Working from home: its implementation and impact on organization productivity ess...

Working from Home: Its Implementation and Impact on Organization Productivity

Introduction

Telecommuting, as it is referred to in the United States, tele-working, as it is referred to in Europe, working from home, home-working, working-at-a-distance, off-site workers, or remote workers are all terms that are used convey the idea that work is something you do, not someplace you go (Baruch, 2001). Due to its various labels and definitions, a lack of clarity exists regarding many telecommuting issues, including an agreed-upon number of telecommuters in today's workforce. In their study " Measuring the Impact of Workplace Flexibility" the Boston College Center for Work & Family defined telecommuting as " a schedule in which employees conduct their work off-site for some portion of their core working hours". The location of work may be the employee's home, a satellite office, or some other location outside of the traditional office space (Example: while on the road or from a client site).

Nowadays, working from home is becoming an increasingly common practice in current modern era. Many professionals and self-employed workers have work at home on a regular daily basis. The attention has been focused recently on the possibility of full time employees to perform their daily tasks right from their home rather than at the employee's workplace. Various factors such as technology advancements and work-life balance can be related to working from home. Work organizations have begun to spread beyond their temporal and spatial boundaries and work has become an unbound activity to be conducted anytime and anywhere (Kurland and

Bailyn, 1999), where the employees can have the flexibility to perform their daily job routine from their homes and get the same paid salary as working in traditional locations.

Before the 19th century, and the spread of the industrial revolution around the globe, nearly all offices were small office or home office. Many professional workers such as consultants, real estate agents and lawyers usually have a smaller scale offices where normally operates from their home. The home office has undergone a transformation since the breakthrough internet capabilities, which enable anyone working from home to compete globally. Technology has made this possible through email, e-commerce, video conferencing, remote desktop software, and confra-call connections.

Working from home covers a diverse range of occupational sectors, ranging from traditional craft-based industries (e. g. textiles) to modern information technology-based sectors. As technology continues to evolve, work-at-home jobs will appeal to more than just stay-at-home parents and seniors (Marilyn, 2008). The development of technology such as telephones, computers and internet facilities has created a demand for larger businesses to employ individuals who work from home. The individuals can either an in dependent business person or they are an employee of a larger company. Tele-work flexibility is a desirable option for employees as they can have the flexibility of working hours and the comfy of working from their own home. A 2008 Robert Half International Financial Hiring Index indicates that 13% would consider telework or home-working as the best recruiting incentives for accounting professionals. Employees can enjoy the flexibility to the comfort

of working at home at desired working hours that suits with their lifestyle, rather than traditional daily commute to the working premises.

The Implementation

The implementation of a telecommuting is entirely feasible but should not be

considered a simple relocation of the workplace or the implementation of virtualization technologies. For the

Characteristics of Individual Best Suited for Telecommuting

Individuals should be skilled at setting routines and meeting deadlines.

Employees without strong self-motivation often have difficulty in situations lacking supervision. Individuals should have enough knowledge of their position to facilitate working and solving problems independently. Individuals should be solid performers, although it is important for some top performers to remain in the office at least part of the time to serve as mentors to co-workers. Individuals working remotely are less exposed to supervision and feedback and should therefore have to ability to make independent decisions.

Telecommuting can arouse feelings of isolation. Therefore individuals with a lower need for social interaction are well suited for telecommuting arrangements. It is beneficial for new hires that will be telecommuting to first work in the office environment to facilitate assimilation with the organizational culture and interaction and relationship building with co-workers before working remotely. With limited daily demands or " check-ups" placed on employees by their managers, individuals should possess the

ability to schedule and organize their work to meet deadlines. Individuals should be highly focused and able to handle potential home distractions.

Individuals who telecommute will need to make greater efforts to stay in touch with managers and co-workers, providing them with necessary information and updates while working away from the office setting. It is essential that telecommuting individuals be held accountable for getting the job done to the same extent as if they were being supervised in the office setting. Mutual trust is an essential element of a tele-work arrangement (Shilling, S. 1999).

In addition to focusing on the personal characteristics of the employee, when considering telecommuting options it is crucial that managers and employees understand exactly what telecommuting entails and the implications it will have for both the individual and the organization.

Employment Contract

Unlike standard terms of employment, if the business objective is to have an employee work in a home-based environment, provisions of the employee contract must be reviewed and may need to be modified. The provisions may include the requirement, if any, for attendance at in-office functions such as training, performance coaching, and other formal functions required by the employer. The requirement that the employee have a dedicated home workspace that is free from disruption by household activities and will be consistently reserved for work use. The identification of the assets and technology to be provided by the employer and those that is to be provided by the employee.

Allowable mechanisms for purchase / expense reimbursement for services such as telephone and internet access as well as necessary office supplies. The responsibilities of the employee for care, retention, safeguarding, and eventual return of any property of the employer. The acceptable practices for the secure disposal of company and client information, and any access the company may require to the workplace to ensure that those required practices are being followed. In addition, the employment contract must outline the responsibilities that the employee has with respect to conduct during working hours, including ensuring that home obligations do not interfere with work responsibilities. The contract must also specify the company's right to ensure that those obligations are being met through tools such as phantom calling, monitoring, or (under reasonable grounds of suspicion) direct monitoring by keystroke, voice recording, and other electronic techniques. Recruitment Working from home brings with it a set of challenges that the company must ensure its employees are willing and capable of managing on a daily basis. These include a much more socially isolated environment, a higher reliance on the individual's motivation and continuous focus, the ability to manage co-worker interactions without the benefit of face-to-face discussion, diligence towards an organized work environment, necessitated by the anticipated clean desk policy and segregation of work from the home environment, and the ability to work independently without continuous direct physical supervision.

During the recruitment process, these social dimensions need to be probed. A number of psychometric tools that focus on aptitude, ability, and personality are available to support the evaluation. When recruiting, it is a

good idea to know the work schedule of applicants to staff, so that we can ensure that the targeted work schedule will meet the applicant's availability. While flexibility is required under specific circumstances, depending on the labour pool the center is recruiting from, it is not a good idea to expect the home worker to be wholly available over the full range of operating hours for the center. As the home worker may be balancing personal obligations, it is in each party's interest to understand any limitations the home worker may have and how those limitations will affect staffing.

Another important dimension of the discussion between employer and employee is the measures and methods implemented for assessing employee performance. This should include the employer's monitoring of adherence, contact management effectiveness, and ratio of non-call related time to total logged-in time. The employee needs to be made aware that in the telecommuting environment, elements such as ring no-answers, unexplained auxiliary (non-work) time, and other periods of non-availability will be treated as performance issues, not coaching issues.

Finally, as a best practice, these items should be part of the verbiage in the employment agreement as well as be part of the discussions that take place during recruitment. The more complete an applicant's understanding of the position requirements is prior to employment, the more successful the partnership between employee and employer is likely to be.

Training

One of the biggest challenges that surfaces with the telecommuter option is building and maintaining an environment that permits the new employee to

absorb the " communications face" of the company, feel a part of a larger team, become aware of interactions between the contact center and associated departments and stakeholders, and integrate the company's values into his / her communications with customers. While new employee training programs typically discuss each of these elements, it is usually the initial weeks of work in the office environment that allow employees to integrate these aspects of the work environment into their work structure. With the home worker / telecommuter, this integration period becomes a challenge. Three options are available to the organization:

a) Implement an intern program in which the new employee works as an inoffice employee for an introductory period of time. b) Expand the sections of the introductory program that deal with the cultural and desired customer experience issues to ensure they get fully absorbed by the new hire.

c) Engage a " buddy system" with real-time, live cooperation between an integrated resource and the new hire until there is a sense that the new employee is independently functional.

The first option has the advantage of providing the employee with direct in-office experience while not losing initial productivity expectations. However, it incurs some of the costs that the telecommuting program is designed to offset and may preclude access to some of the labour markets previously identified.

While expanding the training program is the most obvious option, it is also likely to be the one with the least success. To some degree, employees will still not be integrating the formal and informal social infrastructure, the

internalization of acceptable styles of communication, and other less tangible aspects of the " real" working environment.

The third option, the buddy system, provides the best opportunity to integrate the employee effectively into a telecommuting work environment but will result in resource constraints in the short term.

Coaching

From a coaching perspective, the greatest difference for a telecommuter is the absence of face-to-face contact in the discussion of outcomes and side-by-side support of difficult calls. As with regular coaching programs, the initial concurrent monitoring and coaching of agents should be more intense in the early weeks of an employee's engagement in the contact center. At this point, the monitoring process should be visible to the new agent and treated as part of the initial training rather than any incentive or performance rating process.

Of course, should a new hire prove wholly incapable of providing customer service in the required manner, corrective action should be taken outside of the regular performance recognition cycle. In an office environment, this early coaching can be supported by side-by-side or lab-based monitoring. This affords the coach the ability to communicate with the employee visually and orally while the agent is on the phone. With the coach being remote from the agent, the coach can use IM-based and possibly video tools as an alternate informal, near-concurrent coaching aid. Supervisors will need to deliver coaching feedback by phone rather than face-toface. To do this effectively, they may need to relearn the same disciplines they learned as

agents dealing with customers by understanding communication techniques, the communication deficit associated with voice-only interactions, and the communication style of the employee. To better prepare coaches for the delivery of feedback over the phone, it is generally worthwhile to simulate coaching in this method with experienced agents, providing coaching in-office but over the phone.

Background noise needs to be added as a specific addition to the coaching feedback evaluation. (In truth, ambient noise levels should be considered in all coaching reviews, not as a characterization of the agent but rather as a characterization of the contact center and its technologies, facilities, and business practices. However, it is rarely examined.) In the telecommuting environment, particular interest should be paid to the potential aural intrusions of other family members, pets, home appliances, doorbells, etc. It is reasonable for the company to expect the home worker to limit the potential for interruption.

Implementation in Organization
In the study conducted by (Turcotte, 2010), about 85% of the workers are employees, the data were taken from the General Social Survey (GSS) in Canada from the year 2000 to 2008 periods.

Source: Statistic Canada, General Social Survey, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2006 and 2008

Majority of them are working at a paid job or being self-employed was their main activity during the year. Professionals are among the workers most likely to work at home (Turcotte, 2010) and their tendency to work at home

varies by industry. Some of the industry involving the professional workers includes health care and social assistance, educational services, public administration and so on.

Sources: Satistic Canada, General Social Survey, 2008.

The above chart shows that the highest percentage belongs to other services with 54%. Perhaps this is due to other industries which are not covered in the study falls into this category. Educational services covers 27% of working professionals worked at home at least occasionally. Apart from their work in the classroom, teachers have other duties such as class preparation, homework, test correction and many more. All these duties usually performed at home. The nature of the work performed may vary from one industry to another. It may be difficult to ascribe greater work-at-home opportunities to specific occupational group (Turcotte, 2010). (Casey, 2006) further explained that home workers are most often suits for technology based worker such as call center, administration, credit control in financial services, and also specialist jobs such as journalist, sales and so on.

The Impact
Telecommuting or working from home presents advantages and challenges for

both the organization and the employee. Since every telecommuting situation is unique, the advantages and challenges will vary based on organizational cultures, management styles, and individual personalities.

Employee's Perspective

From the employee's perspective there are a number of advantages to telecommuting. The most obvious is the time saved in commuting to and from work each day. In some congested areas, this time saving can be significant (one to two hours per day or more). In addition, another advantage of a telecommuting work arrangement is the increased autonomy and flexibility of work schedule. Although employees need to be available to clients and co-workers during typical business hours, working remotely allows individuals to focus on work when they feel most energized and efficient. It also can provide flexibility to attend to outside issues and family needs, such as a doctor's appointment or child's activities while minimizing interruptions to the workday.

Although this autonomy and flexibility in managing work can lead to increased productivity and satisfaction among employees, it also presents two key challenges. First challenge is difficulty in separating work and home lives and feelings of social isolation. Employees who work from home may find it difficult to create clear

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demarcations between work time and personal time. Since the ability to work can become ubiquitous, telecommuters sometimes find themselves working overtime late into the evenings, on the weekends, or even on vacation.

According to the Center for Work & Family, 46% of telecommuters worked while on vacation as compared to 34% of traditional office workers. In addition, only 24% of telecommuters rated their work life balance as " good" or " very good" compared to 26% of traditional workers, and 38% of those using daily flexible time (the ability to alter working hours on a daily basis). These results would imply that telecommuting does not necessarily lead to greater feelings of work life balance.

Second challenge is a lack of face-to-face interaction with co-workers can leave many telecommuters feeling socially isolated and " out-of-the-loop". This feeling can manifest itself in many different forms. Job successes and achievements can seem less exciting without others with whom to celebrate. In addition, some work tasks can seem daunting if the employee feels isolated from supporting resources (i. e., a knowledgeable co-worker or manager willing to provide feedback or advice). Informal learning that takes place daily in an organization's work environment will also be missed by the telecommuter. One reason that part-time telecommuting is considered optimal is that it mitigates such feelings of social isolation and taps into the benefits of teamwork and learning.

Telecommuting offers many advantages to organizations that introduce and implement this work arrangement with appropriate training and consideration of employee / manager-fit. A telecommuting arrangement can improve employee productivity as individuals who work remotely are unaffected by typical office environment distractions. This facilitates a greater focus on work for more concentrated periods of time. Offering telecommuting work arrangements also provides organizations with a larger

talent pool from which to recruit and select. When telecommuting is offered as an option, geographical distances become less significant, or potentially irrelevant, in the consideration of employment. Furthermore, organizations are better able to employ disabled, elderly, or other individuals who are capable of employment but whose physical circumstances may prevent them from working on-site. Another significant advantage of telecommuting can be a reduction in the organization's overhead / facility costs. With increasing numbers of employees working from home or in other remote locations, organizations can often reduce their investments and expenditures in office buildings, parking lots, and other physical capital. Despite its advantages, telecommuting also presents challenges for organizations.

The most obvious for many is the perceived difficulty in monitoring employee performance and measuring employee productivity. For organizations and managers who supervise using a " line-of-sight" approach, telecommuting can be an unsettling work arrangement that brings unwelcome and unproductive change into the organization. Therefore, organizations that implement telecommuting arrangements must be committed to trusting employees, empowering individuals to make decisions, and measuring by outcomes rather than " face-time". Another challenge presented by telecommuting concerns developing synergy and teamwork between telecommuters and their co-workers. It is often difficult to establish a mutual trusting and supportive relationship among individuals who infrequently interact face-to-face. For purposes such as the development of working relationships, a combination of telecommuting and onsite work is preferred

over a full-time telecommuting work arrangement (Kurland & Bailey, 1999; McNerney, 1995; HR Focus, 2002; Telecommute Connecticut, 2002).

Conclusion

It can be said that the implementation of working from home or telecommuting

provide some advantages and challenges impact on organization productivity. Working from home will impact not only to the organization but also to the employee. Prior to the implementation, it is important to consider how telecommuting may impact the dynamics of the organization in order to mitigate resentment that may arise among nontelecommuters and to foster an organizational culture that measures employee performance based on results rather than appearances.

Training is critical requirement to the success of a working from home. Employees who lack appropriate training are far more likely to encounter difficulties in managing their new work arrangement. The implementation of telecommuting arrangements should benefit from greater employee commitment, productivity, and job satisfaction.

Numerous methods were considered by employers to adapting and controlling the resources of available labour and to retain them since employees are the most valuable asset for a company. With the consideration of working from home initiative, it can be seen as one of the options to make the employees stay longer with the company. With the increasing popularity of promoting work-life balance in the recent years,

working from home able to provide the best of both world; personal life and work responsibilities right from their own home.

Recommendation

Employees are know and aware of the importance of having a balance between

work and life. But the reality is, it is a great challenge for the home workers to perform the job responsibility at home while at the same time handling home-related activities. Employers must play their big role by giving constant engagement with the home workers or vice versa, giving morale support and encouragement to motivate the home workers to perform better in their job responsibility and also manage to handle home related tasks such as childcare.

A contingency plan is required for the employees working from home to overcome certain issues such as technology breakdown since technologies have their own limitations. If those problems arise, the home workers can continue their job activities by reporting to work at the office to ensure that business are as usual. Here, communication is the key as the home workers must inform to their superior or manager at the office about the difficulties they faced.

Working from home also requires a careful planning and proper management. Employers that implementing home-working initiatives must ensure that the home worker get organized by trying to set a proper working schedule for the days they plan to work and the selection of the working hours. The home workers should also regularly keep contacting with their

office as to keep their superior or manager informed about any difficulties that they may encounter at during their working at home. Good managerial skills also useful to ensure the job delivery by the home worker are achieved.