

MANAGING REMOTELY DURING THE PANDEMIC

CELEBRATING ALABAMA'S PROGRESS

CERTIFIED PUBLIC MANAGER PROGRAM
CPM SOLUTIONS ALABAMA 2021



**CERTIFIED PUBLIC
MANAGER PROGRAM**

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The research, findings, and recommendations presented in this white paper do not represent the views of any agency or organization, but rather the collective educational research and analysis from a diverse group of participants in the Certified Public Manager training program.

I. Introduction

The sudden shift to remote work during the pandemic forced leaders across the nation to lead and manage in new and innovative ways. Alabama's public sector employees responded to the challenge of managing work remotely by utilizing technology, creating new structures and processes, and leading employees remotely to continue providing critical services for Alabama's citizens.

On March 13, 2020, Alabama Governor Kay Ivey declared a State of Emergency due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) and released the following statement:

"Alabamians are smart and savvy, and I know they will continue taking appropriate precautions to prevent the spread to themselves or others. We have taken a calm and collected approach in preparation for this first confirmed case, and we need to remember that calm and steady wins the race. Alabamians should not be fearful but instead use common sense to watch out for themselves and others. We will remain engaged on the matter and continue prioritizing the health and wellbeing of all Alabamians. I am grateful to the work of State Health Officer Dr. Scott Harris, as well as the members of my Coronavirus Task Force and countless individuals who are also watching and working on this situation closely."

This unprecedented situation forced state government leaders to work together and innovate quickly to ensure continuous service. While some agencies had implemented remote work to some capacity, remote work had never been done on such a large scale.

The purpose of the *CPM Solutions Alabama Managing Remotely During the Pandemic Team* is to identify best practices utilized by selected state agencies for managing a remote workforce during the pandemic, research effective remote management practices, and offer recommendations to manage a remote workforce more effectively in the future.

II. Background

The *CPM Solutions Alabama Managing Remotely During the Pandemic Team* recognizes the relevancy and importance of this project for the future. The team began our research by interviewing senior leaders from three state agencies to discover their best practices for managing remotely.

The three state agencies selected include the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM), the Department of Insurance (ALDOI), and the Alabama SuperComputer Authority (ASA).

These agencies were selected by the team based on their diversity in mission and number of employees. Interview questions for agency leaders were created to discover best practices from the various state agencies. The excitement and energy from the three agencies chosen were captivating. Each of the three agencies assembled teams of leaders to share success stories, lessons learned, and plans to continue with the positive progress in managing remotely. Interviews were conducted with department heads, information technology managers, human resources managers, and senior leaders. Zoom interviews allowed all *CPM Solutions Alabama Managing Remotely During the Pandemic Team* members to participate in the engaging dialogue with the agency leaders. A summary of the insights is below.

III. The Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM)

A. Overall Success

The Alabama Department of Environmental Management was selected to represent large state agencies. ADEM was the largest of the three agencies interviewed and currently employs 581 people. The mission at ADEM is to assure all citizens of the state a safe, healthful, and productive environment. The leaders are committed to this mission for the citizens they serve and the employees of the agency. ADEM experienced success in managing remotely because of the high-quality infrastructure proactively designed and built by the IT department, the positive attitudes of the employees, and the clarity of direction given to all teams during the pandemic. Once the directive was given to transition to working in a remote environment, it only took ADEM leaders about four hours to make the shift. The success of the change was due to cooperation, planning, and execution of the plan. The leaders of ADEM shared stories of high productivity,

frequent communication, and reinforcing clarity about roles and responsibilities throughout the pandemic.

B. Remote Work Policies

Decisiveness is imperative when transition must occur quickly. ADEM's leaders believe success for their agency was due to quick decisions on the feasibility of employees to work remotely with little to no interruption in tasks and job quality. With over five hundred employees, leaders relied on managers to make decisions for the teams to ensure high-quality service to the citizens of Alabama. While the pandemic has created an opportunity to evaluate and adjust remote work policies, ADEM leaders are pleased with the outcomes. They are working to ensure policies are in place to allow for continued success.

C. Prioritize Training

ADEM leaders were committed to ensuring all employees were trained and had the supplies and resources needed for success. Speed and efficiency were critical factors in managing remotely during the pandemic. Employees received training on accessing the Virtual Private Network (VPN) and were paired with team members who were more proficient in specific tools and applications. Leaders made it a priority to create training documents so employees could quickly access information for clarity. Leaders celebrated the creation of over twelve training documents produced in about two hours. These documents were made available with important information to increase employees' knowledge of applications and infrastructure, which increased remote work productivity. ADEM's commitment to equipping team members with training, tools, and peer support resulted in success and continues to create positive progress in the remote work environment.

D. Managing Employees

Numerous methods for managing employees were utilized to ensure communication was clear, priorities addressed, and productivity remained high. Zoom, Microsoft Teams, text messages, and interactive reports were utilized to manage employees and create accountability. ADEM employees were flexible and optimistic as they experienced new ways of being managed. Feedback was important during this time. Supervisors were open to listening and adjusting behaviors and tools as needed. The focus on employee needs created an environment for success.

E. Technology Upgrades

ADEM's IT department proactively prioritized infrastructure and tools to ensure working remotely was possible and successful. Leaders praised the IT Team for the excellent work done in the past to prepare for this moment. Additional VPN licenses were purchased quickly, and an audit of technology upgrades was done early once the entire agency transitioned to remote work. ADEM celebrates that few additions were necessary because of the visionary work that was done creating high-quality infrastructure and systems even before the pandemic.

With the efforts described above, ADEM was able to maintain productivity and continue its mission for the citizens of the state while most employees worked remotely during a span of nearly 15 months. In fact, some ADEM leaders expressed their past skepticism of telework turned into pride after seeing successes during the period. As a result of ADEM's success at managing employees while working remotely, the agency now offers a permanent telework option of up to two days per week for qualified employees and positions.

IV. The Alabama Department of Insurance (ALDOI)

A. Overall Success

The Alabama Department of Insurance was chosen to represent a mid-size state agency. Senior leaders were interviewed. With 155 employees, the Alabama Department of Insurance's mission is to serve the people of Alabama by regulating the insurance industry, providing consumer protection, promoting market stability, and enforcing fire safety standards and laws. The ALDOI leaders were committed to ensuring continuous services and adding new team members as needed. ALDOI's success at managing remotely was due to the availability of tools, the focus on high-quality technology, and the priority of continuous learning. Instead of allowing the pandemic to hinder progress, ALDOI used the pandemic as a catalyst for growth. Commissioner Jim Ridling celebrates ALDOI progress, positive impact, and success in protecting Alabama insurance consumers. The letter to all ALDOI employees expresses Commissioner Ridling's perspective and encouragement to the team while demonstrating their success and his willingness to celebrate the value his team adds to our state.

To All ALDOI Employees:

As you all know well, the Coronavirus pandemic is still with us and will be for a while longer. This current peak seems to be hitting closer to home than ever before. As it has been since the COVID-19 virus first appeared, the health and safety of our employees will continue to be our top priority. I am happy to say that the ALDOI has been fully operational during this entire time. Even in the teleworking environment, we have not missed a beat in our efforts to protect Alabama insurance consumers and serve the regulated community. You have all turned this challenge into an opportunity that we can be proud of.

Sincerely,

Jim Ridling

Commissioner

The Commissioner's leadership and commitment to ensure a smooth transition and productive results during the pandemic created results to celebrate. His leadership team created a support network for all employees and continues to make positive progress in managing remotely.

B. Remote Work Policies

ALDOI had remote work policies in place before the pandemic. The Rates and Forms Division and the Consumer Services Division were rotating, working remotely one day a week, Tuesday through Friday. All positions within these two divisions were already web-based. The Accounting Division was outsourcing additional EFT payments and decided to go 100% Alabama interactive e-statements for miscellaneous payments. These work policies were modified to encompass all employees within ALDOI according to their job classifications during the pandemic. The willingness and cooperation of the employees to work together continued to accomplish the goals of the department.

C. Prioritize Training

Prioritizing training was the key to success for ALDOI coupled with the employees' desire to attend and apply the training content. Employees were quick to try new ways of completing their tasks and were eager to maximize the technology available to them. The need for training

allowed all employees to work jointly with the IT team, and this partnership created synergy around the innovative approaches to the new work environment.

D. Managing Employees

Merriam-Webster defines trust as assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone. Trust was the cornerstone of ALDOI's success in managing employees. Leaders trusted their managers to lead their employees. Confident managers would utilize the tools such as WebEx, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams to schedule and participate in meetings in the remote work environment. This trust in managers and employees' commitment led to consistent productivity, frequent communication, and successful completion of departmental tasks while servicing the state's citizens and consumers.

E. Technology Upgrades

Technology upgrades were addressed as needed for employees. The ALDOI has used the pandemic as an opportunity to take a proactive strategic approach to prepare for future events. While the existing technology and employees' cooperative attitudes created a thriving remote work environment, leaders of ALDOI have a renewed commitment to ensuring a strategic approach in ensuring technology upgrades are incorporated into all strategic plans. This perspective has allowed a problematic event to become a learning opportunity so that Alabama citizens have a state-of-the-art agency delivering the ALDOI mission.

V. The Alabama SuperComputer Authority (ASA)

A. Overall Success

The Alabama SuperComputer Authority was selected to represent small state agencies. The mission of ASA is to provide information technology resources and services for the advancement of education, research, and economic development in Alabama. The eleven employees' commitment to this mission is evident in their conversation and actions.

Continued success during the pandemic was a direct result of the robust infrastructure, the highly competent employees, and the advanced technology, which allowed continued success during the pandemic. One week before the pandemic, a new employee was hired. Not only did the employee feel connected to the team and the mission of the ASA, but the onboarding

process was also not hindered due to the proactive work of the team to ensure remote work was possible and mirrored the experience in the office.

B. Remote Work Policies

Most jobs tasks could be completed in the remote work environment with no disruption to the outcome. However, when employees were needed to come into the office, employees were scheduled to enter at strategic times to ensure social distancing. The leaders of ASA shared best practices about working remotely with employees and encouraged each team member to have a designated workspace in their home. The agency's focus is to educate and empower employees so that the environment is free of distractions and create a space where interruptions are minimal.

C. Prioritize Training

Employees communicated frequently and utilized video calling to remain connected to the team and the work. As employees expressed their needs for training, this information was shared with the team. The team's small size allowed employees to share knowledge with each other and provide peer-to-peer technology training. This environment allowed employees to experience community during the workday through the virtual technology being utilized.

D. Managing Employees

The ASA team utilized email and STAARS to stay connected and communicate. Members needed not be micromanaged; however, one-on-one check-ins helped managers keep a pulse on employees and provide feedback via Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Communication increased between the 11 employees to ensure connection.

E. Technology Upgrades

While the agency proactively prepared for remote work, there were a few changes needed to increase effectiveness. Several changes include changing from Microsoft QuickBooks to Microsoft QuickBooks online, implementing electronic signatures, using Adobe Acrobat, and increasing the number of VPN connections. Teams are continuing to utilize the technology used during remote work, and ASA is excited about the progress that has occurred.

VI. Successful Remote Management

Alabama's state agency leaders deserve to be celebrated as they embraced the challenge of transitioning to a remote work model and successfully offered continuity of services during the pandemic. State government employees learned new technology and skills to maintain productivity, while balancing work demands and personal responsibilities during a difficult period. State agencies, organizations, and employees gained confidence and experience in remote work strategies that will be useful should situations demand remote work in the future. Furthermore, some organizations may consider some form of permanent remote work policies in the future based on the success already experienced. For these organizations, this CPM Solutions Alabama team offers the following considerations.

A. Implementation Process

Leadership must assess the job positions, responsibilities, and tasks that can adequately be accomplished remotely and those that cannot. Leaders must also clearly communicate what they expect from each employee every day (*5 steps to implement a successful remote work strategy*, n.d.). It is crucial to outline responsibilities, expectations, and deadlines.

B. Productivity Tools

These days, for most workers, a computer and the internet are not enough to perform their work. Collaborative tools such as Microsoft Teams (live chat, screen sharing, calling), Zoom, electronic documents, and DocuSign enable productive communication and collaboration, while tools such as VPNs ensure proper cybersecurity (*How to Implement a Successful Remote Work Strategy*, 2020).

C. Employee Engagement

Gallup is an American analytics and advisory company based in Washington, D.C., which George Gallup founded in 1935. The company became known for its public opinion polls conducted worldwide. Gallup recommends that for employees to be engaged, they must have 12 needs met (Gallup, 2020, p. 62). Supervisors must meet these needs to have a more engaged workplace. Gallup's research proves that to have an engaged workforce, managers must focus on employee's basic needs, individual needs, team needs, and growth needs. Of the 12 engagement needs, Gallup research reveals the following areas of focus while managing employees remotely:

1. Q5 – Involve employees in setting goals and priorities.
2. Q6 - Provide the employee with meaningful feedback.
3. Q11- Review and discuss steps for an employee to reach goals.

While managing from a distance, a proactive approach of regularly scheduled communication between supervisor and employee to discuss goals and priorities, provide feedback, and performance coaching is essential in overcoming feelings of isolation while providing an environment of virtual engagement. Best practices of remote management suggest daily or weekly communication with monthly coaching sessions, depending on the employee's experience and preference, in order to maintain effectiveness in these three areas of focus.

VII. Recommendations

In providing an organizational culture of workplace flexibility to allow work-life balance for employees, employers must be intentional in offering opportunities for teamwork, personal engagement, and inclusion. (Lee, 2018). Our CPM Solutions Alabama team offers the following recommendations for organizations considering a remote management model.

A. Make Communication a Priority

As stated above in the Implementation Process of Successful Remote Management, leaders must clearly communicate what they expect from each employee each day. All responsibilities, expectations, and deadlines must be clarified for each employee and repeated frequently to ensure success. Managers must keep all remote workers up-to-date on policy and positions or company changes and challenges to ensure a healthy work/life balance and ensure each employee feels connected to the agency's work and mission. Communication is a two-way conversation, which must also include systematic systems for gathering feedback from the team members to ensure organizational decision making, problem solving and collaboration takes place effectively.

B. Ensure Productivity is Tracked, and Continuity is Evident

Each agency must have a methodology for tracking productivity and celebrating progress. This will require organization and flexibility, which is critical for managing a remote work environment effectively. While a structured plan must be in place, managers need autonomy and flexibility to navigate employees' situations to create the most productive culture.

C. Provide an Environment of Collaboration

Managers must set up clear remote work strategies and keep that element of spontaneous spark and creativity going with the team. This environment of collaboration keeps agencies growing and employees connected. Managers need shared documents for tracking work activities as well as conversations about acceptable behavior for virtual collaboration.

D. Achieve Organizational Mission and Celebrate Success

Leaders must intentionally focus on creating a sense of belonging and ensure the agency is accomplishing its mission. New tools, new frameworks, and new technology, including video conferencing, must be implemented. Yet, the agency's culture and creating a community of team members who serve the state of Alabama must be the focus in managing remotely. Celebrating the agency's success is vital to continue the progress and ensure the success of managing remotely.

VIII. References

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