees is crucial in a remote work environment. Managers need to ensure that they are doing what they can to connect to their workforce.

1 Marie Kondo, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2014).

2 Lizzie Wade, “The 8-Hour Workday Is a Counterproductive Lie,” *Wired*, November 21, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3n8keqC>.

3 SBG San Antonio, “STUDY: Texans get back 10 percent of their work week thanks to less commuting,” WOAI-TV, September 2, 2020, <https://bit.ly/33XfoFa>.

4 History.com Editors, “The Fireside Chats,” History, last updated June 7, 2019, <https://bit.ly/37anz3b>.

5 Michael Levitt, “How the C-Suite can prevent burnout,” *CEOWORLD Magazine*, September 7, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2JLJHrI>.

This publication is only available to members. To view all documents, please log in or become a member.

[Become a Member](#) [Login](#)