UCEDD Tip Sheets

UCEDD Tip Sheets are produced by the Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD) through the UCEDD Resource Center (URC).

Contents

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THE LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION, ADVOCACY & RESEARCH NETWORK

UCEDD Resource Center
A project of AUCD, in partnership with ACL, to strengthen the network of UCEDDs

Admin Essentials
Fostering Organizational Culture in a Remote Environment

What is Addressed in this Tip Sheet?

This tip sheet explores how centers across the network have approached remote work and how they are thinking about returning to in-person work. It discusses strategies and tools to help staff bond and be productive. It also covers thoughts about staying remote, re-opening offices, or using a hybrid format where some are remote, and some are in-person. This tip sheet summarizes a virtual roundtable conversation on the topic held on March 2, 2022, and archived here.

The Admin Essentials series brings together UCEDD directors and business managers with content experts to address pressing administrative challenges. These virtual roundtables provide an opportunity to share resources, troubleshoot challenges, and brainstorm creative solutions to a broad range of administrative topics.

Why is it Important

UCEDDs have a lot of people and projects. Sometimes it is hard to communicate across teams or foster a productive and welcoming workplace culture. With the COVID-19 pandemic, most UCEDD

staff were suddenly working remotely. Two years after the pandemic's start, it is clear that remote work will continue to be a significant part of the workforce experience for many UCEDDs. Remote work is a big change from the previous workplace norm, and it can be hard for some to stay as productive, efficient, connected, and collaborative remotely.

> "We are doing our very best to make people feel connected to the UCEDD and we are here, but not in the same way that we were here before." – Roundtable Participant

UCEDDs have tried different things to foster a welcoming and productive workplace culture. Many still share uncertainties about and challenges with operating remotely. These questions are becoming more pressing as centers increasingly think about reopening or going to a hybrid environment, meaning that there are both in-person and remote workers. Strategies for promoting a good workplace culture centered around three themes: communication, trust, and support.

1. Communication with employees needs to be frequent and consistent. Roundtable participants shared that if you are not communicating enough, false information might fill that silence. Incorrect or negative information can weaken workplace culture by creating distrust or conflicts.

2. Trust goes both ways. In a remote environment, leadership needs to trust that staff will get their work done and that staff knows what works for them. Center leadership should also be transparent and reliable. This can encourage a work environment where people trust that leadership has their best interests in mind. Employees should be comfortable asking questions and sharing opinions.

3. Centers should be supportive of employee needs and circumstances. Leadership should make it clear that they are willing to work with employees to help them do their best work.

Many of these issues are particularly important for newer or early career professionals. The remote setting can make it harder to feel connected with coworkers. A lack of connections can make it harder to get the work done. Starting remotely when others are used to working in-person can make it harder to learn and navigate the culture or hierarchy.

Different Work Models: Remote, Hybrid, and All In-Person Work

While many UCEDDs have a lot of flexibility to choose whether they work in-person, some UCEDDs must follow university policies that require one way or the other. For those who can choose, roundtable participants shared two main questions to ask when choosing between remote, hybrid, and all in-person work: 1) what do employees want? and 2) can the work get done? Identifying the essential functions of a job can help determine whether it can be done remotely.

At some UCEDDs, employees really want a hybrid workplace. At others, employees have shared that a hybrid model seems like the worst option – they would prefer all in-person or all remote. However, being all in-person or all remote can raise equity concerns. A hybrid environment can be more inclusive, making work more accessible regardless of ability status. It can also make things easier for

families and may have [decreased microaggressions](#) in some workplaces.

Regardless of whether the UCEDD is remote, in-person, or hybrid, roundtable participants stressed the need to reconsider how the workday is structured. Online meetings are scheduled back-to-back, with few breaks. This is not sustainable; consider 45- or 50-minute meetings to allow time for post-meeting follow-up or breaks. Plus, if work will be in-person, it is unreasonable to ask people to come in for an 8-hour day of online meetings. Participants stressed the importance of taking advantage of being in-person. In-person work should be interactive and collaborative. People do not want to be required to come in if it is just to sit at a desk. In a hybrid environment, the timing of meetings must account for the time needed for in-person staff to move to a conference room, if that is expected.

The University is an important player in these considerations. Universities have made many reopening plans and then changed them. This makes planning hard. Many Universities are unsure about remote or hybrid work models. Universities have always been slow to adopt new systems, and this is the case with remote work. Often, the University is not as open to change as UCEDDs would like. Ongoing conversations with the University are important for learning if remote work is an option. One UCEDD even added a person to the business office to deal with the University because it is so much harder to work with the University.

"If this is something that the supervisor thinks will work, and we have relatively straightforward ways of being accountable, why wouldn't we do that?" – Roundtable Participant

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Effective Remote and Hybrid Work

A few participants said that the overwhelming consensus in their centers is that they would like a hybrid work environment. Many also shared how hard it was to create a good hybrid model. This challenge comes in part from the fact that different people's jobs have different in-person needs. Some people being able to work remotely more than others can make things feel unfair. Having a clear and standard process for working remotely can help.

One Center's process is that anyone who is interested needs to meet with their supervisor to discuss the needs of the project, whether their work can be done from home, and what it would take for the work to be done remotely. They must discuss all the logistics, including whether they would need better internet or a work phone.

After these conversations, formal remote work agreements can help staff feel settled and comfortable with their work arrangements. Many centers keep remote work informal if it is short-term or only occasional, but an agreement can be helpful for setting expectations and being consistent. Participants shared that permanent or frequent remote work requires a formal agreement.

Some centers are moving to a hybrid model because there is not enough office space to be all in-person. During the pandemic, many UCEDDs hired more people and now do not have space for all of them. To address this, many UCEDDs are asking staff to decide whether they want to work remotely and how much of the time they want to be remote. One such Center asked who would be interested in continuing to work entirely remotely. That option was less popular than expected – most people wanted to be in-person at least some of the time.

A common concern with remote and especially hybrid work is that whoever is figuring out the logistics for space and scheduling will have a lot more work. Having a clear process can allow different teams to consistently implement the process for remote work. This can spread the work across different people. Developing this plan should not be one person's job, but part of a center-wide discussion.

While figuring out hybrid work can be complicated, hybrid work has opened a lot of options. Many centers reported that being hybrid or offering remote options allowed for more creative ways to get work done. Centers have been able to hire people statewide (and out of state) for permanent remote work. This has expanded the pool for hiring and talent. It also allows for a better statewide presence.

"I feel that we had to create these virtual worlds to try and make sure that people feel engaged and that they understand what our mission is." – Roundtable Participant

Ideas and Reminders for Remote and Hybrid Work

- Some centers use a "hot desk" or "hoteling" model. Centers have a dedicated workspace in the office for people who usually work remotely. The space has everything needed to plug in and get to work, for those who do not typically work in-person. Rules are being written for these shared workspaces. Many participants shared that employees will only get a designated workspace if they will be in-person at least 50% of the time.

- One center has set business hours from 10 am to 2 pm. During that window, everyone is supposed to be online and working. This helps with meeting scheduling and knowing when you can expect a quick reply to emails or messages. The rest of the 8-hour workday can be done however an employee wants. An employee could work 6 am to 2 pm or work 10 am to 2 pm and then again 6 pm to 10 pm. Employees can structure their day however they want within these parameters.

- Unexpected difficulties will come up with remote work, especially when figuring out permanent remote work. One center had to figure out how to purchase office supplies remotely. Billing would not allow the center to order things to be shipped to employees' houses. People had to be willing to buy their own supplies and then get reimbursed. One roundtable participant provides a standard stipend to each employee monthly to cover the cost of supplies.

- If it is feasible, some UCEDDs are considering having all employees come together in-person once a month for team bonding.

- In a hybrid context, it is important to normalize calling remote supervisors with questions rather than asking someone else because they are in-person. Calling someone who is remote is not 'bothering' them, but a normal part of the workday.

- In a hybrid environment, remote workers are often less likely to be promoted. People do not know remote workers as well and often see them as less engaged. It is important to be aware of this and be intentional in promotion decisions.

- Sometimes when people work remotely, they work longer hours. The end of the workday is not as set. Participants discussed the importance of encouraging people to log off and have a good work-life balance.

"We have been flexible enough to offer a position to people who live all over the place, and we are actually hiring people knowing that they will be working remotely... it opens a lot of opportunities to us. People are kind of excited because they feel like they are trying something new and it is not imposed upon them, the way it was with COVID." – Roundtable Participan

Specific Tools and Ideas for Fostering a Positive Workplace Culture

Roundtable participants shared specific tools and strategies for fostering a positive workplace culture:

- Kumospace is an online meeting space. Meeting participants can move their virtual person around an online conference room. It looks more like an in-person meeting space so feels more organic and natural than zoom breakout rooms.

- Scheduling meetings or calls that are social and have fun activities helps staff build bonds. Specific games and activities include Pictionary, Code Names, trivia, and scavenger hunts.

- During a staff meeting, one UCEDD played the What is a UCEDD? video and then did an online scavenger hunt for UCEDD Network trivia. Questions asked about things like which UCEDD was the furthest north and which states had more than one UCEDD. It helped staff feel more engaged with the UCEDD and the AUCD Network.

- Multiple centers report having a center-wide digital social space. Platforms used include Slack, Microsoft Teams, or VoiceThread. People post recipes, jokes of the day, pet pictures, or other fun things. While it does not replace interactions that would have happened over lunch or during breaks, it does help fill the void.

- One center shared that they have added short weekly meetings, like Breakaway Wednesdays and Teambuilding Tuesdays. Breakaway Wednesdays are 15-minute calls that people can jump on for short social chats with people on other teams. Teambuilding Tuesdays invite people from HR or other parts of the university to learn more about services and practices across campus.

- One center shared that they have facilitated small groups of people in similar places in their careers who might be having similar challenges. Monthly get-togethers provide built-in support. Participants can brainstorm, collaborate, and/or vent. This has been especially helpful for early career professionals.

- Multiple participants noted that scheduling virtual "coffees" with coworkers has helped build feelings of connection. While this does not replace more unplanned interactions with coworkers, it does provide a more intentional space for spending time with colleagues.

One center uses its diversity, equity, and inclusion initiative to bring staff together from across the center. The co-director emailed individual staff, focusing on early-career professionals, to engage them on specific parts of the initiative. This allows the center to bring together people from across the center to advance important parts of its mission.

Relevant Resources

- [The Higher Ed Hybrid Campus](#)
- [Working from Home Doesn't Have to Dilute Your Corporate Culture](#)
- [Remote Workers and Telecommuting Practices for Nonprofits](#)

For More Information

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