



EMPLOYER PROFILE

TRANSITIONING TO REMOTE OPERATIONS: THE RETINA GROUP STORY

Many businesses had to quickly shift from working in an office to working remotely when COVID-19 related stay-at-home orders were issued in March 2020. This was an especially big challenge for some businesses that rely on seeing their clients in person, and among these is the Retina Group of Washington, an ophthalmology practice with 17 offices across DC, Virginia, and Maryland. “We’re a very face-to-face business,” says Retina Group’s Director of Human Resources, Bonnie Grassi, “and that creates a culture across the whole company that really values face-to-face interaction. With the pandemic, we’ve had to shift that paradigm.”

So how does a company like Retina Group move its employees to telework? Says Grassi, “We had to start with the safety of our patients and our staff.” They knew that they would need to see at least some patients in-office, but that most of their 300 employees were not doctors, instead filling roles such as accounting, billing, payroll, and working in the company’s call center. “We quickly realized that not only could our back-office staff all work remotely, but that our doctors could see at least some of their patients remotely as well,” Grassi says.

Retina Group started by very quickly pulling together a telework policy. “It was very important that this telework policy not represent a change in how we do business, and that it’s not a permanent change in their terms of employment,” said Grassi. This policy established expectations about remote work, including productivity and reporting hours worked. It also covered technology, a very important aspect for a medical practice, answering questions about what technology the company would provide, how the costs would be distributed—even who pays for the worker’s home internet service.

The company’s call center, which handles patient scheduling, had a particularly successful transition to remote work. These employees already had access to laptops and headsets, and their existing software enabled supervisors to easily monitor employees’ productivity. “This enabled them to get a head start on testing how to make remote work meet their needs,” says Grassi, which enabled them to be fully remote and fully operational quickly. Some other departments struggled a bit more with the transition, again due to technology issues: many employees were not issued company laptops, and pandemic-related disruptions made it difficult to get new laptops. So the company had to help some of their employees move the desktop computers they used in the office to their home and assist those employees in setting up their new home workspace.

In at least some departments, Retina Group found that switching to a fully remote workplace actually increased productivity. Managers found conference calls and team emails an effective substitute for face-to-face communication, though some employees reported that they miss the personal interactions of the workplace.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created uncertainty for a lot of businesses, and Retina Group is no exception. “We’re trying to plan for the future, but we really don’t know what things are going to look like,” says Grassi. Still, she credits the company’s successful adoption of remote work with giving the company the flexibility it needs to survive in these difficult times. “It’s too soon to tell if our face-to-face paradigm will shift per time, but remote work has proven to be successful right now,” says Grassi. She encourages companies to develop robust contingency plans, including for worst-case scenarios, but to also be willing to evaluate and adjust those plans on the fly should they need to be implemented.

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Director of Human
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