Telecommuting: a research paper essay sample

Technology

1. Telecommuting: An Introduction

Telecommuting is generally thought to refer to the completion of paid work in the home, although no standardized definition exists. The term is a well-known concept coined by Jack Nilles in 1973 (Jackson and Van Der Wielen, 1998, p. 22), defined by Cross and Raizman (1986, p. 3f) as ' performing job-related work at a site away from the office, then electronically transferring the results to the office or to another location'. It reflects ' periodic work out of the principal office, one or more days per week either at home, a client's site, or in a telework center...[via] the partial or total substitution of telecommunications technologies...for the commute to work' (cited in Vega, 2003, p. 4). Huws et al. suggest that an adequate definition should include three variables: the location of work; the use of electronic equipment; and the existence of a communications link to the employer or contractor, which, for the intention of making a coherent introduction, should be adopted by this paper.

According to the latter, telecommuting is work, ' the location of which is independent of the location of the employer or contractor and can be changed according to the wishes of the individual teleworker and/or the organization for which he or she is working. It is work which relies primarily or to a large extent on the use of electronic equipment, the results of which work are communicated remotely to the employer or contractor. The remote communications link need not be a direct telecommunications link but could include the use of mail or courier services' (cited in Avery and Zabel 2001, p. 10). For the purposes of this research paper, teleworking and telecommuting will be used interchangeably, as they have been found to be defined by

many as literally the same. In this nine-page document, the human and economic costs and benefits of the physical travel to and from work were compared with the costs and benefits of staying at home and using a telecommunications link to communicate with the employer will be discussed.

1. Benefits and Disadvantages

The telecommuting literature suggests the following as potential benefits and disadvantages of telecommuting – each item is discussed with a view to its applicability to the employee undertaking such work nature, assuming that some form of information and communications technology will be used to aid the individual in the associated tasks. These benefits and disadvantages involve issues that impact on different stakeholders, including, but not limited to the employees themselves, the employees' families, and the respective organizations that they work for.

1. Benefits of Telecommuting

1. Improved Productivity

It can be seen that teleworkers' experiences can provide a unique challenge to traditional definitions of work. Both the women and men teleworkers that has been interviewed in studies done about telecommuting mention multiple reasons for wanting to work at home; most often, however, they say that they want to increase work productivity. Two central principles through which teleworkers organize their paid work activities and distinguish these activities from their non-work are that they plan and exercise control over their work, and that they evaluate their work in terms of measurable work

output (Jackson and Van Der Wielen, 1998). Likewise, the lack of need for social interaction with co-employees in the workplace is seen as the only way one can really achieve productivity enlargements, by having people work longer and or by doing less chit-chat.

2. Reduction in Office Overheads

For companies, the social-economic factors driving the implementation of telework has been the adopted strategy in an effort to save office space, reduce real estate costs, overhead, and relocation costs, and have already been well documented in the telecommuting literature. Since telecommuters perform job-related work at a site away from the office, telework has been promoted based on the notion that it is technologically feasible and economically desirable to reduce office space. Likewise, the ability to reduce real estate costs can be a real incentive to companies located in high-rent cities, especially major European cities (Mahlon, 1998). The savings on overheads comes obviously, as employees do not have such high company expenses to carry on their duties and responsibilities.

3. Attract Quality Recruits

Telecommuting is being used as a tool to recruit and retain highly skilled workers, especially information-technology workers. In a 1999 interview Nilles reported that the primary reason his clients developed telecommuting initiatives was to improve the recruitment and retention of workers (Ellison, 2004). It also gives companies the ability to hire the best candidate for a job, regardless of where the company or employee is located. This can be a real advantage for small companies that might otherwise have difficulty

recruiting talented workers. Telecommuting can also help small firms enlist the help of experienced professionals on a contractual basis. Moreover, higher skilled workers can market their talents in a worldwide labor market as freelance talent or within multinational organizations with telecommuting as a work vehicle.

4. Reduce Absenteeism

Telecommuting has been found to also reduce absenteeism. Teleworkers, without the hassle of going through the motions of preparing for work and actually taking on the road to go to work, has the tendency to perform all job-related work with better ease, and thus decrease the chances of missing a day at work. Since employees are able to care for their families while actually earning for a living, it increases their interest to work for the organization that has provided them with such an opportunity, thereby not only lessening the instances of absenteeism, but increasing employee loyalty as well (Olson and Primps, 1990). Further, reasons that may keep an employee home, for instance mild personal illness or inclement weather, may not have any impact if there is no commute.

5. Broaden Labor Pool

In addition to the four aforementioned benefits, telecommuting also broadens the labor pool, since companies can attract a wider range of employees, including disabled workers, older workers and mothers who cannot leave their children at home who would benefit from such alternative arrangements (Bredin, 1996). Additionally, people who do not want to work in large urban areas where most of today's organizations are located can be

included in the pool of workforce available with the advent of telecommuting, as there is no need to go to the actual place of work with this type of arrangement.

6. Environmental Benefits

The last two decades have seen the steady realization of teleworking ideas in the world of work. Bredin (1996) noted that in the 1970s, at the time when Nilles introduced the notion of telecommuting, research was aimed at giving public policy-makers technology-supported solutions for several societal problems, such as urban crowding, energy shortages, transportation congestion, environmental pollution and the peripheralization of economic regions. The main idea here was that geographical dispersion of the labor force from central business districts would significantly decrease the number of daily commuters, with IT used to bridge distances because in traveling to work, they take part in additional networks, which involve a heterogeneous association of vehicles, travel fares, energy consumption and environmental damage (noise, pollutants, etc.). Teleworking could also result in decreasing computer production and problems with the disposal of toxic material or from radiation through wireless telephone and mobile radio communication.

1. Disadvantages of Telecommuting

1. Isolation

One of the major concerns with telecommuting is that remote workers will feel lonely and isolated, especially those workers who like the social aspects of the workplace. Telework is often associated with isolation (both expected and actual) and this has been a key factor in the limited adoption of

distributed work (Forester, 1989). The following sections are aspects of this social isolation which the teleworker is said to be disadvantaged against.

1. Social Interaction

One activity teleworkers consistently excluded from the definition of work is social interaction at the office. Traditional office workers meet social needs at the office through informal channels, which may not be available to those off-site. Informal channels of communication—which are associated with proximity—are important for sharing organizational norms, for socializing new employees, and for encouraging collaboration (Avery and Zabel, 2001). Although computer-mediated communication can pose for a semblance of social interaction, it is unlikely that it will ever completely replace face-to-face interaction for all social and task-related communication in the office environment. The same qualities that make it more appropriate for some types of communication also make it less desirable for other purposes. Also, working at home blurs roles for the telecommuters' family as well. Children, spouses, neighbors, and even pets may find it difficult to know when the telecommuter is available for family-related interaction versus when they are working. Thus social interaction in the context of the family is affected negatively as well.

1. Decreased Identification

The effects of telework on organizational identification (which speaks to an employee's level of commitment and attachment to the organization) are also taken down in literature. It is generally assumed that telework reduces organizational commitment since off-site employees are less likely to come

into contact with organizational symbols and messages, an assumption supported by some research (Olson and Primps, 1990). As other authors have noted, organizations typically express and reflect organizational norms through physical aspects of the organization. Physical artifacts—like decorations and awards, furniture, and office size—serve to maintain organizational culture by strengthening organizational identification (Mahlon, 1998) and by indicating employee status and hierarchy. These visual communication devices are unavailable to teleworkers, who may not spend time in a centralized office. From the teleworker's perspective, conformity, acceptance of organizational norms and customs, and predictability are rewarded in bureaucracies, and it is more difficult to demonstrate these qualities while working at home.

- Decreased Participation

Managers have consistently expressed concern over the difficulty of managing remote workers and fear that key staff will not always be available as a result of remote work. Ellison (2004) asserted in a finding that a high level of telecommuting involvement may result in a lower participation due to physical absence, which in turn hinders their chances of promotion. Employees who like to work in a team or at least with others will find that teleworking will not provide them with the maximized ability to do so, and as such feelings of being left out or isolation from the rest of the organization (especially if the firm does not wholly operate on telecommuting) may potentially surface.

1. Team Isolation

In addition to missing out on ' face time' with supervisors, teleworkers may miss out on other career development opportunities, such as informal networks and mentoring and the stimulation of sharing ideas with coworkers on a team (Vega, 2003). It is impractical that telecommuters become a part of a team, mainly due to the difficulty of coordinating work groups and teams. Thus, a teleworker is left out of the list of options when forming a team within the organization. Although the viability of working with a team is still present, the chances that the telecommuter is involved in all of the essential team activities are slimmer than that of the traditional office worker, for purposes of distance to the actual working place of the team.

2. Propensity to Overwork

Since the notion of ' office hours' is absent and since the worksite is highly convenient in telecommuting, the propensity to overwork is present, with others having a tendency to put in too many hours since the line between work and home blurs. Avery and Zabel (2001) argue that this is especially true for workaholics, since in a sense they never leave work – it is always there, in the home office, nagging, while may ultimately lead to stress and eventually, burnout. There are also findings that teleworkers' sense of overwork is linked to feelings of pressure on the job, to feeling that they often have difficulty focusing on their work.

3. Invisibility Factor

Olson and Primps (1990) found that most telecommuters believed that their career advancement had been hindered due to decreased visibility. Especially for those who seek career advancement in the organization, this

invisibility factor would not help much in their goal. Since their physical presence is found wanting in the organization, most managers and supervisors are unable to effectively and objectively judge their activities, thus the tendency to have a lower performance rating than those who work on-site, or even telecommuters who work in the traditional workplace from time to time.

4. Communication

Cross and Raizman (1986) noted that although teleworking has ways of communicating with their co-employees or superiors, the importance of face-to-face communication cannot be overemphasized. Most misunderstandings occur when communication is facilitated through the Internet, as the context of communication is imperceptible to both the sender and the receiver. Likewise, there are still some forms of messages that cannot be effectively transmitted through technology-enabled applications such as instant messengers. Further, teleworking requires more communication between employee and superior, as replacement for close supervision that is present in an otherwise traditional working environment.

5. Alienation

Teleworkers who work off-site may find it difficult to re-create some of the social bonds from afar, although instant messaging—a synchronous technology around which informal communication norms have developed—appears to be promising in this respect (Forester, 1989). Being detached from the social scene for even a while with nothing but the computer as everyday companion can sufficiently alienate a person from the real world

and lead to the individual's difficulty in getting back on the social track once opportunity presents itself.

6. Technology and Security Issues

The last two issues are technology and security . Telecommuting that relied on the remote access to company files, while technically feasible, is cautioned against. Additionally, where such cases needed investment in equipment to support homework (especially where this only occurred occasionally, with staff also needing office facilities) the likely costs involved were thought to outweigh the advantages. This was hardly surprising, of course, given that the principal rationales for teleworking are issues of productivity and flexibility, not savings in fixed resources. Benefits of on-site working which included: the availability of existing resources such as computers, photocopiers, faxes and furniture – much of which could be shared, especially between different shifts, are not accessible to telecommuters (Vega, 2003). In addition, while central workplaces provided for the maintenance of confidentiality and security and the fact that they also allowed for the enclosure and surveillance of workers also meant that teleworkers are disadvantaged with regards to these aspects.

- Conclusion

Two conclusions have been reached by this paper. One, telecommuting is not for everyone. Two, telecommuting must be an integral part of any organization's management strategy in the twenty-first century to reduce costs and address growing concerns of work and family life. The first conclusion reached implies that due to the given advantages and

disadvantages in this paper, the nature of the business and the individual needs and capacities of employees depend on whether to implement such program within the organization. It is important to look at job requirements and individual behavior first before determining whether a job or an individual is suitable for teleworking. New employees, particularly, are not the best prospects for telecommuting, since it is important for employees working away from the principal office to have a good knowledge of their job. Without the five skills essential for the successful virtual worker including time management, the ability to handle challenges, the ability to handle distractions, the ability to manage business support relationships, and the ability to balance work with non-work obligations as identified by Bredin (1996), the disadvantages mentioned in this research cannot be overcome.

There is a practical side to telecommuting that has to be anticipated and planned for as part of the organization's management strategy in order to achieve some measure of success. Efficient telecommuting depends upon management of a number of human factors in tandem with the technical aspects of working from a remote site. The very real problems of handling distractions, coping with isolation, and avoiding overwork and burnout must be expected and treated with the same attention as the selection of appropriate office equipment, software, and mastery of technical skills. The most important technical decisions faced by companies are related to network capabilities and data transmission. Most internal and external communication within organizations depends upon efficient use of the Internet as well as intranets. The pace of change in this area is staggering,

but taking advantage of new technology as it becomes generally available is crucial to economic survival.

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