UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

E X T E N S I O N

Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

Telecommuting as a True Workplace Alternative[1]

Kelli A. Green, Mayra López, Allen Wysocki, and Karl Kepner[2]

Introduction

Global technology has quickly progressed to provide more accessible business modes of communication. Telecommuting, which is described as the practice of establishing, developing, and maintaining successful off-site business practices through telecommunication practices, is currently paving the way to a potentially more efficient communication system in the workplace. Current workplace trends are promoting more flexibility for associates (employees) and tailoring jobs to fit individual needs. The image of the traditional workplace as a particular place to go to work is being replaced with associates working wherever they can be most efficient and productive, whether at home, on a plane, on the road, or a telework center. The availability of affordable technology has been one of the major contributors to the "any time, any place" telecommuting trend. Telecommuting is a work option that has steadily gained in popularity and commands a strong position as a viable alternative in the business world. Telecommuting is intended to provide a better quality of life for associates and promote better job performance.

This document includes a detailed description and definition of telecommuting, lists the desirable traits of telemanagers and teleworkers, and discusses the benefits and challenges of telecommuting.

Managers and associates seeking teleworking jobs should understand the issues related to telecommuting. While telecommuting is a great work option, it is not for everyone. Some do not possess the required qualities and attitudes required in telecommuting. For example, a desire to work at home does not automatically qualify an associate for telecommuting.

Telecommuting/Teleworking Defined

The terms "telecommuting" and "teleworking" are used somewhat interchangeably. "Teleworking" is probably a more accurate description of what actually occurs, but "telecommuting" continues to be the more commonly used term. Telecommuting is a word created by Dr. Jack M. Nilles when he was director of information technology at the University of Southern California (Roberto, 2001). Telecommuting is defined as an alternative way of accomplishing work tasks while at the same time providing a variety of benefits to organizations,

---

associates, communities, and the environment. Telecommuting replaces the traditional workplace via telephones, computers, and other telecommunications equipment at off-site locations.

Telecommuting work arrangements have a variety of forms, depending on the needs of associates and employers. Part-time telework (one to two days per week) allows associates to avoid daily commutes to and from a main office, which may or may not be easily accessible. Part-time telecommuting associates include editors and designers who often work as freelancers. Full-time telecommuting associates (four to five days per week) work as "virtual teams" who assemble electronically from a variety of physical locations to solve business problems (ITAC, 2002). For instance, medical transcriptionists who work from home or a teleworking center for an established national service. There may be special requirements for full-time teleworkers (e.g., training or years of work experience).

Why Telecommute?

The availability of more affordable technology has led companies to consider telecommuting as an alternative work arrangement. A tight job market, the fierce competition for talent, and the record high turnover among associates are several reasons why many executives see telecommuting as a benefit to entice new recruits. Another factor fueling the telecommuting trend is the high price of commercial real estate (ITAC, 2002). An office-space crunch in major U.S. cities has forced employers to become more creative when it comes to hiring. Instead of leasing new office space or expanding existing office buildings, it is vastly less expensive to provide associates with laptops and phone lines to work from the convenience of their own homes.

Telecommuting can assist employers in meeting government regulations relating to employing persons with disabilities, who may find daily commuting difficult. Telecommuting provides companies the opportunity to successfully integrate workers with disabilities and pregnant associates into the workplace. Also, the Federal Clean Air Act requires employers to reduce driving by their

associates, so telecommuting is an easy and simple way to meet this requirement (Communications Today, 2003).

Perhaps the most compelling reason for the move toward telecommuting is the change in the nature of work itself. More Americans are moving from manufacturing jobs to information-oriented jobs, which lend themselves to working away from a central office. The advancement of high-speed Internet connections and increased residential multiple phones and fax lines has helped increase the number of telecommuters in the United States from 8.7 million in 1996 to about 18.0 million in 2000 (ITAC, 2002).

Both the public and private business sectors have embraced telecommuting. Early adopters of telecommuting in the private sector included insurance, telecommunications, transportation, healthcare, and advanced technology companies (DVR, 2002).

Who Will Telecommute?

Successful telecommuting requires four main elements: the right work, the right associate, the right supervisor, and the right top management support. These four elements must meet the set standards and practices of telecommuting.

Mandatory practices for a successful telecommuting business can be easily identified. First, it is imperative that top management and human resources, information systems, and contracts/legal departments provide organizational support for a telecommuting program to succeed. They can do this by adhering to the following guidelines:

- Develop effective telecommuting business policies.

- Plan for technical equipment and support for the telecommuting network.

- Select and properly train telecommuters.

- Prepare managers for telecommuting supervision.

• Regularly evaluate and analyze the program.

Not all jobs lend themselves to telecommuting. For instance, jobs that involve direct management, face-to-face contact with customers, frequent meetings, manufacturing and warehousing of goods, purchasing, and facility management are not suitable for telecommuting operations. Jobs that do lend themselves to telecommuting include systems and information managers, writers, financial managers, computer programmers, auditing reports, data entry, medical transcription, billing, dispatching, appraising, court transcription, claims processing, filling orders, scheduling, researching, computer programming, record keeping, and writing (DVR, 2002).

Successful telecommuters are self-starters who have proven their ability to do the job well with minimal supervision. They know how to organize their work, manage their time, and work well with telemanagers. In addition, they have low socialization needs and good communication skills, are trustworthy, and advocate the telework concept (DVR, 2002).

Benefits of Telecommuting

Benefits for associates include improved work environment; increased productivity; more autonomy; greater lifestyle flexibility; reduced stress; work satisfaction; motivation; and decreased transportation, food, and clothing costs (Innovisions Canada, 2002a). Telecommuting also provides easier work conditions for workers with disabilities. The ideal teleworker must be highly productive in an "isolated" environment.

Employers can benefit from telecommuting because it saves office-space and parking requirements, which reduces overhead costs; increases labor productivity, which means higher profits; and provides additional recruitment and retention options due to a larger, talented labor pool. Telecommuting also reduces business disruptions due to emergencies, including snow, storms, floods, power outages, strikes, and illnesses (Innovisions Canada, 2002b).

Challenges of Telecommuting

There are several challenges facing telecommuting. Some teleworkers have complained of social isolation, so it is important for the company to maintain some type of social contact with teleworkers (Innovisions Canada, 2002a). For instance, regular office meetings.

Due to the distraction factor, teleworkers should separate their work from other activities. Creating a physical boundary between work and other activities is a good solution. Other challenges include fewer career and promotional opportunities due to isolation, the potential for longer work hours, and diminished access to resources in the workplace (Innovisions Canada, 2002a).

Despite the trend toward empowering associates, many managers are uneasy about telecommuting programs that remove associates from a physical workplace. Managers need to carefully coordinate activities, clearly communicate expectations, help associates avoid isolation, and select individuals with the right work habits for telecommuting. To do this, some managers schedule non-optional meetings on a regular basis.

Other challenging factors of telecommuting include problems associated with maintaining security of information and files via telecommuting and the lack of group stimulation and impromptu discussions that increase productivity and creativity.

One of the biggest obstacles for employers is the issue of control. Because monitoring performance is more difficult for those working at home, managers often do not recognize the contributions made by teleworkers by way of good performance reviews and promotions. Teleworkers are often not provided clear performance goals by their managers, who sometimes mistake useful work with physical presence.

Skills a Telemanager Should Possess

Managing telecommuters takes a lot of talent. It also involves learning new applications and skills through specialized education and training. In the traditional office setting, it is much easier for

managers to account for what work is and is not being done and who is doing or not doing the work. Critics of telecommuting fear that telecommuting will prevent managers from keeping track of what associates are doing and that there is too much opportunity for the associates to slack off (Reimer, 1998).

Telemanagers must possess exceptional people skills. People who are promoted to management usually have years of experience doing a particular job or a variety of jobs within an organization, which provided them with the knowledge and skill to lead and teach others (Goulden, 2002).

Ability to Read People

People skills are important. It is mandatory for telemanagers to possess the ability to read people, to understand what is being said and not said, simply by the tone of voice or words being used. Non-effective telemanagers do not listen and therefore miss important cues necessary for successful telecommuting. In some cases the only communication between managers and associates is via e-mail or telephone. Therefore, the need to communicate well can never be overstated.

Empathy in Praise and Discipline

Good telemanagers are able to determine when associates need to be encouraged or disciplined. Depending on the job and duties, there are times when it becomes necessary to provide a gentle push to get associates to complete required tasks; an effective manager will know when it is appropriate to do so. Telemanagers also need to be willing to accept new ideas and new ways of thinking (ITAC, 2002). It is beneficial to businesses to encourage teleworkers to make suggestions or bring forth ideas that can improve telecommuting.

Managers who like to micromanage are unlikely to succeed in telecommuting. One method to help micromanagers is to include timetables in the telecommuting policy regarding such things as meeting schedules (Reimer, 1998).

Knowing When to Interface with Associates

Leadership skills involve knowing when and when not to communicate as a leader. Telecommuting managers must realize that too many meetings will prevent telecommuters from doing their jobs. Not enough meetings can cause telecommuters to feel isolated from their co-associates. Achieving a delicate balance between work efficiency and communication may be difficult and take time. Teleworkers should not feel that managers are constantly checking up on them.

Keeping Track of Teleworkers

Effective telemanagers always know the status of their associates' projects. There are a variety of ways to accomplish this (e.g., bulletin board postings to the Internet). Experimenting with different methods may prove necessary to find the right fit for both managers and associates (Reimer, 1998).

Mutual Trust

The greatest and most valuable skill in telecommuting is mutual trust between managers and associates (ITAC, 2002). Mutual trust makes for a better and more productive work environment.

Conclusion

Telecommuting (establishing, developing, and maintaining successful off-site business practices through telecommunication) can pave the way to a more efficient communication system in the workplace. This document has addressed the current trends, advantages, and disadvantages of this process. It has also suggested effective practices and the necessary skills for managing teleworkers.

It is imperative to understand that telecommunication is an alternative option and not a substitute for person-to-person contact associated with traditional business settings. When it comes to understanding, research has suggested that 75 percent of communication is non-verbal (Management Today, 2000). This is alarming when considering telecommuting as a viable business alternative. Because of this data, it may be more beneficial to use telecommuting in conjunction with traditional forms and methods of business practices.

References

Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR). 2002. Telecommuting: Supporting flexible workplace options. *Information on telecommuting for Employees and Employers*. Available on the World Wide Web at http://kydvr.state.ky.us/programs_services/ telecommuting.htm. Date visited, March 18, 2002.

Innovisions Canada. 2002a. Advantages and disadvantages of telework for teleworkers. Available on the World Wide Web at http://www.ivc.ca/proteleworkers.html. Date visited, March 18, 2002.

Innovisions Canada. 2002b. Advantages and disadvantages of telework for employers. Available on the World Wide Web at http://www.ivc.ca/proemployer.html. Date visited, March 18, 2002.

International Telework Association and Council (ITAC). 2002. Telecommuting Aids Companies, Employers. *ITAC* (Memphis Commercial-Appeal, available through Lexis-Nexis). Available on the World Wide Web at http://www.telecommute.org. Date visited, March 27, 2002.

Reimer, Susan (1998). This telecommuting stuff will never work. Feature article in the *Baltimore Sun*, December 8, 2001.

Roberto, Lisa. 2001. The remote promotion. *Home Office Computing*, April, 68.

_____. 2003. Road Runner and TeleTrips put numbers on broadband telecommunting. *Communications Today* 19 (28, February 12).

_____. 2002. Meetings: Would you miss them? *Management Today*, 31 October 31, 54.