Who would have thought when the first pandemic lockdowns began last March that we would still be facing some of the same workplace challenges in the new year? When offices first closed and employees began the experiment of working from home, it felt like a temporary, emergency measure. Now? It's become part of our everyday life.

The reality is that remote work is here to stay. Surveys show that even after the pandemic finally subsides, many employees across the country will choose to stick with their work-from-home scenario, if the option is made available to them. This is sure to pose new challenges for payroll processing. Here are some tips and best practices for how to adjust to the remote-working new normal.

Establish a timekeeping policy, and stick to it.

Federal and state regulations require certain records be kept covering hours worked, especially for non-exempt employees. This presents unique challenges when workers are no longer physically in the office – how can you know exactly when they are actually working? How can you track (and enforce) breaks? What if your employees work unapproved overtime hours?

A strong timekeeping policy is critical to addressing these remote-work concerns. Have this policy put in writing, if it does not already exist, and distribute it to all employees. Be sure the policy covers common issues employees may encounter. Here are some helpful points to include:

✓ Reminder that employees are responsible for tracking and entering their own hours

✓ Instructions for keeping records of time worked using a designated method or timekeeping software

✓ Consequences of working unauthorized hours or unapproved overtime

✓ Steps for requesting personal, sick, or vacation time

✓ Flexibility, if any, for working outside of scheduled hours

Give employees the tools they need.

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To keep track of hours, employees need the right tools where they can log their time. For remote workers without access to a local network or onsite methods, that means they need to be provided with a way to track their time from home. A system like CenterPoint Time Clock offers employees and supervisors an online portal where they can track time worked and request time off via the web. (It can even be entered from a mobile phone.) This information can then be seamlessly imported into CenterPoint Payroll software for processing.

Set rules for overtime and flex hours.

No doubt you have heard stories about the high levels of "burnout" being experienced by employees navigating home-work balance for the first time. We're discovering that without the physical separation of office and home, it can be all too easy for the two to blend, with at-home workers continuing on tasks beyond the end of their shifts or answering work emails late into the night. If not carefully managed, this can have negative effects on both productivity and morale.

That's why it's important to set expectations for work schedules, flexible hours, and overtime. This applies to both hourly and salaried employees. Be sure to get an accurate record of hours worked and set up an easy approval process for supervisors to approve overtime in advance. In many cases this can be done in the same timekeeping software system. Finally, consider if offering additional flexibility in completing scheduled hours is a possibility for the work your employees do. While this arrangement does not work in every scenario, it can help employees regain control over their work-life balance, which in turn benefits their workplace satisfaction and the quality of their work.

Take heed of regulations.

It goes without saying that the switch to remote work has added complexity to the payroll process. This has implications for taxes and compliance that you need to be aware of. For instance, an employee may have relocated out of state as a result of the pandemic, with implications for how the taxes on their salary are calculated. There are also the various business and family relief programs passed last year to address the initial lockdowns, the effects of which are in many cases ongoing. Keep these changes in mind when processing payroll and taxes. Software like CenterPoint Payroll can help by performing automatic tax calculations for all 50 states and many local jurisdictions.

Make it work with communication.

Two-way communication is always key to a successful employee-supervisor relationship. Have employees give you a schedule of what they expect to accomplish within a given time. In return, keep them apprised of deadlines and expectations, and, of course, always keep them up to date on scheduling and priorities. Agree on what reasonable benchmarks for productivity and metrics for achieving those would look like. But don't breathe over their virtual shoulder — remote oversight does not mean micromanagement. Strike the right balance, and you increase the chances of a successful ongoing remote workforce.

Running a happy and productive remote workplace is an ongoing challenge, but if the past year has shown us anything, it's that it can be done. With a thoughtful payroll policy and the right payroll tools, you can ease the remote transition and even increase employee satisfaction. That way, the new normal can also be a bright future.