

THE COVID-19 RESPONSE AND TELEWORK A NEW NORMAL

“Telework is here to stay – Employees expect it and customers demand it.”

“Meeting your mission during Covid-19 requires a new operating approach.”

“There are lessons learned every person can implement!”

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BACKGROUND

As the United States entered March 2020, Covid-19 required the government and its support to start to preparing for long-term quarantine and help the nation “flatten the curve.” The normal day-to-day activities of our society were turned upside down. For hundreds of thousands of government workers and contractors, normal office life was disrupted, and teleworking became the “new normal.” Amidst the turmoil, contractors and government were still required to meet deliverables and accomplish the mission. This paper summarizes the lessons that we learned and can be implemented by both contractors and government employees.

WHY IS ST. MICHAEL'S QUALIFIED TO WRITE THIS PAPER?

St. Michael's Inc. met the challenge of COVID-19 in great stride and continued to provide excellent work to its clients. We were able to accomplish much during this time because our experienced team members kept the focus on taking care of our employees who in turn would continue taking care of their clients. Through the many months of quarantine, core lessons were learned that ensured the continuity of excellent work, now, and for the future.

“Taking care of yourself and your people are more important than ever”

Since our founding in 2006, St. Michael's has been dedicated to its five Core Values of: Excellence in Reputation, Dependability, Teamwork, Candor, and Commitment to Excellence to guide our actions. Every task requested by the client is performed with our core values leading the way. This foundation led St. Michael's to grow its reputation and make it one of the leading firms in providing financial management services to Department of Defense and Intelligence Community clients.

We have a supportive corporate culture. Our culture enabled us to quickly realize the need to modify corporate policies and provide maximum assistance to our employees. Our employees in return were able to continue meeting their mission objectives and also maintain their health and well-being.

HOW WERE LESSONS LEARNED IDENTIFIED?

We interviewed and surveyed employees at all corporate levels (Senior Management, Middle Management, and Individual Contributors). Employees identified process improvements and changes they made in order to meet their responsibilities. After reviewing actions taken during the transition to teleworking, St. Michael's compiled a document detailing our lessons learned. St. Michael's consolidated the lessons learned, identified core themes, and developed key lessons learned that are applicable to any organization operating in the Federal enterprise.

“Flexibility, creative thinking, and a willingness to change is critical to your success.”

TELEWORKING LESSONS LEARNED

We aggregated our lessons learned into four categories: Senior Management, Middle Management, Employee Self-Care, and Security and Compliance.

SENIOR MANAGEMENT - SMALL AMOUNTS OF PREPARATION LEAD TO A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION

Senior Managers have overall accountability and responsibility for their people and meeting mission objectives. Operating in telework status during the COVID-19 pandemic requires senior managers to implement new processes to look after their people and continue providing the resources needed to accomplish the mission. Here are some lessons learned for senior managers to continue meeting their responsibilities:

1. Current contact information for all team members and stakeholders is critical when teleworking. Update all contact information for team members and stakeholders and make readily available for all. Ensure the entire team has the roster, can access it, and understands how to execute the alert roster.
2. Anyone can get sick and contingency planning will help minimize disruption to the mission. Develop and publish contingency plans in case team leads and/or members get sick. Identify the team members that will assume leadership positions and confirm the government and contractors understand how to utilize the contact information/chain of supervision.
3. People require technology to do their jobs. Identify, resource, and test information technology requirements to facilitate telework (Laptops, Dedicated Conference Lines, File Sharing, etc.). Try to establish primary, alternate, contingency and emergency (PACE) means of communication. Establish a schedule to validate on a recurring basis. Be prepared for after-hours notification of imminent reduced manning posture on- site, if there are signs that this might occur in the near future, start taking home laptops, files, and anything you would need to successfully telework for a sustained period.
4. New ways to communicate with team members are required. Find effective ways to keep everyone informed. For example, group MS Teams chats, group cell phone text chats, etc. Consider different communication methods for normal business hours versus off-hours. Be prepared to spend a lot more time on the phone. Conduct weekly/daily standup or other types of meetings via Zoom or other media to ensure Senior Managers and Middle Managers communicate frequently and can address any issues as early as possible.
5. Increased communications between Government and Contractors are critical to success. Seek to increase communications between Senior Managers and Contracting Officer Representatives (COR) to re-affirm commitment to excellence, re-affirm the work that staff is doing, and determine if there are any challenges from both the Government and Contract side. Senior Management should check in regularly with team members to identify teleworking support issues early and address appropriately.
6. Things are changing quickly and team members need to know what's expected of them. Make sure the team understands the expectations when beginning telework. First week: a lot of check-in calls, team meeting. After several weeks, may have less frequent team meetings.

7. Work sites are restricting access to certain individuals. Senior Managers need to control and facilitate the return of people to the work site. Identify requirements and communicate the requirements and expectations with all individual team members.

MIDDLE MANAGEMENT – SUPERVISORS MUST ENGAGE THEIR EMPLOYEES

Operating in telework status during the COVID-19 pandemic required our middle managers to actively engage their employees and implement new processes to manage projects and individual team member's tasks. Here are some lessons learned for middle managers to continue meeting their responsibilities:

1. Middle managers must maintain awareness and accountability for their team members. Communicate frequently with all team members. Conduct daily check-ins on their well-being and health (mental and physical). Taking daily accountability is critical to ensuring everyone is safe, especially since we don't have the ability to verify this by presence in the office, as would normally be done. Middle managers should make positive contact with all team members daily, and send any issues to senior management. If the middle manager or senior manager are unavailable, an accountability alternate should be designated.
2. Telework can make it harder to maintain communication and discuss work products. More frequent communication is needed to monitor work status. Check in with each team member at least two times per week to discuss deliverable status (no surprises near due date), discuss their concerns, and to check on their personal well-being.
3. This new operating environment requires creative thinking. Be open to alternative ways to get the tasks accomplished. Learn together and do not be bound by four walls. Draw from one another's knowledge and expertise and collaborate with other teammates to produce great work products.
4. Be understanding and empathetic to people's individual situations. The lockdown isn't normal for anyone. Most people are wearing at least 2 hats during COVID 19 (e.g. caring for family members, homeschooling, etc) while providing meaningful work. Allow flexible hours and deadlines (if possible) understanding that people schedules could be way off.
5. There is increased risk for disruption to the mission due to various external risks (e.g. sickness, technology issues, etc.). Where applicable, cross-train team members to enhance coverage options during extended absences

EMPLOYEE SELF-CARE – INDIVIDUALS NEED TO ADAPT THEIR WAYS TO BE SUCCESSFUL

Operating in telework status during the COVID-19 pandemic caused individuals to change the way they do things, both personally and professionally. There was increased focus on individuals maintaining individual and family well-being, while also continuing to meet their work responsibilities. Here are some lessons learned for individuals to continue meeting their responsibilities:

1. Schedule, Schedule, Schedule. Everyone's individual schedules were disrupted. Create and follow a new daily routine. For example, creating a schedule when to do work, help children with home school, errands, etc. Create and follow a "To-Do" list. Create daily, weekly, and long-term timelines for work and personal tasks. Work hours may change, establish and communicate any changes with management.
2. Work life balance is important for maintaining well-being. Keep work life balance. Set aside some time to maintain physical and mental health. Be cognizant of that. Individuals will notice that "work-hours" become less clear and individuals may find themselves answering different communication means at all hours of the day every day of the week. Set "work hours" and take breaks. Get out for a nice walk or other personal exercise. Keeping healthy is the primary goal.
3. Homes may need to be reconfigured - designate an office space which is quiet and away from distractions.
4. It takes more effort to stay connected to the team – communicate, communicate, communicate.
5. Embrace the positives: despite working off-site, individuals can continue being successful at work. It may also allow for increased family time due to not spending time getting ready, commuting, parking. More time for self-care.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR SECURITY AND COMPLIANCE

1. Using personal computers and emails to conduct business may be in conflict with government rules and regulations. The government and contractors should discuss personal computer and email usage.
2. All work products and conversations must remain unclassified.
3. Familiarize yourself with using DoD SAFE, encrypted email, and/or other methods of transmitting Controlled Unclassified Information, including PII.
4. Consider whether DD-254s need to be modified to include issued secure mobile communications devices where appropriate.
5. Contractual changes may change reporting requirements (status reports, activity reports, meetings, telework plans, invoicing, etc.) prompting a change for Senior Managers, Middle Managers, and individual team members with their work products.

CONCLUSION

Taking care of yourself and your people are more important than ever. A healthy work force is required to meet your mission objectives. Operating in a telework environment, either full time or part time, requires new ways of doing things. Flexibility, creative thinking, and a willingness to change is critical to your success. This paper provided lessons learned that government employees and contractors can implement to meet their mission requirements and maintain their physical and mental well-being.