The Rural Online Initiative: Short-term Outcomes of USU Extension Master Remote Work Leader Course

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.26077/8062-3fa8
Available at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/oiq/vol1/iss2/5
The Rural Online Initiative: Short-term Outcomes of USU Extension Master Remote Work Leader Course

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Abstract

Many people migrate out of rural communities in Utah in search of job opportunities. Meanwhile, businesses in urban areas struggle to find workers. The Master Remote Work Leader (MRWL) certificate course was developed to provide specialized training for Utah’s organizational leaders in managing hybrid-remote and fully distributed employees.

Introduction

Remote work is the ability to work from any location other than a central office (Siha & Monroe, 2006). With advances in technology and internet speeds, remote work is increasingly popular as an alternative workplace arrangement (Katz & Krueger, 2016). The availability of enhanced mobile and internet connections at affordable rates further enables remote work opportunities within organizations (Allen et al., 2015). The Utah Legislature viewed remote work as an economic development priority to reduce rural unemployment and rural-urban migration. While one aspect of this focuses on training employees on remote work best practices, another emphasizes managing remote workers and creating remote work environments and policies. With legislative funding under the Rural Online Initiative (ROI), Utah State University Extension developed the Master Remote Work Leader (MRWL) certificate course to provide specialized training for organizational leaders on core skills for effectively creating remote work environments and leading hybrid-remote and fully distributed employees.

Response and Target Audience

The ROI created and delivered an educational online course targeting remote work leadership skills to encourage the creation of remote work environments and employment of remote workers from rural Utah. The MRWL course is currently offered in odd-numbered months. Through remote skills leadership training, the course helps organizational leaders understand the challenges associated with managing remote employees, as well as, facilitating a remote work culture within their organizations. Through seven modules, leaders develop a capstone remote work plan that can be formulated into an operational policy. Course modules are accompanied by interactive core content, assigned quizzes, knowledge checks, and self-assessment activities. Participants engage with their cohort via live weekly Zoom workshops and the group’s Slack channel. Participants must earn an average score of 80% or higher to graduate. ROI’s Program
Coordinators conduct additional seminars where participants (i.e., organizational leaders) pitch available remote job opportunities in their companies.

The intended audience for the MRWL certificate course is organizational leaders with businesses located along the Wasatch Front region, or companies approved by the Governor’s Office of Economic Development’s Center for Rural Economic Development incentive program. This was the target group for the course because this area has the highest job growth and lowest unemployment numbers. Given these circumstances, the market for talent is competitive and helping businesses connect with talent in rural areas would help increase job opportunities for rural Utah residents.

Outcomes and Impact

A total of 120 participants completed the MRWL course since it began in February 2020. An evaluation of short-term outcomes captured changes in participants’ knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations toward creating remote work environments. Most participants (98%) believed remote work was important to the future of talent acquisition, and all participants believed the creation of a remote work environment was important in their organization.

For knowledge, results showed statistically significant differences between pre-and-post test scores for all seven modules of the MRWL course; culture ($t = 12.75, p < .001$); vision ($t = 12.58, p < .001$); change management ($t = 12.48, p < .001$); conflict management ($t = 10.31, p < .001$); learning and development ($t = 10.30, p < .001$); performance management ($t = 6.54, p < .001$); and communication ($t = 5.31, p < .001$). As such, participants demonstrated significant increases in their knowledge of creating a remote work environment.

Overall, participants had high overall mean scores across all skills; culture ($M = 4.73, SD = 0.33$); communication ($M = 4.73, SD = 0.37$); vision ($M = 4.68, SD = 0.45$); change management ($M = 4.65, SD = 0.45$); performance management ($M = 4.64, SD = 0.45$); learning and development ($M = 4.60, SD = 0.54$); and conflict management ($M = 4.56, SD = 0.50$). After course completion, participants felt they had better abilities to balance their professional and personal lives, manage their professional and personal productivity, solve problems, communicate digitally, use online technology, engage in teamwork, and manage their careers. Upon course completion, 90% of participants reported they were more likely to create remote work positions in their organization; almost all participants (99%) felt their value as a leader of remote employees improved; and 61% indicated they were more likely to hire qualified residents from rural Utah.

Public Value
The MRWL course showed progress in meeting short-term outcomes with increases in knowledge, favorable attitudes, improved skills, and positive intentions to create remote work environments. With the ability to effectively manage remote employees, organizational leaders were willing to create remote work environments in their organizations. These results suggest participants value remote work as an option for business continuity and employment opportunities in rural Utah communities. In the long-run, this ultimately helps reduce rural unemployment and rural-urban migration.

Although the preliminary evaluation showed positive short-term outcomes, there is room for improvement. As continued evaluation is important for course improvements, future activities include: (a) assessing program fidelity to ensure essential activities that are linked to course outcomes are carried out as intended; (b) observations and continued participant feedback that contribute to course improvements; (c) conducting follow-up surveys and interviews with graduates to track medium-term outcomes and long-term impacts; and (d) engaging in new marketing and outreach efforts to increase course participation in urban Utah counties. The Rural Online Initiative (ROI) of USU Extension is actively creating opportunities and implementing programs to enhance rural competitiveness and promote economic development across Utah.

References


