In 1804, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark began their historic journey to discover a route to the Pacific Ocean. Fortunately for us, their journey also provides lessons for managing what I call ‘invisible’ employees. Geographic dispersion, employee welfare considerations and environmental interests have increased the occurrence of employees who work in locations other than a central office. As a result, these employees are not under regular and visual supervision. Employees such as field auditors, public works staff, telecommuters, and even certain contractors are such workers. Because we do not see them very often, they seem to be invisible within the organization.

Management Focus

Three points of focus arise from the Lewis and Clark Expedition which help us in managing invisible employees, and these points are affirmed in my experience and study of remote work arrangements. The important considerations in managing remote employees are expectations, communication, and completion.

Expectations

When President Thomas Jefferson sent the two explorers and their crew out on their voyage of discovery, he was clear about what he wanted. His expectations were not only for the voyagers to find a Northwest Passage, but also to gather extensive information about the customs and culture of the Native Americans who lived in the West. He also wanted to know about the land, as well as the flora and fauna, especially those unknown in the U.S. at the time. Fittingly, he also provided them the tools and supplies in support of these expectations.

Communication

Communication between President Jefferson and the expedition party was virtually non-existent throughout the two year and four month journey. In fact, the party had not been heard from in so long that most people thought they were dead. With our modern communications systems, managers need not have this worry. Good communication is important in work outcomes for virtual teams and remote individual employees. In fact, one team of authors recommends looking at leadership as communication; that it is human communication which modifies the attitudes and behaviors of other in order to meet group goals and needs. In my experience as a remote employee and manager, the more personal the communication is the better it will be. Email is impersonal, phone conversations are more personal, and video conferencing adds an important visual element. Of course, periodic face-to-face meetings can be the very beneficial.
Completion

The expedition set out at 4pm on May 14, 1804. By 5pm, and for the next two years, they were unsupervised. President Jefferson was not looking over their shoulders to see if they were getting their work done. Rather, he was only concerned with what they produced.

Such radical employee independence can be stressful for managers who are used to being co-located with their employees, and having the ability to monitor their work activities. A common problem with off site work, as telecommuters report, is that there is an attitude with co-workers and bosses that, “If they can’t see you, you aren’t working.” The solution to the invisibility of work activities is to focus on results, or the completion of activities. Managers have to trust that the work is being performed and focus on what gets done. As a manager, it does not make sense to concentrate on what you cannot manage. Rather, you have to focus on what you can manage. Accordingly, the manager’s focus must shift from work activities to work results. The value of a results focus is demonstrated in the journals of Lewis and Clark, which historian Stephen Ambrose called a national literary treasure. These journals and physical specimens from the journey documented over 100 previously unknown animals and nearly 200 new plants, and are a testament to the success of a results focused orientation.

The Fine Print

Some of you might be thinking that it is a little more complicated than focusing on these three points, and I would agree. There are two other important issues that must be addressed in managing successful remote work arrangements. The first is that the implementation of remote work requires attention to individual-level and group-level job design in order to be successful. Also, remote work also proceeds more smoothly with skilled, experienced, and self-directed employees. Therefore, there may be some training needed to make remote work successful and, from my experience, some ongoing informal training will be required at the early stages of remote work implementation.

In the End, Success

The journey of Lewis and Clark was a resounding success. Lewis and Clark showed that employees sent out to remote work locations can accomplish their mission. These often ‘invisible’ employees are able to be successful with a foundation of the right skills and job design, and with a management emphasis on expectations, communication and completion.

Timothy R. Dahlstrom is an invisible employee for the U.S. Small Business Administration. He is also the Editor in Chief of Perspectives in Public Affairs, and a Ph.D. student in public affairs at Arizona State University. Dahlstrom can be reached at tcdahls@cox.net.