

## Work Flexibility, Telework, and an Evolving Workplace

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Two and a half decades ago, the idea of working from anywhere but an office was novel. Today the internet allows to work from virtually anywhere at any time. Technology has changed the way in which people live life; it allows the rapid exchange of mass amounts of information from essentially anywhere instantaneously. Because of the rapid changes in technology, businesses have had to evolve to meet the demands of the shifting and emerging global society. An increasing number of businesses are adopting flextime, home office, or telecommuting programs. Many employees are opting to take advantage of these models. Because of the rise of employees working remotely it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of these models as compared to traditional office settings –taking into consideration variations among individuals and organizations.

First, it is important to define and understand what telecommuting is. In an earlier study by Pamela Knight and Jerry Westbrook (1999) telecommuting was defined as “employees who work predominantly outside of their home office, but are associated with a traditional office and may use a traditional office for some administrative support and to hold physical meetings.” Essentially, telecommuting grants an employee within an organization the flexibility of working from home or elsewhere while allowing access to the physical office as well. Harpaz (2002) stated that an individual who telecommutes or works remotely can “structure his/her tasks and working life in many ways –

dependent on the nature of the work, the organization, the customer-base, etc. The degree of remoteness is highly variable”.

### **Telecommuting: Factoring in the Individual.**

Research indicates that along with the nature of the business or company, personality plays a key role in an individual’s likelihood to adapt to and succeed at telecommuting. Some people are more apt to be productive under this model, whereas others work best with a specific and supervised schedule. Some individuals simply lack the ability and motivation to work independently. For example, an exploratory study by Gainey and Clenney (2006) found that personality played a role in flextime and telecommuting. The study measured the five basic dimensions of personality: extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, openness to experience, and conscientiousness. Results suggested that the trait most significantly related to the success of an individual in telecommuting was openness to experience.

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This finding implied that those who scored higher on openness to experience were more likely to be willing to try out various working arrangements such as telecommuting. Extraversion was also found to play a role in an individual's desire to choose or excel in telecommuting situations. Not surprisingly, extroverts were not the best match for remote working arrangements; extroverts value spending time around coworkers and/or clients regularly throughout the work week.

Research also found demographic differences relevant to individual's likelihood of telecommuting. Factors that contributed to a higher inclination towards telecommuting included number of children or dependents, such as elderly parents, marital status and age. Since telecommuting allows those with family obligations to work from home on a more flexible time schedule, it was unsurprising that the study found that older workers who were married and with children favored the option of telecommuting (Feldman & Gainey, 1997; Gainey & Clenney, 2006).

**Telecommuting: Advantages.** Although there are many advantages to telecommuting, some of the most supported by the research are autonomy and independence, time management, and reduction in travel time and associated stress.

**Autonomy & Independence.** In general, people value autonomy. By working from home, an individual is affiliated with an organization, but operates on a schedule arranged around personal life demands. Employee autonomy and independence facilitate a sense of responsibility and control. As long as work is getting done

effectively and efficiently, the schedule does not matter. Individuals are able to manage their own time, ideally cutting out distractions and wasted time. Furthermore, by cutting out wasted time, employees have more time to participate in hobbies or activities with family and friends.

**Time Management.** Many people in the workforce are faced with company politics, interruptions from coworkers, or other distractions that limit their ability to be as productive as possible. The option of working remotely offers individuals the ability to work comfortably from home or elsewhere with the potential of less distraction. Tunyaplin, Lunce, and Maniam (1998) summarize research which found that when away from the office, employee productivity increased between 15% and 30%, because people were able to focus on work with fewer interruptions.

**Reduced Travel Time & Stress.** Many employees face stress associated with commuting to and from work, often spending hours doing so. In the case of many working parents, getting to work on time must be balanced with getting children to daycare or school (Mokhtarian, Bagley, & Salomon, 1998). Studies have shown a decrease in work tardiness, absenteeism, and sick days with the incorporation of remote work settings. Additionally, stress levels and travel expenses decrease while time for leisure increases (Harpaz, 2002).

**Telecommuting: Disadvantages.** Research generally points to the many advantages of telecommuting. However, some of the most bothersome disadvantages across research are

isolation and lack of belonging, lack of work-life separation, self-discipline issues, and lack of professional support and career development.

**Isolation & Lack of Belonging.** One major disadvantage of telecommuting is isolation and lack of belonging. Older studies in the social sciences, notably by Freud (1930), Bowlby (1969), Baumeister and Leary (1995), found that belonging to a group is a basic need of individuals. Without positive and challenging group experiences on a regular basis, well-being and work effectiveness decrease (Feldman & Gainey, 1997). Numerous studies site that employees, when asked, would only choose to work from a home office a couple days a week because of a fear of social isolation. In fact, Tunyaplin, Lunce, and Maniam (1998) found that over 75% of respondents felt this way regardless of where their current workplace was. This suggests a need for belonging and interaction within a work setting, although there are individual differences in the strength of this need (Feldman & Gainey, 1997).

**Work/Life Separation & Over-Availability.** Although technology has allowed more flexibility in the workplace, it has also placed more demands on the individual to be available 24/7. Employees, regardless of the day or time of day are expected to be responsive at every work-related call. It is very difficult for some people to separate work and home life when they do business from home. It is important that employees working from home institute boundaries or establish a set space to work. Furthermore, some people when working from home are more apt to become addicted to their work and not know when to call it quits. This can potentially damage family or social life,

increase stress levels, and decrease overall well-being (Harpaz, 2002).

**Self-Discipline issues.** One of the benefits of telecommuting is the autonomy and independence that goes along with it; yet it can also be a disadvantage. Some people are not as disciplined as others and procrastinate on their work. It is also easy to become preoccupied with social events, hobbies, or other distractions when not working from an office.

**Lack of Professional Support & Career Advancement.** Another big concern for people working from home is the lack of exposure and interaction. This could hinder their ability to be promoted or advance in their job. Perin (1991) found a relationship between visibility and apparent participation of an employee and opportunities of promotion (Harpaz, 2002). Not being in an office regularly impedes an employee's ability to interact directly with supervisors or managers which could lead to missed training or development opportunities.

**Telecommuting: The Continued Future of Business.** Research provides strong evidence of benefits of telecommuting to organizations, in the form of higher productivity. It is also beneficial to individuals. At the same time, it is important to remember to carefully select individuals most suited for telecommuting, and to balance it with some "face time". Judicious use of telecommuting will help ensure the greatest success for both employers and employees.

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