



ARTICLE

Revenue Cycle Workforce: How to Manage Sending Employees Home

Now that you sent employees home, they are not coming back.

For many, COVID-19 forced an answer to the question, “Can I work from home?” Even though many business leaders were not necessarily on board with the change, the risks of COVID-19 forced businesses to put in place platforms that enable remote work. As a result, companies began sending employees home and both physician groups and hospitals followed suit wherever possible. While clinical staff had to find ways to remain safe in the workplace, revenue cycle management staff were sent home to work remotely. At first the benefits of maintaining a healthy staff outweighed the costs of transitioning to remote work; however, even post-pandemic, the decision will have lasting effects as employees ask for permanent changes.



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Because of the growing threats of COVID-19, companies have been faced with the responsibility to prioritize the health of employees and shift to a remote working environment. This shift has spread horizontally into nearly every industry sector, including one of the most stressed: healthcare. While essential clinical staff among physician groups and hospitals find the means to remain safe and present in the workplace, other more “versatile” departments within healthcare organizations have been shifted to work remotely from home. What remains to be seen is how the transition of revenue cycle management staff to a remote working environment will impact policies and decisions over the long term.

Due to HIPAA regulations and the prevalence of protected health information (PHI) data in the revenue cycle, staff have historically worked on-site at a hospital, practice or central business office workplace. This is largely a result of the strong safeguards that have been implemented on-site to manage and protect personal patient

information. Additionally, since the productivity of revenue cycle employees is critical to receiving payment, it is important to monitor productivity closely — something that has typically been easier to do on-site.

After months of working in this new environment, management may still wonder if the employees are efficient and effective from home. Now questions arise for what this means for the future of revenue cycle staff. Will employees want to come back to working on-site? If not, or if employers deem their presence on-site nonessential moving forward, how will revenue cycle management workforce development change and adapt?

When determining the future model of managing a team of remote revenue cycle staff, consider two key questions:

1. *How can sensitive patient information be maintained with confidentiality and integrity?*
2. *How can productivity of employees be ensured in a remote environment with lack of direct, in-person oversight?*

Protecting Patient Information

One important question healthcare organizations need to address: What technology is necessary in order to transition to working remote? Ensuring staff are compliant with HIPAA rules and security policies regarding sensitive data becomes increasingly important once the data is no longer confined in a singular managed setting. However, this does not restrict the ability to work safely and confidently in a remote environment at home. The following best practices have been identified as examples for how organizations can secure sensitive patient information in an at-home workstation:

- **Encryption:** By ensuring employees have encrypted home routers, transmit patient information via encrypted and password-protected means, and use a VPN when connecting to internal intranets, health systems can ensure they are doing their part to maintain confidentiality of data.
- **Antivirus software and firewalls:** As a best practice, employees should be required to install firewalls and antivirus software to protect against breach on the devices used for work purposes in handling sensitive data.
- **Company-provided hardware:** In order to ensure all safety measures are implemented, companies should make sure that staff are using company-provided equipment such as laptops, instead of personal devices. Consider reallocating funds from traditional workstations toward these new mobile options.
- **Physical security:** Educate employees to not leave devices out and logged on for periods of inactivity.

- **Data backup requirements:** In the undesired case of a data breach, a backup hard drive should be in place to maintain a level of integrity within the data.

Finally, comprehensive training is essential to ensure that staff recognize, acknowledge and abide by the security measures put in place. Be sure staff are aware of the risks and consequences of data or software misuse. Make a point to not only ensure new staff are receiving these trainings, but also keep current staff on a regular cadence of updates and reminders via regular trainings throughout the year.

Although working remotely introduces additional risks of exposing sensitive information, employers can ensure that a remote working environment can maintain the same levels of confidentiality and integrity as on-site work.

Managing Productivity Remotely

With the shift to a telework environment, in addition to the lack of direct in-person oversight, employers fear the loss of productivity due to potential unknown distractions that can arise more readily at home. However, with the development and rise of productivity tracking software, managers will have a much clearer picture of the work that is being completed per employee.

Productivity tracking software provides a great view of the environment in which your employees work best. Data can provide insight into peak-level activity times and accurate timekeeping to create customized goals for the workforce. Additionally, employees who know their activity is being monitored will likely have a greater awareness of their productivity and accountability — maybe even more so than when in the office.

With the use of this readily available data, managers can provide visualizations across their employees to depict performance updates and remain engaged with their progress. Quality assessments can also be monitored in a similar way. Examples of productivity tracking options include reviewing:

- when a user logs onto a system;
- videos watched and trainings completed;
- keystrokes.

Monitoring an employee's performance includes both measuring the quantity and quality of their work, as well as providing valuable feedback. It is essential that supervisors and employees discuss how to maintain good performance as well as continue to improve performance in a remote environment.

Specifically, supervisors and employees must work together to:

- Establish new standard working hours, if flexibility is necessary.

- Clearly define what tasks need to be accomplished and within what time frame.
- Set expectations for reporting on work progress.

Further, it is recommended that supervisors create an accountability model for remote employees by asking a few simple questions:

- **What will you do?** This gives employees the responsibility to plan how they will successfully complete their work in a remote environment and to make their own decisions on what works best for their situation.
- **When will you do it?** This ensures that you provide clarity around expectations for your staff. There is less opportunity for confusion when timing and deadlines are made clear.
- **How will I know you've done it?** Ask your staff to notify via email or an informal chat once a task is complete.

One of the difficulties that arises in a remote environment is the need for intentional and regular communication between management and staff. This touchpoint is essential to maintain an engaged workforce long-term. Some best practices to overcome this consideration include:

- Organize a team-wide check-in at the start of each week.
- Schedule time at the start of meetings to ask: “How are you doing?”
- Coordinate videoconferences to discuss any organizational updates.

- Set policies and procedures early on; determine if a structured working schedule needs to be in place for employees to follow, whether video-enabled calls will be incorporated, what dress code is expected, etc.
- Agree upon a common communication platform.
- Maintain social interactions beyond the scope of work; suggest virtual events or forums to have casual meet-ups with employees to mimic the “hallway conversation” environment.

When implementing productivity tracking, employers should exercise caution. Too much oversight could do more harm than good and contribute to a negative work environment where the employee feels as if there is no level of trust. Employers should find a balance between maintaining productivity and keeping a high morale.

Conclusion

While the idea of remote working once caused hesitation among many employers, especially in the healthcare industry, its use is becoming more normalized and integrated into organizational culture. This shift not only impacts the makeup of the future workforce but also provides more flexibility for hospitals and physician groups to manage their labor and real estate costs. Having been forced to put in the required efforts and adjustments due to COVID-19, employers now know it is feasible to protect patient information and maintain productivity in a more remote environment.

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