Managing Remote Team Accountability Without Turning Trust Into Surveillance

Accountability is not the same as visibility

Remote and hybrid work have moved from emergency flexibility to ordinary workforce design. That does not mean employers have solved the management problem. In many organizations, the hardest question is no longer whether remote work should exist. It is how managers can hold people accountable without turning every workday into a test of digital presence.

This is where many remote-work programs start to drift. A manager sees that an employee’s status light is often yellow. Emails are not answered immediately. The employee blocks time for deep work. Another employee appears available all day but misses deadlines. A third employee works late at night because meetings interrupt the day. HR is then asked whether the company can use monitoring software, review activity data or demand faster response times.

The real issue is not remote work. The issue is weak accountability design. When managers do not know how to define performance, they often fall back on visibility. They measure availability, responsiveness, calendar activity, online status and meeting attendance because those signals are easier to see than outcomes. But they are not always good evidence of contribution.

An employee can be visibly busy and produce little. Another can spend three quiet hours offline and deliver high-value work. A manager who relies on visibility may reward performative busyness and punish focused work. That is why HR needs to help the organization separate accountability from surveillance.

The goal is not to prove employees are sitting at their keyboards. The goal is to know whether the right work is being done well, on time, safely, ethically and in a way that supports the team.

Remote work is now normal workforce management

Remote work is no longer a temporary pandemic practice, even though its use has changed. Statistics Canada reported that in May 2026, 11.4% of employed Canadians worked exclusively from home, while about 9.8% had a hybrid arrangement that combined work at home with work at locations outside the home. That is not a fringe workforce model. It is a stable management reality for many employers.

The numbers also show why HR should stop treating remote accountability as a special exception. A smaller share of the workforce may now be fully remote than during the pandemic peak, but remote and hybrid arrangements remain common enough that employers need durable policies, manager training and performance systems. A company that still manages remote work through ad hoc manager preference is inviting inconsistency.

This matters across several HR functions. Remote accountability affects performance management, accommodation, privacy, employee monitoring, overtime, disconnecting from work, engagement, onboarding, internal mobility, discipline and trust. A weak remote accountability model will eventually show up somewhere else in the HR file.

The visibility trap

The visibility trap begins when managers confuse work signals with work results. Online status, instant response time, meeting attendance, calendar density and keyboard activity may tell the manager something, but they rarely tell the whole story. They may even point in the wrong direction.

A customer service role may require defined response times because responsiveness is part of the job. A project role may require documented milestones because the value is delivered through completion, not constant availability. A senior analyst may need blocks of uninterrupted time. A payroll role may require strict deadlines and accuracy. A sales role may require activity measures, but those measures should still connect to pipeline, client contact quality and revenue outcomes.

The mistake is applying one visibility standard to every job. A manager who expects instant replies from employees doing complex work may be interrupting the very performance they want. A manager who praises employees for always appearing online may create a culture where people signal activity instead of doing the work that matters.

HR should push managers to define accountability by role. What work must be delivered? What quality standard applies? What timelines matter? What must be documented? What response time is genuinely required? What meetings are essential? What work requires collaboration, and what work requires focus? Once those answers are clear, visibility becomes a supporting signal rather than the performance system itself.

The Besse case shows both sides of the issue

Canadian HR professionals should understand Besse v. Reach CPA Inc., 2023 BCCRT 27, because it became one of the most discussed remote-work accountability cases in Canada. The employee worked remotely for an accounting firm. The employer used time-tracking software on the employee’s work laptop, compared the software data against time records and argued that the employee had recorded hours she did not work. The B.C. Civil Resolution Tribunal accepted that the software likely recorded work activity accurately and concluded that the employee worked 50.76 fewer hours than claimed, which supported just cause and a repayment order.

The shallow lesson from Besse is that tracking software can catch time theft. That is true as far as it goes, but it is not the best HR lesson. The stronger lesson is that remote work still requires honesty, clear expectations, accurate time records, reliable evidence and a fair process before discipline. Monitoring data may be useful, but it should not become a substitute for proper management.

Besse should not be treated as permission to monitor every employee aggressively. It was a specific case with specific evidence, and it came from an administrative tribunal. It does, however, show why employers need clear rules around timekeeping, remote work expectations, software use, employee notice, evidence review and investigation process. If an employer wants to rely on digital activity data, it should be able to explain what data is collected, why it is collected, how it is used and how employees were informed.

That is the balance HR must strike. Remote employees must be accountable for their time and work. Employers must also be accountable for using monitoring tools transparently and proportionately.

Privacy still matters on employer systems

Remote accountability often leads employers toward monitoring tools. That may include time-tracking software, device logs, location data, application use, browser activity, messaging metadata, meeting activity, screen capture, keystroke data, productivity scores or AI-generated summaries of work patterns. Some tools may be appropriate in certain contexts. Others may be excessive or poorly aligned with the job.

The Supreme Court of Canada's decision in R. v. Cole remains useful context. The Court recognized that employees may have a reasonable expectation of privacy in information stored on an employer-issued computer, depending on the totality of the circumstances, even where workplace policies and employer ownership reduce that expectation. [6] Cole was a criminal case, not a remote-work policy case, but it is still a reminder that employer ownership of the device does not automatically eliminate privacy concerns.

The Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada and provincial and territorial privacy regulators have also warned about the growth of workplace monitoring. In 2023, privacy authorities urged employers to be more transparent and accountable in workplace monitoring practices and noted that digital surveillance technologies can affect privacy, career, well-being, stress, autonomy and creativity. Reuters reported in June 2026 that Canadian employees have limited specific legal protections against workplace surveillance, while monitoring tools are receiving growing pushback as employers seek new ways to track remote or hybrid work activity.

For HR, the lesson is straightforward. Electronic monitoring may be lawful in some circumstances, but legality is not the only test. HR should also ask whether the monitoring is necessary, proportionate, transparent, accurate, fair and connected to a legitimate business purpose. A tool that damages trust, produces weak performance insight or encourages micromanagement may solve one problem while creating several others.

Ontario's electronic monitoring policy rule is a minimum standard, not a strategy

Ontario gives HR a practical example of how accountability, monitoring and disclosure are becoming linked. Employers with 25 or more Ontario employees on January 1 of a year must have a written electronic monitoring policy in place before March 1 of that year. The policy must state whether the employer electronically monitors employees and, if so, describe how and in what circumstances monitoring may occur and the purposes for which information obtained through monitoring may be used. Ontario's guidance also states that these ESA requirements do not create a general right not to be monitored and do not create new privacy rights for employees.

That distinction is important. A written monitoring policy may satisfy a disclosure obligation, but it does not automatically make monitoring wise, trusted or useful. A policy that says the employer monitors systems still does not answer whether the data is an accurate measure of performance, whether managers understand it, whether employees know how it will be used, or whether less intrusive methods would work.

HR should treat the monitoring policy as a governance document, not a permission slip. If digital activity data may be used for discipline, performance management, productivity analysis or resource allocation, the policy should say so clearly. If the data is used only for cybersecurity, workflow planning or system integrity, that should be clear too. Employees should not discover after the fact that a tool presented as a workflow tool was also used to evaluate performance.

The trust issue is often created by mismatch. If employees are told monitoring is for one purpose and later see it used for another, they may conclude that management was not honest. That can damage the very accountability culture the employer was trying to build.

Remote accountability should be built around outcomes

A mature remote accountability system starts with the work, not the software. HR should help managers define the performance contract for each role. That contract does not need to be a legal document, but it does need to be clear enough that both the manager and employee understand what good performance looks like.

For many roles, the core accountability questions are practical:

- What outcomes does the role own?
- What quality standard applies?
- Which deadlines, service levels or milestones matter?
- What decisions can the employee make without approval?
- What issues must be escalated, and how quickly?
- What communication rhythm is required for the team to function?
- What evidence shows the work was completed properly?
- What conduct standards apply regardless of work location?

These questions shift the conversation from activity to accountability. They also help employees because they replace vague expectations with a clearer performance agreement. A remote employee should not have to guess whether the manager values responsiveness, deliverables, meeting participation, independent problem-solving or collaboration. The priorities should be explicit.

This approach is also better for discipline. If expectations are unclear, a performance concern becomes harder to defend. If expectations are documented and tied to the role, the employer can address missed commitments more fairly.

Manager capability is the real remote work gap

Remote accountability often fails because managers were never taught how to manage by outcomes. Onsite management allows weaker habits to hide behind proximity. A manager can walk the floor, see who is present, overhear problems and rely on informal contact. Remote work removes some of those signals. That means managers need more discipline, not more surveillance.

They need to set priorities clearly, define deliverables, conduct meaningful one-on-ones, document performance concerns, support workload planning, recognize when employees are blocked and address missed commitments without jumping to accusations.

They also need to distinguish a performance problem from a communication problem, a workload problem, an accommodation issue or a role clarity issue.

HR should not assume managers can do this naturally. Many cannot. Manager training for remote accountability should include:

- How to set measurable expectations without overloading employees with metrics.
- How to run remote one-on-ones that cover priorities, blockers, workload and development.
- How to address missed deadlines without relying on suspicion or tone.
- How to document performance concerns in a way that is factual and fair.
- How to recognize accommodation triggers, burnout risks and workload problems.
- How to avoid proximity bias when recognizing, promoting or assigning work.
- How to use monitoring data responsibly, if the organization uses monitoring tools.

The manager is the accountability system employees actually experience. If the manager is unclear, inconsistent or suspicious, the remote work policy will not save the relationship.

Hybrid teams create a fairness problem

Hybrid work adds another layer of risk because employees may be judged by different signals depending on where they work. Onsite employees may feel remote employees have more flexibility. Remote employees may feel excluded from informal conversations, stretch assignments, promotion opportunities and leadership visibility. Managers may unconsciously give more trust, recognition or opportunity to employees they see in person.

This is proximity bias, and it can quietly distort performance management. A remote employee may be doing strong work but receive less recognition because the manager has fewer casual interactions with them. An onsite employee may be seen as more committed simply because they are physically present. A hybrid employee may spend in-office days in meetings and remote days doing deep work, then be judged by attendance rather than outcomes.

HR should make sure accountability expectations are location-neutral wherever possible. If the role requires specific onsite duties, that should be stated. If remote work is permitted, employees should be measured against the same core deliverables, quality standards and behavioural expectations as others in comparable roles. The manager should not create one accountability system for people they see and another for people they do not.

Fairness also requires access. Remote employees should have access to information, coaching, feedback, career discussions and development opportunities. Accountability is easier to accept when opportunity is distributed fairly.

Communication standards prevent many performance disputes

Remote teams need communication norms because unclear communication becomes a performance issue quickly. Employees need to know when they are expected to be available, how quickly they must respond, which channels are used for urgent matters, which matters belong in meetings, and which decisions must be documented.

Without these norms, managers may interpret silence as disengagement while employees interpret repeated check-ins as micromanagement. One employee may treat chat as urgent. Another may reserve chat for quick questions and use email for substantive work. A manager may expect a response within 15 minutes, while the employee believes same-day response is reasonable unless marked urgent.

HR should help teams define communication standards that are specific enough to be useful but flexible enough to respect real work. For example:

- Urgent issues should be marked clearly and sent through the channel the team has agreed to monitor.
- Routine messages should not be treated as emergencies unless a deadline or risk requires it.
- Deep work blocks are acceptable where the role allows them, but employees should make availability expectations clear.
- Meetings should have a purpose, owner and decision point, not simply replace hallway visibility.
- Status updates should focus on progress, blockers and next steps, not proof that the employee was online.

These standards reduce unnecessary friction. They also help managers avoid judging employees by personal communication preferences. Accountability becomes a team agreement rather than a manager mood.

Remote performance management still requires documentation

Remote work should not lower the standard for performance documentation. If anything, it should raise it because misunderstandings are easier when work is distributed. Managers should document expectations, coaching conversations, missed commitments, deadlines, quality concerns, workload discussions and agreed next steps.

The documentation does not need to be punitive. It can be as simple as a follow-up note after a one-on-one: here are the priorities for this week, here is the deadline, here is the support needed and here is when we will check in. That kind of documentation helps both sides. It reduces ambiguity and gives the employee a fair chance to meet expectations.

If performance concerns continue, HR should ensure the manager has evidence tied to outcomes, not impressions. Statements such as ‘I do not think she is working’ are weak. Statements such as ‘the client report was due May 12, it was submitted May 19, two required sections were missing, and the employee did not notify the manager of delay despite the escalation rule’ are much stronger.

Remote performance management should follow the same principles as onsite performance management. Expectations should be clear. Feedback should be timely. The employee should understand the concern. The manager should consider whether barriers exist. HR should assess whether disability, accommodation, workload, technology or caregiving issues may be involved. Discipline should be based on facts, not suspicion.

The 30-60-90 remote accountability reset

HR can help managers reset remote accountability without launching a heavy program. A 30-60-90 approach gives the organization a practical way to move from vague concern to clear operating rules.

1. **First 30 days.** Clarify the role outcomes, key deliverables, communication

standards, core meetings, documentation expectations and escalation rules. Managers should meet with each remote or hybrid employee to confirm what success looks like and where expectations have been unclear.
2. **By 60 days.** Review whether the expectations are working. Are deadlines clearer? Are employees raising blockers earlier? Are managers getting enough visibility into workload without checking every digital movement? Are employees being judged by output rather than online presence?
3. **By 90 days.** Review the evidence. Look at missed commitments, quality issues, employee questions, performance concerns, complaints, workload indicators, engagement signals and manager consistency. Adjust the remote work policy, manager training or team norms where the first 90 days reveal gaps.

This reset works because it does not begin with distrust. It begins with clarity. Employees are told what is expected. Managers are trained to manage the work. HR then reviews whether the system is producing better performance and fewer misunderstandings.

What HR should measure

Remote accountability should produce better data, but HR should choose metrics carefully. The goal is not to build a surveillance dashboard. The goal is to understand whether work is being delivered, teams are functioning and managers are applying expectations consistently.

Useful HR and manager metrics may include:

- Completion of agreed deliverables and milestones.
- Quality indicators such as errors, rework, customer complaints or audit findings.
- Service-level performance where response time is truly part of the role.
- Missed deadlines and whether delays were escalated early.
- Employee engagement and trust scores by team.
- Turnover and internal transfer patterns by manager.
- Absenteeism, overtime and workload indicators.
- Performance documentation quality.
- Remote work complaints, monitoring concerns or inconsistent manager practices.
- Training completion for managers on remote performance management and privacy-conscious monitoring.

These metrics are more useful than raw activity scores because they connect accountability to business results, employee experience and manager behaviour. If HR sees a team with missed deadlines, rising overtime and declining engagement, the answer may not be more monitoring. It may be workload redesign, manager coaching or clearer prioritization.

What HR should tell leaders

Leaders often ask for remote accountability because they are worried about productivity, culture or fairness. Those concerns are legitimate. The mistake is assuming that monitoring is the first or best answer.

HR should help leaders understand that accountability problems usually come from one of four places. The first is unclear work. Employees cannot be accountable for outcomes that were never defined. The second is weak management. Managers cannot hold employees accountable if they avoid feedback or rely on impressions. The third is poor systems. If priorities, dependencies and decisions are not visible, work will drift. The fourth is misconduct. In those cases, the employer needs evidence and a fair process.

Monitoring may help with the fourth issue, but it won’t fix the first three. In fact, it may make them worse if employees feel watched instead of led.

A better leadership message is this: **remote work will be supported where it works, but accountability will be based on clear expectations, measurable outcomes, communication standards, documentation and responsible use of technology.** That message is firmer and more credible than either blind trust or blanket surveillance.

The HR takeaway

Remote accountability is not created by watching employees more closely. It is created by defining work more clearly.

Canadian employers have legitimate reasons to manage performance, verify time, protect information, coordinate work and ensure employees are meeting expectations. Employees also have legitimate concerns about privacy, trust, fairness and micromanagement. HR’s job is to build a system that respects both realities.

That system starts with role clarity, output measures, communication norms and manager capability. It includes monitoring only where the purpose is legitimate, the method is transparent and the data is used fairly. It trains managers to coach and document rather than guess. It gives employees a clear understanding of what they own, when they must communicate and how performance will be assessed.

The organizations that get this right will not need to choose between trust and accountability. They will build both.