Remote Work is Still Good Business
By Sandra Wiley
President
Boomer Consulting, Inc.

Recently, IBM began the process of dismantling its popular remote work program by giving thousands of its remote workers a choice: return to the office or find a new job. The company, which markets software and services for the “anytime, anywhere workforce” and has published numerous studies on the merits of remote work, says bringing employees back to the office will “improve collaboration and accelerate the pace of work.”

The move comes three years after Yahoo, Inc. called telecommuters back to the office and two years after Bank of America scaled back eligibility for its work-from-home program. Does this signal the end of the growing remote working trend? Not at all. Despite these headlines, remote work is here, and it’s growing. According to a survey done by Gallup in 2016, 43% of Americans do some or all of their work from home, up four percent in four years.

Many experts predicted cost savings for employers who no longer needed huge office space to accommodate their workforce, but the true benefit of permitting employees to work from home is not
improving the bottom line but attracting and retaining the best people. A [2014 survey](https://www.flexjobs.com) from FlexJobs found that virtual work is the most desired flexible work option people want in a job, primarily because they feel they can get more done when they’re away from the distractions of noisy co-workers and office politics and the stress of commuting.

But beyond that, it’s that the notion of “work” has changed. We used to think about going to work at being at a particular location. Today, people – especially Millennials – see work as less about being in an office and more about getting things done, servicing clients and completing projects. If your employees are doing all that, does it really matter if it’s done from a home office or a cubical?

With that said, you can’t just invest in a few dozen laptops and hope for the best. Successful work from home arrangements have a few requirements:

**More management**
If your version of management involves counting bodies behind desks and hours logged, remote work will require some major mental shifts. Successful managers of remote teams don’t base productivity on face time, but on actual output. You’ll need to establish and communicate expectations and determine how progress will be measured. When people deliver quality work by the deadline, they’re doing their jobs.

**More communication**
Keeping lines of communication open requires a little more deliberate effort when your team is spread across the city, state, country or globe. Fortunately, the tools to accomplish remote work are becoming increasingly powerful and accessible.

You’ll need cloud-based project and document management tools to give visibility into what teams are working on and manage the status of jobs. When you can’t meet in a conference room, video conferencing lets remote teams connect visually without being physically present. Instant messaging allows remote workers to touch base or ask a quick question. Most of those tools come with the ability to set your status as “away” or turn off notifications if you need to work without interruption for a while.

**A few good rules**
Few firms have formal policies in place before employees start working from home. Often, one valuable employee will request to work remotely and more will follow. Before long, the firm is accommodating a wide range of remote work situations with no formal policy in place. If that sounds familiar, it’s not too late to get one in place. We recommend addressing what technology the firm provides versus what the employee is responsible for, how to ensure client data is secure, hours of availability, eligibility for remote work, and how performance will be measured.

**Honest feedback from everyone**
Every employee isn’t naturally cut out for working remotely, and every manager isn’t adept at managing remote teams. Some will require a period of adjustment while they learn how to make working from home work for them. That’s why it’s crucial to have a culture that values honest feedback. People at all levels of the firm should be able to give honest and straightforward feedback. When people are honest, they don’t need to sugar coat things. They just say what needs to be improved and work together on making it happen. Being open to honest feedback helps promote a healthy team environment and continuous improvement.

The collaboration and relationship building that naturally happens in an office environment may not come easily to a remote team, but that’s not a good enough reason to keep your people chained to a desk. Firms that encourage remote work and provide the culture and tools to make it work enjoy a larger pool of qualified candidates to choose from, enhanced employee productivity, greater employee engagement, and retention.