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Tips for Remote Employment for Blind Rehabilitation Professionals
National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision

Introduction

This guide offers basic strategies for increasing effectiveness and efficiency when working from home, suggestions for maintaining strong communication with your employer, colleagues, and stakeholders. This guide is not meant to be comprehensive, but to provide a starting point. Situations vary, so problem-solving and creativity will be critical as you determine what works best for your situation.

Organization

Working remotely is very different than reporting to an office or providing itinerant services. First, it is essential to maintain a work-life balance, thus keeping a schedule of work time, breaks, lunch, and regular work hours. Communicate with your supervisor about your mutual expectations. If you are struggling, talk to your supervisor and identify solutions that will work. Our homes have distractions that our work environments do not. We might not have the needed equipment, such as a photocopier or a scanner at home. Your supervisor needs to help problem solve and ensure you have adequate technology and solutions to perform your assigned tasks. It may take time to create a productive workspace and routine for working remotely.

Suggestions for Working Remotely

- Identify a designated work area. Find an area where you can work comfortably and productively. This area should allow you to make phone calls and participate in virtual meetings without interruption, have the necessary equipment, and expose you to the least distractions.
- Ensure you have the necessary equipment, such as a work phone and a secure computer. Many individuals do not have assigned work phones; therefore, ask your supervisor to help you get a Google Voice number or identify another option. It is important that consumers have a way to contact you directly.
- Follow a daily routine. Create a schedule and try to follow it. This schedule should include consistent work hours and lunch breaks.
- Create a weekly and daily plan of tasks to complete, including consumers to contact, services, and training to be provided, and documentation to complete. Monitor your progress on these goals.
- Schedule time for calling consumers, documentation, ordering items, researching resources, checking and responding to email, and following up with new referrals. It may be helpful to turn off email notifications to reduce distractions.

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- Once you start a task, stick with it for the pre-determined time block. Sometimes you need to be flexible, but scheduling time on the calendar will help you complete necessary tasks.
- Schedule appointments to provide training to consumers. This scheduled day and time will increase the likelihood the consumer will answer the phone/virtual session because they know who is contacting them
- Document the work you have completed with the consumer in their case file.
- Communicate regularly with your team.
- You may find that remote work provides an opportunity to work on professional development, such as taking short courses, networking with other professionals, and researching local, state, and national resources that would benefit consumers.

Confidentiality

Working remotely can present many challenges. One of these is the protection of private information, such as consumer's contact information. Agencies should arrange for all employees expected to make telephone calls to consumers to have a "Google Voice" number and access to a work email address. Also, there are many free conference lines and video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Skype, Google Hangouts, and Facebook groups.

The following are guidelines that can be implemented to increase the protection of consumer information.

- Keep all consumer files and documentation in a locked file cabinet in a locked room or drawer.
- Keep electronic consumer files on a password-protected computer or case management system.
- Never discuss consumers or consumer issues in a public area where others may hear the discussion.
- Ask all consumers or potential consumers how they would like to receive communications, such as telephone calls, texts, or emails. Ask if leaving a voice mail is permissible. Agree on what information can be included in an email or text.
- Be careful when including private information in emails and texts. This communication should be limited to information that is not confidential.
- At the beginning of remote group meetings, ask all to identify themselves with first names only, and to keep highly personal information out of the conversation.
- Keep a separate document of the individuals who participated in these remote/virtual sessions. Keep this documentation in employee records, not in individual consumer files.

Remote Team Strategy Development

Remote work can be very isolating and lonely, especially for individuals who have limited experience with it. Consider building remote teams. Each "team" might Include a rehab teacher/vision rehabilitation therapist, an O&M specialist, an assistive technology instructor, and a case manager/social worker or a support staff. This "team" can develop a specific strategy to continue to meet the needs of open/active consumers and address new referrals and assessments. This team can hold a weekly virtual meeting and daily check-ins if needed.

Support Staff Assistance

Support staff can play an important role in the remote training environment. They can assist with well-checks of all open consumers. Provide a specific list of questions, including:

- Are you able to, or do you have someone who is helping with grocery shopping and getting needed medication?
- Do you feel safe in your home?

Additional Tasks for Support Staff

- Set up appointments for you to call/meet with consumers who report safety needs.
- Order equipment, mail out devices to consumers, and make sure assistive devices are functioning properly.
- Remind consumers of upcoming group events.
- Increase their knowledge through continuing education opportunities.

Tips for Blind Employees

For employees who are blind or vision impaired and working from home, work tasks can feel overwhelming. You may not have someone who can take a quick look at your computer if it is not functioning correctly or make sure a document is organized in a visually appealing format. The following are some ideas on dealing with these challenges.

AIRA is an app that you can use on your smartphone. This service is free for any call up to 5 minutes in length. The app connects you with a sighted assistant who can view a task through the smartphone camera and assist you. They even have the ability to remote into your computer to assist you with a task. You can pay for this service if you need more than a 5-minute call. There is no limit on the number of calls you can make in one day.

Be My Eyes is another app. This app is similar to AIRA and completely free. The sighted assistants are not trained; they are volunteers. You should not use this service to identify any confidential or sensitive information. Talk with your supervisor about which coworker might help with proofreading documents or completing other visually tricky tasks. Increase your technology skills. Hadley has many instructional tutorials, discussion groups, and videos on a variety of topics.