

Q&A with Kristen Skender, Jimcor Agencies, Inc., and Leah Ohodnicki, Argo Group

How much of a production decrease (if any) could you expect from an associate that is now working fully remotely due to COVID-19, and what are effective ways to discuss expectations and lack of production with an associate?

LEAH: Each situation is unique but considering the myriad of possible distractions in the home currently, many of them completely unavoidable; now is a time to manage with empathy. Work with your associates to review expectations pre-COVID-19 and have an honest discussion with them about what's reasonable currently. Set new production goals and determine together the cadence for checking in on those goals. Communication and space for "real talk" in this work remote extreme circumstance are of the utmost importance.

Are there differences in leading the younger generation through this process from how you should be leading more seasoned producers and staff?

KRISTEN: There are advantages and disadvantages in working remotely for each individual, regardless of generation. For example, comfort level with technology is a huge asset in working remotely to troubleshoot independently and leverage remote working tools. While that is not inherently a generationally specific trait, our younger associates are introducing me to new tools and vice versa. For some of our younger associates, their experience in e-learning and technology at home have provided a framework to work remote.

With that said, I've led all types of generations that love working remotely and those that need their usual office accessories and a team around them to feel "productive." Across multiple generations, some associates find working from home challenging due to the lack of structure, distractions and limited face time collaboration. Look for core character traits and strengths to leverage within your team, while being open about their limitations or challenges to find solutions and improve results.

LEAH: My team is generationally diverse, and I can't say that I've seen differences that strictly follow generational lines. I'd say it's more about meeting each team member where he/she is and working to understand each person's situation and needs.

Suggestions for hiring or transitioning other team members for the company to a completely remote team. My team will always be remote across the country. How often would you do daily call-ins for training before transitioning to 2-3 times per week then eventually a weekly individual and team meeting?

KRISTEN: I have touchpoints daily typically for the first two weeks of a new associate, either in the form of a call, email or other communication. There is a training schedule pre-planned for that same time period. Based on the individual's needs, typically in the third week a cadence of every other day is sufficient. Then moving into weekly or bi-weekly planned connections. During COVID-19 for consistency, I am hosting weekly "coffee chats" that do not have a specific agenda and are optional to attend for team members to connect with each other. Otherwise I tend to schedule meetings around a purpose, goal or initiative, rather than lock into a set schedule. I recommend trying a few concepts and see where you get the most impact, waiting to set recurring tasks until you see what times or topics work best for your teams. Most importantly, ask your team: does the time work well for them, how would they like to change the meeting format or try something new, and how can we get the most out of our time together?

How to motivate teammates that are not used to working remote to stay motivated to work and be efficient in their new environment.

KRISTEN: I recommend micro-goals, breaking the goals for the week/day into bite sized pieces with measurable results. You will know quickly if they are meeting their goals or not, starting with short sprints first. That also provides the opportunity to celebrate success or adjust if the plan is not working without an extended period between checkpoints and coaching during this transition. Next, identify new ways to connect with celebrations, conversations, and culture – that match your corporate/office feeling – remotely to keep your team engaged.

Best way to keep a remote team engaged with each other as a team... ideas to promote this would be helpful.

KRISTEN: Some of our team’s favorites are morning coffee chats, meet & eat (lunch sessions), sharing photos, sharing positives/wins on accounts. We also encourage our team members to pick up the phone/or use video calls to connect with each other regularly. **IDEAS:**

- **Celebrations:** birthdays, work anniversary, achievements, accounts
- **Connections:** personal photos, events, “water cooler” talk, lunch/coffee chats, happy hours
- **Causes / Other Events:** Create mutual purpose, support a great cause or find others that have similar interests

I have a team of 27 people. I would like tips on how to virtually lead a big group of people and not necessarily focus on small groups.

KRISTEN: Hopefully, many of these tips can be scaled for the amount of direct reports you have; we apply many of them across our entire company/160+ associates. For more personal conversation, opportunities for the team to meet or work at times in smaller groups that may get more dialogue than the full 27 on one call. Empowering the team members within your group to plan activities, organize meeting schedules or help with projects is a great way to get your team engaged in the group results and contribute.

Have either of you hired an employee without an in-person meeting?

LEAH: I've hired without an in-person meeting; however, I've never hired without at least a video interview. When you can't meet in person, scheduling a series of video interviews with key stakeholders is recommended. Be sure to coordinate with each stakeholder on specific characteristics to look out for during the conversation and follow up with stakeholders quickly to capture feedback while it's fresh.

KRISTEN: I have, with a series of video interviews as Leah mentioned. I would prefer to do in-person meetings unless it is someone I have met in-person previously. Even having someone on our hiring team that can compare the video experience to the in-person perception. Most of us are insurance rock stars, not TV personalities by trade. The camera creates a different persona for most candidates that you need to look past for the right hire and explore their core character traits with other tools.

Do managers need to check in daily with employees? I understand the need to communicate, but I worry that too much communication could waste time. I think a message maybe, but daily calls seem to be micromanaging.

LEAH: I don't formally check in with my team daily, but every team is different. My direct reports are more senior marketing managers. We meet on Monday mornings and as needed throughout the week. Some of my team members have weekly one-on-ones scheduled, others do not. I'd recommend asking your team what cadence feels right. Once set, if you aren't seeing the results you expect, you can always reassess.

Do you have tips for creating meeting agendas that are better designed for remote teams?

LEAH: My favorite agendas are the ones set by the team. I used to run the monthly all team meeting, but it resulted in me doing all the talking. Once we shifted to team members coordinating and hosting, the calls became more interactive. A couple ideas that tend to be popular agenda items are round-the-horn updates from the team where each team member shares a recent accomplishment they are proud of, and something they are currently focused on.

KRISTEN: We get everyone sharing early on by starting and ending with a positive. Planting seeds prior to the call, on something you want them to reflect on or share with the group, can help create more dialogue. Also, pre-planning passing of the mic, so that other associates present and have their part in the content of the meeting. Everyone has a part in participating!

- Define how to submit to an agenda ahead of time
- Who will compile and how will you share the notes?
- Solve problems at the beginning
- Poll / Around the "Room" to get more participation

ARTICLES & RESOURCES:

- [8 Ways to Manage Your Team While Social Distancing](#) (*Harvard Business Review*)
- [Leading Remotely in Times of Uncertainty](#) (*Randstad Sourceright*)
- [5 Levels of Remote Work](#): (Link to Podcast on “Pro” Level by Medium)
- [Fears of Leading a Remote Team & How to Overcome Them](#) (*Sales Hacker*)
- [How will this change how we manage forever?](#) (*SmartBrief*)
- [Don't be afraid to show vulnerability during a crisis](#) (*Chief Executive*)
- [Best Practices for Remote Teams](#) (*SmartBrief*)

TIPS FOR YOUR TEAM:

- [Adjusting to working remote](#) (*Harvard Business Review*)
- [Strategies to set up your remote work station](#) (*Fast Company*)
- [Work life balance](#) (*The Atlantic*)