

AMERICAN BUSINESS MEDIA

The Association of Business Media Companies

Best Practices of Telecommuting

by William C. Edwards

Introduction

A recent survey composed by FIND/SVP, a market research and advisory firm, found that more than 11.1 million Americans telecommuted in 1997, triple 1990's figure. According to a report by the Olsten Corporation, 40-percent of American companies are offering some form of telecommuting program for their employees. This surging market is working to dispel a long-held myth that in order to be successful at one's work and climb the corporate ladder, one needs to be physically present at company headquarters, where minor victories are noticed by senior executives. In reality, some employees are commenting on how they have never set eyes on those directly overseeing their work - and how they have not suffered for it.

Advantages for the Employer

- Reduce company costs
- Less work space required
- Helps attract best candidates and retain good employees
- Provides for a wider employee talent pool
- Save on relocation costs
- Easily accommodate "differently abled employees"
- Employee morale may be improved
- Fewer commuters help support clean air objectives

Above and beyond, employers cite budgetary savings as their top incentive for initiating a telecommuting program. Telecommuting has proved to be an effective method for reducing company costs, mostly associated with the amount of office space that is no longer required. These savings are amplified when companies relocate to larger cities where office space is scarce and increasingly expensive to rent. Employee morale, too, provides an employer with another important incentive. Employers also enjoy casting a larger employment net for potential candidates looking for firms that offer telecommuting initiatives. Finally, the inclusion of "differently abled employees" contributes to this candidate enlargement, as employees who might have been unable or unwilling to work in an office setting can now be accommodated.

Advantages for the Employee

- Enjoys increased flexibility in balancing work and home needs
- Higher morale from ability to work when most productive
- Reduced stress from reduced commuting problems and increased control over work
- Financial savings (auto, commuting, clothing expenses, etc.)

For employees who never thrived in an office atmosphere where time clocks ruled the day, telecommuting provides the ultimate flexibility with much less of the stress. While hours are normally established for communicating with employers, employees can otherwise set their own timetables. With a final deadline to shoot for, employees are free of office distractions, such as an anxious boss worried about a project's status, or an employee looking to add fodder to the company gossip mill.

At some companies, weekly meetings are informally arranged at mutually convenient locations. Employees have much to gain financially as well. Commuting, auto and clothing expenses are just a few of the costs telecommuters conserve on when they are free to work at home. The mental costs associated with the daily commute are also assuaged; "road rage" is relegated to the weekend shopping trips.

Disadvantages for the Employer

- Less management interaction
- Delay of work due to office equipment service needs
- Cost of appropriate home work environment
- Liability and implementation issues
- Resentment of telecommuters by non-telecommuters
- Potential for lapses in communication

Companies face a few potential disadvantages when they offer telecommuting programs, the severity of which depend on the working relationship between the employer and the employee. While the employee usually enjoys less stress outside of the working environment, the manager's ability to interact with the employee may be weakened, especially when communications between the two are lacking or when times are not clearly established for communication. When this is the case, the team-working process may be hijacked by an employee's inability to communicate on a timely basis. This issue is further complicated when an employer finds that corrective actions need to be taken against a telecommuter who, in the employer's mind, is not meeting his or her objectives. Also, insurance and workmen's comp issues have the potential to cause problems when employees injure themselves at home. Finally, non-telecommuters could come to resent those telecommuting and express their feelings to employers.

Disadvantages for the Employee

- Provides limited office culture, less social interaction
- Greater need to be self-motivated
- Space required for work is taken away from living space
- Potential for family expectations of telecommuter to interfere with work

For the employee, the major disadvantage cited by telecommuters is the lack of social interaction they once enjoyed in the office environment. As the water coolers are replaced by water bottles, these employees, especially younger staffers, find that a branch of "cabin fever" sets in when they are removed from a face-to-face working climate. Some telecommuters find that this disadvantage outweighs the advantages or that they simply are not motivated enough to thrive in a work-at-home setting. Furthermore, some telecommuters have found that office services they once took for granted, such as MIS support, are much tougher to come by in a home office.

For some, the office space required at home interferes with their family living space. "Not everybody has that spare room," one committee member remarked. Finally, the home provides ample room for a number of distractions, from family members or others, that disrupt an employee's ability to complete his or her work.

Issues to Consider Prior to Implementation}

- How does our traditional HR policy apply to telecommuting?

Some committee members believe that an existing HR policy can successfully be adapted to a telecommuters relationship with the company. Others believe that in order to work through this question, the telecommuting program should be presented as a business decision for the employer and not an employee benefit.

- Who is eligible?

Companies should evaluate each department or work group for applicability. Positions that simply cannot be performed outside of the office need to be ruled out, along with employees who have sub-par performance ratings.

- What office equipment will be provided for the telecommuter and how will it be serviced?

During the initial stages, companies have found that sending a team of MIS personnel into a home has proven successful. During this visit, the MIS support staff, whether in-house or third-party consultants, assess the home office requirements and place orders for necessary computer, fax machine or printer parts and supplies. Other safety-oriented tasks, such as ordering ergonomic work chairs or establishing monitor and keyboard positioning, are completed during this phase according to the company's liability insurance policies. How equipment and services will be provided is just one of the issues that needs to be addressed in a policy agreement between the employer and the telecommuter. Making a definitive list of the equipment, services and supplies that will be provided by the employer is essential to avoiding future conflicts.

- How will the employee communicate with the supervisor?

We know that one of an employee's incentives for pursuing telecommuting is a flexible timetable. Nonetheless, concrete times must be scheduled when the employer can count on the employee to be available for teleconferences, e-mail message or fax receipt, or on-site visits. Some companies seek to alleviate management's loss of oversight and employees' loss of social interaction by mandating weekly face-to-face status meetings. Establishing these scheduling issues provides an

employer a basis for evaluating a telecommuter's performance. Just as is in an office-building environment, at-home workers should be judged on a timeliness basis.

- Insurance?

Wording must also be included concerning insurance issues that may arise. It is the employer's responsibility to inform the employee whether or not the company's liability insurance policies extend to the telecommuter's home office. In some cases, homeowners' policies will not automatically cover injuries arising out of business use of the home. Such policies may need to be endorsed accordingly to allow for that possibility. Periodic inspections may be mandated to ensure that a home office is maintained according to the pre-ordained safety standards.

- How do you effectively evaluate a telecommuter's job performance?

To a large extent, telecommuter evaluations should mimic those of in-house employees. Language must be included in the telecommuting agreement that will focus on employee benefits, professional conduct and ethics, and evaluations, among other subjects based on a company's standard set of operating regulations.

However, precautions should be taken with telecommuters that are not necessary for in-house employees. Specifically, employers may find it useful to include language in the telecommuting agreement to ensure that a proper work environment is maintained. While some telecommuters find that working at home decreases the amount of distractions that they face at work, employers are wary of disruptions that can be caused in the home. Some agreements include sections that underline an understanding that personal matters, such as non-business telephone calls and visitors or dependent care, should not interfere with the employee's work.