



Effects of telecommuting organisational behaviour

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The term 'telecommuting' was first coined in the '70's in a national transportation study to describe the potential for using telecommunications to give people access to information resources without requiring them to physically commute to a central work location. But it wasn't until the downsizing era of the '90's that telecommuting became a viable alternative to working in the traditional office.

Telecommuting has become a major area of interest to both employers and employees. The reasons for this interest are numerous. Fortunately, technology and the availability of products have made telecommuting practical. The home office can be outfitted with similar equipment as the office environment. Fax, e-mail, pagers, mobile phones, modems, personal computers and teleconferencing have liberated from the need to be at the office. Telecommuting spans all levels of the office hierarchy from managing directors to data-entry workers, writers and accountants to telemarketing and sales forces and technicians and customer support to field workers. The manner in which the employee plans to work could determine the office setup at home, the impact on work, effects on fellow employees, and the progression of the employee's career.

Substituting telecommuting for real-time travel can save time and money, particularly with the globalisation of business adding miles to every face-to-face encounter. Most significantly, since people can represent over 90% of a company's operating cost, employees allowed to match tasks to location and to work at their most productive time often achieve better and more creative results.

What is telecommuting?

'Telecommuting' is the practice of an employee performing his or her normal office duties from a remote location, typically home. Telecommuting can be performed on an occasional basis or on a permanent basis. The employee may work remotely as little as one day per month or week or as regularly as every day with an occasional scheduled meeting at the company office. The other term for telecommuting is 'teleworking' putting more emphasis on the work, not the travel.

While certainly the employee working at home is one avenue, the emerging 'non-traditional work environments' also include working at a satellite office, establishing a mobile or virtual office through laptop computers and other technology, 'hoteling' through shared office space and the compressed work week.

Why telecommute?

In an increasingly challenging economy, organisations are looking for ways to improve the bottom line. To compete effectively in global markets, they are streamlining operations, downsizing organisational structures and reducing overhead costs and travel expenses. To meet higher customer expectations for quality and service, they are looking for ways to get their employees closer to the people they serve and to help them achieve better results with fewer resources. And in an increasingly tight skilled-labour market, they are looking for benefits that will help them attract and keep good workers and tap into new labour markets like part-time, semi-retired or disabled workers.

Companies experimenting with alternative office arrangements find that more flexible work location options can help reduce operating expenses and improve results. Better utilisation of costly office real estate can lead to dramatic savings in the 20-40% of a

corporate's total assets that can be locked up in facilities.

Companies have endorsed telecommuting also because of the realised benefits of employees working remotely, such as retention of quality employees, flexible work schedules and increased productivity. Government is encouraging telecommuting via various legislation that is aimed at cleaning the environment and lowering wasteful practices such as traffic jams and other commuting expenses.

Enlightened management is recognising that employees who balance work and family life are productive employees.

Among the many benefits of telecommuting are the additional opportunities it provides to individuals with disabilities who seek an accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or other employees who may qualify for an unpaid leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act but who would prefer to be paid while working at home. By allowing these employees to work from home, employers may be able to retain some of these skilled, trained employees and cut personnel costs.

With the emergence of sophisticated digital technologies, the concept of people converging to a common space for productive output seems redundant. Experts in the field of telecommuting have convinced employers that it makes sense to remove people from the stress of being on congested freeways in the first place and giving them the option to work in a productive environment. They also contend that productivity suffers, particularly in open plan offices because there are too many distractions and too much socialising is going on. On the other hand, non-supporters of teleworking claim that the work experience is not limited only to the performance of responsibilities. It also about

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learning to interact and work with the diverse personalities in an office and coping with interpersonal issues.

Many organisations, both public and private, are telecommuting. Some have formal programs, but the rest are taking a more informal approach. Nortel, Ernst & Young and IBM are few of the more visible organisations that have successful telecommuting programs.

Social concerns about the environment and the family are also driving alternative work locations. In an effort to better manage air pollution and traffic congestion, various government agencies are enacting transportation management programs that require many organisations to reduce their employees' work-related commute. A more market-driven influence is being exerted by an increasing number of corporate customers who are interested in doing business with an organisation that demonstrates an environmental consciousness. Today's customer is better educated, more demanding and more discriminating.

A major attraction of this type of arrangement to the telecommuters is the control it allows them over the way they structure their work and lives. Some telecommuters see that as being able to spend more time with families and to raise them in the community they have chosen. It also fosters increased civic involvement and volunteerism.

Another factor is stress. There are negative productivity and morale on the good urban information worker who's spending an hour and a half to two hours getting to and from work while inhaling carbon

monoxide. There have been medical findings linking 'anxiety attacks' to traffic. The employee saves not only time and money but also his/her sanity when telecommuting. The employee feels better and therefore produces better quality work.

Drawbacks of telecommuting

'Out of sight and out of mind,' not having equal access to career advancement opportunities because they are not regularly seen by their managers is one of telecommuters set of concerns. Telecommuters may feel that on-site workers are more visible, and thus more likely to be rewarded for their work with raises and promotions.

Family conflicts can occur when the job interferes with home life or home life with the job. Spending time at home has a different meaning to family members when work invades the once private domain. Children especially, do not see the dividing line of work and play when they see their parents at home all the time. Employees must be able to balance this carefully so as not to destroy the sanctity of home/work environment.

The isolation factor is one that weighs heavily among teleworkers. Telecommuters can't engage in informal networking, a key element in today's work environment. Employees who work at home often feel that they are out of the loop of everything from office gossip to policy changes. Isolation causes feelings of insecurity. To what degree will their co-workers support or sabotage their efforts depending on the degree of resentment of envy they may feel? Do they have the

Implementing a telecommuting program

Setting up a telecommuting program for a company involves many steps. Policies being written, jobs evaluated, employees selected, equipment leased or purchased and placed etc are just a few steps necessary. Both the employee and the employer gain from the program provided it is implemented carefully and with planning.

According to John Curran, business systems analyst at the management consulting firm of Saltzer, Surron and Endicott, companies can achieve the most productivity from teleworking by following the three R's.

The right reasons

Teleworking is viewed as a benefit and accommodation instead of a business strategy. Businesses should implement telecommuting for reasons such as:

- increased productivity
- reduced need for office space
- increased customer contact by the sales force and
- increased use of highly qualified people who are not available or affordable on a full-time basis.

The right job

A recent survey reported that a majority of telecommuters are information or knowledge workers, workers whose jobs involve cognitive tasks as opposed to manual tasks and who rely heavily on digital information resources. Many job functions are well suited for telecommuting. Sales employees benefit from the remote access capabilities which permit them to spend more time with customers. Telemarketers can more comfortably shift their schedules in order to reach more prospects. Field service employees save time by not having to report to the main office for

personal discipline to stay on task and away from the TV or refrigerator? Will they be given the resources to do the job well? It is not uncommon for teleworkers to experience some initial concern about maintaining their professional image and wondering if they have all the required technology skills to communicate effectively via the information super highway. These are all viable and potentially demotivating concerns.

Cost considerations for the telecommuter go above the basic infrastructure investment. Ongoing monthly expenses can instantly nullify the financial value of remote provisions. Fees associated with remote business activities — wireless voice and data services, for example, will escalate. Higher recurring expenses and steeper cost impact to support remote commuting will be evident. Employees must confirm their employers' policies on reimbursement of home-office expenses.

Legal issues

The ADA does not address telecommuting directly. However, because the law requires employers to make reasonable accommodation for disabled workers, home offices and telecommuting centres must be considered as options. The courts appear to be divided on the circumstances in which an employer can be compelled to allow disabled employees to work at home. It is important for an employer to carefully evaluate the job held by a disabled employee to determine whether telecommuting is a reasonable option. If the employee is able to perform his or her essential

functions effectively at home, there may be an obligation to allow the individual to telecommute unless it would create an undue hardship.

Before implementing a telecommuting program, employers must ensure that it does not run against any of the federal and state wage and hour laws. There are no regulations unique to telecommuters. Non-exempt employees are covered by the minimum wage and overtime restrictions of FLSA regardless of where they perform their work. The record keeping under the FLSA can become particularly tricky in the arena of telecommuting because its difficult for employers to supervise telecommuters' hours and activities. Thus, it is imperative for employers to create a mechanism that captures all time worked by non-exempt telecommuting staff members including overtime hours. For clerical workers, it may be easier to keep track of their hours through computer-generated reports that enumerate work hours and log-on times. Some system should be established to evaluate the productivity of exempt telecommuting employees without undermining the fact that they are paid on a salary basis. Employers should maintain records of the employees' payment schedule and working time. Employment laws are slowly starting to recognise this new trend. Other legal questions may also arise under workers compensation laws and insurance policies. It is important for employers to examine these laws prior to implementing or rejecting a telecommuting program.

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service orders. Assembly line manufacturers who require a centralised approach and must have employees on site would not benefit from the line workers telecommuting. Many other job functions can benefit from telecommuting through planning and proper execution.

The right people

Selection of employees is one of the keys to successful implementation. Motivation and discipline must come naturally to those who choose this change in lifestyle. The absence of stresses of commuting and office politics are the most valued aspects of telecommuting. However, being away from the office also means missing the mental stimulation of an exchange of ideas with colleagues. Telecommuters often worry about the impact they make as employees of their companies. And working from home doesn't necessarily mean less distractions — children, TV, neighbours, friends and family calling all hours of the day. Telecommuters tend to work more hours than they would in an office.

With the continuing trend to dual-career and single parent families and the greater demands of work at streamlined companies striving for continuous improvement, time is an ever more precious commodity in most households. People are working more hours at their primary job and their employment priorities are shifting away from wage concerns and toward working conditions that allow them to achieve a better balance between work and family life. In a recent survey, 25 % of the respondents said that they would change jobs in order to be able to work at home.

The key to telecommuting is organisation. Organisation is necessary to having an effective program. To ensure a successful

teleworking operation several changes have to take place. When employees are in the office, the supervisor can at least ensure that the workers are at their desks. The inability to watch what employees are doing may make many managers nervous and uncertain. Managers are not able to monitor the activities of each employee. The telecommuting employee can be taking a class, helping a child or elderly parent, or taking a nap but on the other hand, the same teleworker may also work nights and weekends or spend 20 hours straight working on a project.

Management must move from managing attending to managing performance. Managers need to eliminate the false sense of security they get when they observe workers who appear busy at their assigned places in the office. Conversely, employees who work in the office must realise that fewer managers will be supervising them. They can shift their focus on their own expectations away from attendance at meetings and report presentation and towards performance. They should evaluate and change performance appraisals as necessary to accommodate teleworking considerations. They should also make sure middle managers are given some degree of formal training in working with teleworkers.

Managers can keep problems of isolation to a minimum by encouraging employees to stay in touch with one another, whether they work in the office or at home.

The bottom line is good planning. Consultants specialising in teleworking are available to provide assistance in developing a program. They can help the organisation in writing plans which will involve business units, special technology requirements, estimate costs and benefits and specify evaluation criteria and establish selection and implementation schedules. They will also help companies define who can benefit from teleworking and

recommend training to those who will be involved. These consultants can also evaluate and recommend sites for regional/satellite telework offices and help select the computer and other information technology for use by the telecommuters. They will help develop an agenda, plan and procedures for broad-scale implementation of teleworking or telecommuting.

The telecommuting companies polled in a recent survey feel that three ingredients are necessary for the implementation of a successful telecommunications program:

- providing a reliable computer and communication lifeline back to the office
- training managers how to supervise telecommuting employees and
- training telecommuter how to maximise personal productivity.

It is advantageous for companies to solicit the help of consultants in evaluating the success of their telecommuting program, including measuring changes in performance and developing detailed cost and benefit data. The cost-benefit analysis includes effectiveness/productivity change estimates. The consultants will also recommend changes in the telecommuting methods and systems based on the performance data.

Conclusion

Telework must be an integral part of any organisation's management strategy in the 21st Century. Experts believe that working at home will become an increasingly common, accepted and satisfying part of people lives. Although the telecommuting work style is not for all people or all jobs, it will play an important role in helping organisations increase output, reduce costs and address the growing concerns of work and family life.

