Why Leave Your Home to Work When You Can Bring Your Work Home? The Positive Impact of Telecommuting on Employee Wellbeing

Organizations are continuously searching for ways to maximize the productivity of their employees without pushing them to the point of burnout due to work overload. Constantly juggling between the demands of work and life at home, working individuals with families are fighting to stay afloat the responsibilities that life throws their way. What can employers do to help their employees cope with this struggle while still protecting (or even increasing) the productivity of their employees? Recent research has shown that telework could be the solution.

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Telework, or telecommuting is defined as "working outside the conventional workplace and communicating with it by way of telecommunications or computer-based technology" (Greer & Payne, 2014). With the advancement of technology and the changing of organizational business models, telework continues to be a prevalent alternative to working a traditional 9 to 5 hour job in an office cubicle, especially with the rapid emergence of a new generational workforce—the Millennials. In 2012, the Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that about 23% of employees in the U.S. participated in some form of teleworking; this percentage was even higher (38%) among employees with a Bachelor's degree or higher level of education (as cited in Greer & Payne, 2014). Multiple studies found that telework is implemented within organizations in order to promote business effectiveness as well as support employee well-being at work and at home (Greer & Payne, 2014). Looking into role overload and strain will help paint a picture of what individuals are experiencing at work and at home.

Overload

Many of us have experienced what it's like to be "under the gun" or under a "time crunch" due to excessive work responsibilities, family obligations and the like within a certain amount of time. When the pressures of life exceed the tolerance that people have for any given stressor, the results are role overload which has been increasing over the past decade. This has been attributed to increases in time spent at the office, new communication technology—including laptops and smart phones—which allow constant access to work responsibilities, and organizational norms that reward long hours rather than or more than performance (Duxbury & Halinski, 2014).

What effects can role overload have on work performance? Studies have shown that overload often results in lower levels of organizational commitment, higher rates of absenteeism, increased turnover intention, poorer mental and physical health, and lower levels of work performance (Duxbury & Halinski, 2014). Overload has also been shown to negatively affect individuals' role with their families which can result in increased levels of anxiety, burnout, fatigue, depression, and emotional and physiological stress (Duxbury & Halinski, 2014).

Work-Life Balance

Another approach to work strain can be seen through Karasek's demand-control model which was originally established in 1979 and has since been studied as one of the most utilized models of occupational stress (Kain & Jex, 2010). This model states that workplace stress is dependent on how demanding individual's job is and how much control they have over the accomplishments of those demands. In other words, employees who have low levels of control over their job are more likely to be subject to higher levels of job strain. Also, research has shown that when job demands are too high, energy levels and time resources are depleted which results in strain (Duxbury & Halinski, 2014). In order to minimize role overload and strain, employees need to have more control over their work—especially the time that they work—and the ability to balance work and family demands. The question stands: Can the implementation of teleworking in organizations help solve this?

Better for the Organization

In 2011, Lister and Harnish (2011) proposed that flexible work arrangements were considered to benefit society due to fewer drivers being on the road, resulting in less traffic and air pollution. Research within the past five years now shows that there are many benefits that telework offers at the employee level *and* the organizational level. The organizational benefits include: telework being used to attract and retain top talent and a diverse workforce, access talented individuals outside of immediate geographic location, greater productivity of employees, less absenteeism, lower turnover, improved organizational performance, greater organizational commitment, reduced overhead costs, lower utility costs, lower real estate costs, and circumventing possible sickness outbreaks with fewer employees at the office (Greer & Payne, 2014).

Better for the Individual

The benefits at the employee level include better work-life balance, less overload and strain, higher job satisfaction rates, more flexibility over day-to-day schedule, zero commute time (which leads to a more efficient daily schedule), fewer distractions at the office and an increase in autonomy (Greer & Payne, 2014). Also, a study conducted by Kelliher and Anderson in 2010 showed that when employees worked from home they considered it a privilege in which they would feel indebted to their organization which resulted in a sense of obligation to exert greater effort in attempt to repay their organization. This is consistent with the social exchange theory (Greer & Payne, 2014). The social exchange theory within an organizational context suggests that employees who believe they benefit from the option to telecommute will feel obligated to reciprocate an increased work effort by performing behaviors that benefit the organization (Jones, 2010). How synergetic and advantageous!

Negative Side

Nevertheless, the negative aspects of telework can't be ignored. These include employees being physically separated from the main office resulting in fewer growth opportunities, employees potentially feeling isolated from their coworkers, disengagement from their job, and a heavy reliance on telecommunication tools that aren't always 100% dependable (Greer & Payne,

2014). Relying on technology as a form of communication can result in less effective communication and also could harm the cohesiveness of team collaboration. Additionally, research has shown that a common challenge amongst supervisors of telecommuters is that it can be difficult to manage the work performance of these employees due to the fact that they aren't always in the office. Out of sight, out of mind.

What Millenials Want

The millennial generation has now taken over as having the highest number of individuals within the workforce at an estimated 82 million people. The Millennials are individuals born from the 1980s through the early 2000s are changing the way organizations do things. For example, millennials enjoy having flexibility, autonomy, and control over their jobs and many organizations seek to come up with ways to help satisfy their desires. If millennials can't find workplaces that are consistent with their personal values, they will look elsewhere for employment, which costs the organization time and money spent training and replacing those that left (McLeigh & Boberiene, 2014). In fact, many millennials are starting their own businesses in order to get all it is that they want in their work lives (McLeigh & Boberiene, 2014). Therefore, it is important that organizations are trained on the tendencies of their workforce in order to minimize dissatisfaction and turnover rates as much as possible.

Clear Expectations Key

For telecommuting to work, both the organization and the employee need to be on the same page.

As long as expectations of the employee are clear from the supervisor, the employee can be held accountable for his or her work performance whether in the office, at home, or at a local *Starbucks*. It is also important to note that if expectations are set too high, employee dissatisfaction and possible turnover intentions will be higher, whether telecommuting or not.

The flexibility of teleworking has been gaining ground over the past decade. With the new generation of employees desiring this flexibility and job control, the number of organizations utilizing teleworking is increasing. With more employees and organizations adopting the mentality of "if you scratch my back, then I'll scratch yours", employers are helping their employees cope with heavy work demands, and employees are feeling grateful and responding to the kind gesture with increased effort and work performance. When the expectations are clear and being met, yielding both positive results for the company and better work-life balance and higher satisfaction for employees, the question is asked even more often: why leave your home to work, when you can bring your work home?

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