

As working lives get busier and more flexible work options open up, a way to keep in touch with remote colleagues is needed. Colleagues might be working from home, in a different state or 'on the road'.

Feeling part of a team

It is difficult to replicate 'water-cooler' chat with remote staff but it is becoming easier. A number of tools are now available to support individuals working in remote teams. In order for these tools to work, there must be a 'connection' established first. If two colleagues don't communicate beforehand, providing access to instant messaging tools is not going to make them talk.

Commitment to communicate

Keeping the connection with staff can be difficult. It is easy to fall into the trap of 'out of sight, out of mind'. All members of a team are responsible for keeping in touch with colleagues.

A variety of tools can be used to help remote staff feel connected, but there needs to be a commitment to 'keeping in touch' for this to work. No technology can replace those personal interactions.

Making an effort to call, message or email on a regular basis can help manage the sense of isolation often felt by teams working remotely from each other.

Head office or branch staff need to make an effort to find out more about remote staff, their interests, goals and location.

Instant messaging (IM)

Tools such as Messenger and Skype can help colleagues keep in touch without the lag in communication that comes with email. It can be used for one-on-one chat or to direct a question to a group of people. IM shows who is online and also allows sending of messages to those offline.

Unlike other available communications tools, instant messaging allows staff to feel immediately connected to the rest of the team.

Blogs

Internal blogs can allow remote teams to communicate without real time boundaries. Team members create a short post every few days (or more frequently if required) highlighting something interesting that has happened or generally what they have been up to. This creates awareness among other team members about what is going on and who to go to for help on a particular topic.

Wikis

Wikis can be used by colleagues in different locations to work on a single document. A wiki allows multiple people to access the document at the same time and see the changes that each person has made. This is useful for creating a policy document, working on a position description or drafting a project plan.

Video calling

Free services like Skype can be used for video calling remote staff. An internet connection and a webcam is all that is needed. A video call helps build an existing working relationship as well as enabling staff who haven't met to put a face to a name or voice.

Microblogging

Twitter and Yammer allow users to send and read updates from 'their followers'. Short posts are useful for keeping others informed of what's happening without having to compile a blog post.

While Twitter posts are available for all to see or secured to those selected, Yammer can be secured to just members of a particular organisation.

Like instant messaging, microblogging access can give that sense of 'belonging' for remote staff.

Try them out

Not all tools will be suited to every situation and teams will need to experiment and find what works. Remember to schedule face-to-face time with remote staff where possible to continue to build relationships.