

Vermont RETAIN: Fostering Work-Health Balance to Build Productive Remote Teams

November 2022 RETAIN Success Story

“RETAIN has allowed me to have work–health boundaries that I haven’t had with prior employers. The encouragement of coworkers to take lunch breaks has me walking away from the computer for lunch for the first time in years. When I had unexpected surgery, the RETAIN team was conscious of my health needs, rescheduling or covering meetings to ensure I was able to get the rest I needed.” – Sarah, Vermont RETAIN

BACKGROUND

The Vermont RETAIN program helps employees with an injury or illness find safe, healthy options for staying at or returning to work. Matching work and health is its core principle. As an employer, Vermont RETAIN leadership believes they must support work-health balance for their staff as well. Vermont RETAIN draws from best practices for successful teams and work environments as well as its team’s expertise in wellness, person-centered design, and continuous quality improvement to create a remote team culture built on safety, trust, and open and direct communication.

CHALLENGE

The shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic added unexpected challenges to the already difficult task of maintaining work-health balance. Remote work, especially from home, can blur the lines between work and personal time, making person-to-person connections and effective communication more difficult. Like other workers, many Vermont RETAIN team members experienced increased stress and fatigue stemming from the pandemic. Some were juggling caregiving



Challenge-Action-Results

Challenge: The COVID-19 pandemic-related shift to all remote work created unexpected challenges to building productive, collaborative teams with good work-health balance.



Action: Vermont RETAIN implemented policies and procedures that are routinely updated to meet staff needs, such as meeting-free days and flexible scheduling. The program hosts virtual, all-staff retreats and trainings to strengthen team collaboration; foster open, direct communication; and promote work-health tools and resources, such as a work-health coach to support staff with acute health conditions that affect their ability to work.

Results: Since Vermont RETAIN has prioritized the work-health needs of its team, the program has attracted a diverse, remote workforce; maintained more than a 90 percent staff retention rate; and received consistently high program and job satisfaction ratings from participants and staff.

responsibilities or medical issues while working from home. Vermont RETAIN knew that flexibility and attention to the emerging needs of its staff were essential to the success of the project and the health of its workers.



ACTIONS

Fostering clear communication and ongoing learning. Being able to connect outside of meetings and disconnect at the end of a workday is critical for an effective remote team. Vermont RETAIN experts and leaders hold regular, virtual, open-office hours to answer questions, discuss projects or cases, and troubleshoot problems. The team created standard language for email

signatures that lists the individual’s work hours and the process for urgent communication. Staff can comfortably sign off email knowing they will not miss time-sensitive information. Relationship building occurs at routine meetings and special events where staff accomplishments are recognized. Regular, all-staff online retreats blend team building, goal setting, and strategic planning with work-health research and tools. These retreats explore individual strengths and work styles and how to adapt them to the remote team environment. Team members report that these tools and trainings provide a structure for connecting and interacting with staff and their work in positive ways.

Engaging partners through a culture of trust. Vermont RETAIN leadership took an intentional approach to building a culture of safety, trust, and honest communication. Research from Martin Seligman on [human flourishing](#), Google’s [Project Aristotle](#) on strong teams, and Amy Edmondson on [psychological safety](#) informed their process. Recently, Vermont RETAIN used its robust work culture to turn a negative interaction into a success. A potential RETAIN participant told their medical clinic about a confusing conversation with a Vermont RETAIN team member. The Vermont RETAIN medical director shared this feedback with the team member without blame or judgment. Together, they uncovered what caused the confusion and arranged a timely follow-up call with the patient to talk through their concerns. Although this person was not eligible for the program, they told the clinic how impressed they were with the follow-up and the Vermont RETAIN program. The other seven clinics in this practice group enrolled in Vermont RETAIN on this clinic’s recommendation. Vermont RETAIN used this experience as a teaching moment with staff to discuss productive ways to handle difficult feedback. Vermont RETAIN’s culture of safety, trust, and openness strengthened the relationship with the clinic and Vermont RETAIN team members.

Embedding practices, policies, and procedures that support strong remote teams. Vermont RETAIN is establishing efficient meeting protocols and an organized workgroup structure balanced with regular, meeting-free days to provide uninterrupted work

time. Work breaks and self-care are promoted as tools for improving productivity. Program leadership is adding an internal work-health coach role to offer support for staff with acute health conditions that may affect their ability to work. Vermont RETAIN is flexible in accommodating personal responsibilities, such as caregiving, medical care, and exercise. Leadership encourages staff to prioritize other aspects of their lives that bring them joy. Vermont RETAIN also seeks ongoing feedback from team members on what is or is not working.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND RESULTS

- Vermont RETAIN leadership believes that one of the program’s biggest successes is its commitment to continuous quality improvement and job-health principles for both its external work and its internal team.
- Vermont RETAIN’s intentional, proactive approach fosters a high-performing remote culture that supports work-health balance. This approach has boosted the team’s engagement with their work and has helped the program attract and retain a talented and diverse workforce.
 - Vermont RETAIN has retained more than 90 percent of its staff despite the challenges of launching a large program under tight deadlines with a growing, remote team dispersed across multiple time zones. Employee surveys report high levels of job satisfaction in a work environment rated as highly supportive.
 - Creating a work culture that values work-health balance and open, honest communication as part of the work process has led to important successes in the Vermont RETAIN program that could motivate other employers to adopt this model for their organizations.



Vermont is participating in RETAIN (Retaining Employment and Talent After Injury/Illness Network) to build connections and improve coordination among employers, health care providers, and other key parties to help newly injured and ill workers stay in the workforce. The state Department of Labor’s Division of Workers’ Compensation and Safety, in coordination with several partners, leads Vermont RETAIN. The U.S. Department of Labor, in collaboration with the Social Security Administration, sponsors RETAIN.

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