

Which skills and competencies will be most critical for leaders as the workplace continues to evolve?

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The world of work is experiencing an upheaval and a transformation as profound as the one that grew out of the invention of the printing press in the late fifteenth century. The ways people work, where and when they work, and what they produce have changed dramatically in just the past few years.

Knowledge work is now the predominant form of labor in the economy. And knowledge work is much messier and more variable than production work. It's not location specific, and it's highly collaborative. The work of the future is highly distributed yet richly interconnected.

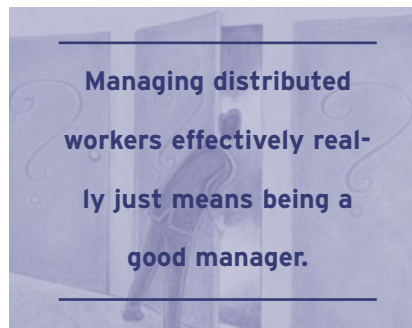
What's more, knowledge workers (who make up close to 40 percent of today's workforce) have a set of values, beliefs, and expectations different from that of more traditional factory workers. They want more control over their time and their life, and they expect to make highly independent choices about where to live and when and how to get their work done.

At the same time, technological advances have made the ability to work anywhere at any time a reality.

In our experience, distributed teams struggle most often when their managers fail to recognize that dis-

tributed work programs almost always involve significant change—not only for the workers who are directly affected but also for their support organizations and for other people who interact with or depend on them.

To be successful, managers of distributed workers must master major and often unrecognized new behaviors and skills. There are four specific things that managers of distributed teams must do to ensure success:



Use highly participative approaches to establishing distributed work environments. Pull out all your books and articles about introducing major organizational change, and do what they tell you. Involving people in the changes will instill a much higher level of commitment than will imposing changes from the top down.

Define and publish formal policies and procedures for distributed work. It's easy to slip into a potpourri of special arrangements for different individuals, but that's a recipe for disaster—if not lawsuits.

Establish explicit, tangible performance measures. Managing a distrib-

uted workforce requires managers to shift their focus away from tight control of workers' activities and toward managing results. It is critical that managers and their subordinates agree in advance on how performance will be measured and rewarded. The most effective distributed work programs we've seen include explicit processes for establishing performance contracts between workers and the organization. These contracts identify tangible results, specific deadlines, and other agreements about mutual accountabilities and support levels.

Develop formal agreements about regular interaction. A lack of direct and frequent interaction often makes both managers and distributed workers uncomfortable. Periodic face-to-face interaction is important, but with effective telephone, e-mail, and instant messaging contact it doesn't have to happen as often as some managers might think. Some kind of contact should occur at least once a week.

Managing distributed work does take extra effort because opportunities for chance meetings at the water-cooler or in the company cafeteria—to say nothing of on-the-spot supervision, problem solving, and coaching—aren't there anymore. But managing distributed workers effectively really just means being a good manager. Managers still must know what needs to be done and what kind of guidance and support each subordinate needs to be successful. Some of the rules may have changed, but it's still the same basic game.