

I'm worried an off-site direct report isn't actually working

What could be going on? How to handle it:

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While you're stressing out about whether your off-site direct report is working — Why hasn't she sent an update? Why isn't she on chat? — your direct report could be stressing out about whether you *trust* that she's working. And ironically, these doubts could be taking up precious time and mental space for both of you.

Instead of letting your worry distract you and potentially harm your relationship with your direct report, or even her performance, take action.



"Look at it this way; if it were a 'cat eat cat' world, do you think I could sleep all day?"

What could be going on?

- You're falling prey to unproven fears because you can't see your direct report working, are new to managing remote workers, or have been burned by remote workers in the past.
- The person is, in fact, getting plenty done but not updating you to the extent that you want.
- Poor communication tools (or poor use of them) is making it hard for you to keep tabs on the person's output.
- There's a time zone or cultural barrier getting in the way of your working relationship.
- You haven't provided the person with enough guidance — maybe because it's hard to do so over chat or video — resulting in work that's incomplete or disappointing.
- The person really isn't working enough or to a high enough standard.

How to handle it:

1. Focus on what your direct report has accomplished, not on whether you can see him or her accomplishing it.

Research shows that remote workers tend to work more hours than co-locateds. Yet all too often, managers let sheer face time bias their views of a direct report's work ethic. Seeing a co-located direct report work late or through lunch, for example, could lead you to think she's getting more done than a remote team member — someone whose hours and effort aren't visible to you.

To fight this potential bias, make a list of what your remote direct report has actually accomplished in the last month or quarter. Don't rely on your memory, which is prone to highlight and corroborate your fears. Instead, objectively assemble the facts: Go back to old emails, lists of goals from planning meetings and performance reviews, and task updates in project management tools.

Even if you do notice a drop in production — your direct report is completing fewer support tickets this month compared to last, for example — consider whether it really indicates he or she hasn't been working enough. Could it be that his or her output the past two months was unsustainably high, meaning what you now see is only a return to normalcy?

If you do uncover evidence of underperformance, you'll need to address the cause, whether it's a motivation issue or skill gap. For help, see [Direct report is slacking off](#) and [Direct report tries hard but underperforms](#).

2. Take steps to build trust and rapport with your remote direct report.

If you don't trust your direct report, it's all too easy to use the physical distance as an excuse to disengage with the person. Maybe you delegate fewer assignments, check in less frequently, or hold off on providing tough feedback or development opportunities.

That only compounds the problem. First, a weak relationship with you — the person's main connection to the company — might de-motivate him and hamper his performance. Second, if his output really is suffering, he needs *more* attention from you, not less. And third, when you stop trusting someone with important work, you give him fewer opportunities to prove himself, creating a vicious cycle of low expectations yielding low performance.

To build or rebuild trust with your direct report, try:

- **Getting to know them better.** Maybe you reserve the first 5 minutes of every 1-on-1 for informal chatting or finally make the effort this quarter to visit them in person. On occasion, check in on how being remote is working out for the person: *“How are you handling the lack of separation between home and work? Do you have something that helps you decompress?”*

- **Asking your direct report for feedback on what you could do better as a manager.** When you ask in a genuine way, it sends a signal that you value her opinion. You're more likely to get honest, helpful input if you ask for feedback in a specific area; for example how you're addressing some of the common challenges that off-site workers face: *"How am I doing with sharing company news? Is there anything that's come up recently that you wish you had more (or even less) detail or context on?"*

For more, see [Zipp's tips: How I build trust on my team](#).

3. Seek and apply insights from peer managers who have remote team members.

Every organization has its own culture around remote work. To better navigate yours, turn to the knowledge bank that's already all around you: your peers. All the better if you can find a manager of remote workers whose roles are similar to the one your direct report holds. You're more likely to find such a peer if you're consistently [developing a strong internal peer network](#).

Once you book time with experienced peers, you could ask questions like:

- *"Have you had similar concerns about a remote's work habits? What happened? And what did you learn from the experience?"*
- *"How do you establish and maintain trust with your remote direct reports?"*
- *"Which communication and project management tools are you using? How are they working for you and your team?"*

Try out what seems relevant to your situation. Then share how it goes with your peers to help refine and reinforce effective management practices across your organization.

4. Clarify and align your performance expectations with your direct report.

What if the person thinks his or her work is exactly what you're looking for — when it's not? This is more common than you might think.

The problem often lies in how you've set and enforced (or failed to set and enforce) performance expectations, which can be especially tricky with remote workers. For example, a co-located direct report can often turn around, point to his draft customer report, and ask you, "How's this looking?" to be sure he's on track. But it's much tougher for an off-site worker to have these kinds of spontaneous exchanges that might not seem like much as they're happening, but can go a long way toward aligning expectations between a manager and direct report.

In addition to going over instructions carefully with the person, try:

- **Using visual aids.** Experienced manager [Shahan Mohideen](#) says he often uses slide decks, images, mock-ups, and spreadsheets, anything to help direct reports literally see what he means when he's giving instructions. You might even consider mailing something for them to see, hold, and inspect — like a physical prototype or a printout — as Mohideen once did.
- **Probing for input and understanding.** This is especially important during chat or phone conversations. Try asking questions like, “*Does this approach feel doable to you, given what I'm asking for and your other responsibilities?*” or “*What do you think will be most challenging about this project?*”
- **Following up.** Since remote workers can't tap you on the shoulder for a quick reminder, be sure to send a written recap of what you both discussed, both so your direct report has an opportunity to clear up misunderstandings and so you have a written record you can refer to in the future to gauge progress.

For more, see [Setting expectations: A checklist to save yourself from “but that’s not what I wanted.”](#)

5. Clarify and align your communication expectations — for both 1-on-1 and team updates.

No manager wants to play the role of parole officer, using the pretense of a quick check-in to confirm the person is working — that makes the shortlist for ways to damage trust. But consider what a difference establishing communication expectations *upfront* can make: If you've preemptively agreed to share updates at certain intervals, what might otherwise come off as micromanaging becomes something routine, a natural part of your working relationship and the whole team's culture.

To set and uphold expectations around how, and how often, your direct report provides progress reports, consider:

- **The frequency and level of detail you want in 1-on-1 updates.** Depending on your situation, you could ask for a status update each morning, or weekly, or whenever they hit a milestone in the work. It could be a brief email or call with highlights, or an in-depth report. Err on the side of overcommunication at the outset so that you feel like you're getting the information you need. You can always pare back, [removing a control or check in](#) once you and your direct report are in sync.
- **Team-wide protocols.** If everyone else on the team is following a system for sharing goals and updates, your remote direct report should, too. Don't underestimate the element of social pressure — remind them of what the whole team has agreed to do. Should she email recaps to everyone after sales decisions? Post to a chat channel when she uncovers a potential fork in the road? Promptly update the team's project or task management tool? If your team doesn't follow specific practices like these, consider meeting as a group and brainstorming ideas for some.

- **Address any concerns or obstacles.** If your direct report thinks more communication is unnecessary, or will be too much of a burden, share how more and better communication will help you both: *“If we all have more insight into each other’s work, we’ll be able to catch and address issues earlier.”* Also, be sure to acknowledge (and correct!) any communication roadblocks they may have faced: Perhaps the team’s been huddling in-person without videoing her in, you’ve been ignoring time zone differences and IMing during her lunch hour, or no one ever trained her on the project management tool everyone uses.

6. Make check-ins more interactive — for example, have your direct report screen-share work.

Maybe you need to see the person’s work, not just hear about it, to take the guesswork out of what the person is getting done. And when you visually review work together during a check-in, you create the opportunity for a back-and-forth discussion that can be used for feedback, coaching, and development. Screen-sharing could also circumvent cultural or language barriers. There’s less to interpret if you’re both looking at the same thing, versus inferring progress from tone and your or your remote’s understanding of a second language.

If you’ll need time to review the work before the check-in, be sure you give your direct report enough advance notice. And use our [team feedback assessment](#) to ensure you’re actually giving helpful feedback, not just verifying whether something is done, which can be perceived as micromanaging.

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