

## Supporting Virtual Supervision as Part of a Hybrid Workforce

More and more public child welfare agencies offer the opportunity to work in a hybrid environment, combining remote work with in-office work. This has raised questions among supervisors about how best to manage a remote workforce. Since research on virtual supervision is fairly limited relative to the popularity of remote work, studies are needed to understand the ways and conditions that influence effectiveness. Available [research on remote work](#) indicates that it is moderately associated with greater perceived autonomy and modestly associated with better supervisor relationships, performance, and job satisfaction. It was also modestly associated with decreased role stress and turnover intentions. For employees who telework more than 2.5 days a week, coworker relationship quality is lower.

In February 2023, more than 100 child welfare professionals joined a webinar to learn evidence-informed strategies from the Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development (QIC-WD) and share some of their own experiences. Among webinar participants, 66% reported that they were supervising staff who worked remotely. Supervisors are tasked with effectively managing staff, [onboarding new employees](#), handling conflict, and encouraging and maintaining morale in this new hybrid environment. This can often be difficult and necessitates supervisors navigating changes in communication styles and tools. This QIC-Tip is framed around the questions posed by those who attended the webinar and highlights some promising practices.



1. **Assume positive intent and good will.** Pre-pandemic [research](#) indicates that teleworkers are more productive than those who work from an office environment. People who work remotely also report high degrees of satisfaction, autonomy, trust between themselves and their organization, and work-life balance. When agencies consistently message that they expect everyone to succeed in the virtual work environment, most will rise to the occasion.
2. **Focus on outcomes over process.** Supervisors need to carefully navigate between emphasizing process (how the work is done) and the achievement of specific outcomes (what gets done). According to the [General Services Administration](#), “Rigid monitoring of employees’ daily activities hinders productivity and creates an environment of distrust...” Additionally, allowing employees [flexibility](#) has been shown to give them a sense of control over how their work is completed which may help them experience positive outcomes.
3. **Involve workers in determining meaningful outcomes to track.** Supervisors should have conversations with staff about meaningful performance indicators, outcomes, and reasonable timeframes, and what factors will help or hinder meeting those outcomes. Staff input helps to ensure that what is tracked is contextually valid and perceived as fair. It helps to develop a climate of trust and helps managers customize the support they provide to individual staff to ensure that tasks are accomplished, and productivity is maintained. Finally, it is ideal to use multiple data sources to measure worker productivity.
4. **Provide clarity and develop shared understanding.** [Research](#) suggests that establishing a shared understanding is a key condition for an effective hybrid or virtual team. Leaders and staff need to have a common understanding of the unit’s goal and tasks, the roles and group processes needed to achieve them, and the knowledge, skills, and abilities each team member brings. Leaders need to clearly and consistently communicate expectations. Shared understanding has been linked to greater job satisfaction, improved staff motivation, less need for piecemeal consultation and monitoring, and less room for misunderstandings and conflict.

5. **Supervision is not one-size-fit all.** Staff likely have [different needs for supervision and structure](#) when working from home (just as they might working from an office). The QIC-WD Washington telework study found that newer staff are more likely than experienced staff to struggle in the virtual work environment. For example, they may lose the informal learning that happens organically in an office environment amongst experienced and newer staff. Webinar participants suggested being very intentional with their supervisory strategies and trying to balance in- and out-of-the-office meetings with staff to create the opportunity for relationship building that creates more opportunity to partner to think critically and build solutions when challenges arise.
6. **Understand workers' strengths and challenges as teleworkers.** Encourage workers to do a [self-assessment](#) to determine if hybrid or fully remote work is a good fit for them. A self-assessment tool can provide the supervisor and supervisee with critical information to help tailor supervision to the needs of the remote employee. The supervisor and employee can develop a plan for how to approach supervision that includes monitoring productivity and completion of job tasks, communication expectations, building job competence, and supporting teamwork within the unit and the agency.
7. **Address the challenge of building co-worker relationships.** A recent [study](#) of hybrid work indicated that one or two days of remote work may be an ideal balance between home and the office without negatively impacting the ability of teams to build a healthy culture and maintain morale. [Strategies](#) used by supervisors in several QIC-WD's sites to support relationship building included: (1) holding more frequent team meetings to collaborate and share knowledge; (2) increasing the use of group supervision, case staffings, and weekly "team huddles" to plan the week and share information; (3) encouraging employee gatherings outside of online meetings; and (4) engaging in peer-to-peer information sharing and team building activities. Nearly one-fourth of webinar participants indicated that helping build relationships is a significant challenge in a hybrid environment. Some participants suggested activities geared around food to manage this challenge, including in-person potlucks and eating lunch together in a virtual environment. Participants also encouraged the use of ice breakers or other social activities in meetings to help people get to know one another, although some cautioned that these can feel forced or awkward for some people. Additional strategies include setting aside time in virtual meetings for conversations about non-work activities and creating peer mentors and liaisons to welcome new employees.
8. **Get feedback on your supervision strategies.** Asking for feedback is critical to get an accurate idea of what is expected of you and assess how you can improve as a supervisor. Regularly seek specific feedback from staff and be specific about what you would like feedback on. Ask clarifying and open questions. Be appreciative (regardless of if you agree with the response) and be genuine. Once feedback is received, act on it. If you decide not to act on certain feedback provide the rationale behind your decision.

These strategies can help supervisors determine the best supervisory approach for their team. This is important because virtual or hybrid working arrangements, while amplifying routine supervisory challenges, offer some important benefits. Webinar participants felt that the greatest benefit to their hybrid staff is improved work-life-balance and reported that the top organizational advantage to having a hybrid workforce is worker retention. In a time when retention is a challenge developing a successful virtual supervision strategy can benefit the workforce.