Hiring and Thriving in the Remote Work Era

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In May 2023, the WHO ended[1] the global COVID-19 health emergency. Today, nearly 4 years after many U.S. workplaces became remote overnight, the working world is still evolving. While estimates about remote work vary, the Pew Research Center[2] reports that many employees have embraced a hybrid schedule (combining on-site and off-site work). About 35% of employees work remotely full time. Not all work can be done remotely, but a flexible work arrangement is a top motivator for job seekers and a crucial factor in retaining employees, as highlighted by the Reimagined Workplace 2023 Survey.[3]

The March 2023 issue of *Science Editor*[4] discussed the value of remote work and strategies for success. At the Radiological Society of North America (RSNA), we have seen this success in action: approximately 22% of our staff are full-time remote, many of whom were hired remotely and have not yet visited our Oak Brook, IL, headquarters. Virtual hiring and onboarding come with their own set of challenges—and possibilities! This article will share some best practices drawn from our experiences in the RSNA Publications department, where we produce and publish 5 peer-reviewed journals.

Use an Applicant Tracking System

By definition, remote-friendly work attracts a wider and more diverse talent pool than does local work. At RSNA, most positions we post are not advertised as full-time remote, but many job responsibilities for knowledge workers can be performed remotely. Hiring managers who choose to consider remote employees may have a larger pool of candidates because location is not a factor for initial screening. An applicant tracking system (ATS) can help employers manage a larger talent pool by automating processes and making it easy to communicate with candidates. An ATS can also improve the candidate's experience with the organization and increase speed to hire. At RSNA, we use ADP. I especially appreciate the feature that allows you to select candidates to "keep on file" for future opportunities, including freelancing.

Conduct Virtual Interviews—Thoughtfully

Virtual interviews offer various advantages for employers and candidates. First, videoconferencing is convenient! Virtual interviews can be arranged on short notice, without disrupting routines or requiring travel. Time zone compatibility can be easily managed with scheduling apps like Calendly or Outlook add-ins like FindTime, reducing back-and-forth emails. In addition, virtual interviews are more eco-friendly and cost-effective than in-person meetings. Accessibility features like closed captioning may level the playing field for candidates with disabilities and non-native speakers. Virtual interviews also reduce the risk of transmitting contagious diseases, as seen during the pandemic.

Videoconferencing has its drawbacks, however. Some people prefer in-person interviews for the opportunity to build stronger rapport and experience the workplace firsthand. Technical difficulties, like unstable internet connections, can add stress to the process and hinder conversations. All stakeholders need to be comfortable with the tools. Whether you use Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, or something else, practice with the tech and have a backup contact method in case of issues. Be patient and compassionate about factors outside a candidate's control, like interruptions or background noise. Be mindful of your surroundings, too.

Beware of unconscious bias,[5] which can influence decision-making. To ensure an equitable interview experience for everyone, allow the same amount of time for each interview and ask questions to help you understand whether remote work is the right fit. For candidates with prior remote work experience, inquire about past challenges and successes, as well as the candidate's preferred work setup and schedule. What collaboration tools have they used? How do they structure their workday? How do they handle unexpected disruptions? For candidates new to remote work, focus on communication skills and accountability. How will they

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manage the transition to remote work? Finally, consider panel interviews to involve multiple perspectives and backgrounds (and save everyone time during the interview process). For example, you could include a peer to speak to the day-to-day experience. Overall, the goal is to evaluate not only the technical skills but also the soft skills and habits essential for thriving in a virtual work environment.

Rethink the Skills Test

Not every position requires a skills assessment, but it is standard for positions where you need a sense of the candidate's technical proficiency, like copy editor or proofreader. Skills tests are particularly useful for remote positions where independent work and self-motivation are key (although again, bias must be carefully managed). It is also a great opportunity for candidates to showcase their talents!

When hired as a *Radiology* manuscript editor in 2017, I was given a paper copyediting test following my interview, with instructions to complete it within 60 minutes. The test included math questions like "Convert 3 inches to metric." In 2020, the shift to remote work allowed us to rethink our approach. Today we administer a "closed-book" copyediting test via email. We create a short sample article, obscuring key details like titles and author names, and ask candidates to edit in a set time frame with Track Changes enabled. Here is a sample of typical copyediting test instructions for *Radiology*:

- This test is "closed book." We're looking to see how you approach a manuscript and your thought process behind the changes you make. If you would query the author or consult a reference text or website, please indicate by inserting a comment in the margins.
- Copyedit the text for clarity and consistency.
- Correct any misspelled words, grammatical mistakes, or other errors you find.
- You should assume the manuscript does not require a heavy edit or rewrite.

The hiring team evaluates each copyediting test to reach a consensus on next steps.

Designate an Onboarding Buddy

Onboarding a virtual employee can be downright hard. Consider logistics: Was their computer shipped on time and configured properly? How should first-day "paperwork" be handled? How will training be conducted? Integrating the new hire into office culture is especially challenging without traditional activities like a building tour or team lunch. Virtual employees may struggle to pick up on unwritten norms, like communication styles or the level of social interaction that might be expected of them. Enter the onboarding liaison.

In 2022, the RSNA Pubs department launched an initiative in which new hires are partnered up with more experienced team members. The onboarding buddy helps the new hire feel welcomed, included, and supported. Onboarding buddies are on hand to answer questions and may even schedule time for short, casual conversations (which can be tough in a virtual environment). We think of it as the new employee's first friend in the office. An onboarding buddy can be valuable for all new hires, but the support is especially important for fully remote employees who need to feel connected to the organization and its mission. Since the launch of the Pubs onboarding buddy initiative, feedback has been positive, especially from our fully remote teammates.

Remote work is a game changer, reshaping our perceptions of productivity and job satisfaction. With the right care and planning in place, workplace flexibility can be a win-win for both employers and employees.

References and Links

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