

TELECOMMUTING: SHAPING THE FUTURE OF WORKING ENVIRONMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The information technology revolution has brought about numerous changes, affecting almost every aspects of life in the modern world. The relative ease of obtaining and using information has led to radical shifts in organizational structure and in an individual's work methods. These changes also have significant effects on the way of people live and work. Among the new flexible work arrangements is telecommuting. People can work from remote areas beyond traditional boundaries in time and space through electronic computing and communication devices. An organization may introduce new structure to meet the changing social lifestyles of employees.

Additionally, in an increasingly challenging economy, organizations are looking for ways to improve the bottom line. To compete effectively in global markets, they are streamlining operations, downsizing organizational structures, and reducing overhead costs and travel expenses. To meet higher customer expectations for quality and service, they are looking for ways to get their employees closer to the people they serve and to help them achieve better results with fewer resources. These changes include a rise in the number of dual-career families, number of females in the workforce and the aging population which have made it more critical for organizations to build in flexibility with regard to where and when employees want to work. Thus, organizations need to be flexible in their employment practices so as to attract and retain scarce talented and skilled staff and to tap into new

labor markets like part-time, semi-retired or disabled workers. Therefore, telecommuting can represent a work alternative which allows for some flexibility in where and when people perform their work.

Definitions

In this paper, "telecommuting" is defined as a work arrangement where organizational employees work at home instead of at their offices. This work can be done during or outside regular office hours. They maintain contact with their organizations through the use of telephones, facsimile machines, computer modems, and electronic and voice mail systems. Employees do not necessarily work at home everyday but for one or more complete workdays a week instead of working in the office. Normally, telecommuting combines the use of electronic computing and telecommunication technologies with flexible work locations so as to remove the geographical and organizational boundaries of the traditional and centralized work place.

The other term for telecommuting is "teleworking". These two terms are equivalent in meaning. Teleworking is widely used in Europe, Australia, and Asia, while telecommuting is used mostly in the U.S.A. and Canada.

Why organizations choose telecommuting?

There are about as many reasons as there are organizations, but there are a few general motives that are the most prevalent.

- **Employee satisfaction.**

Employee satisfaction is one possible result of telecommuting. Telecommuting enables employees to have more time flexibility and autonomy in their work. Telecommuters' effective control of time and reduce of stress together increases their work satisfaction.

- **Productivity.**

Telecommuting can increase employee satisfaction which, in turn, can lead to higher work productivity.

- **Cost reduction issues.**

Employers soon realize that telecommuting could reduce operational costs and real estate costs. Once telecommuters work at home, the company can save cost on office space, electricity, custodians, etc.

Technological advancement, competitive pressures due to globalization and the increasing importance of work and family balance have contributed to telecommuting entering many organizations.

Telecommuting Program

Setting up a telecommuting program for a company involves many necessary steps such as policies being written, jobs evaluated, employees selected and trained, equipment leased or purchased and placed, etc. Both the employee and the employer will gain the numerous benefits from the program, if it is implemented carefully and with good planning. There are many companies who have achieved high productivity from telecommuting by following the three R's (Papalexandris, & Kramar, 1997):

The Right Reasons.

Telecommuting is viewed as a benefit and accommodation instead of a business strategy. Businesses should implement telecommuting for reasons such as

to increase productivity; to reduce need for office space; to increase customer contact by sales force; to retained a highly talented skilled workforce; and to increase use of highly qualified people who are not available or affordable on a full-time basis as explained in the advantages above.

The Right Job.

A recent survey reported that a majority of telecommuters are knowledge workers or, workers whose jobs involve cognitive tasks as opposed to manual tasks and who rely heavily on digital information resources. Many job functions are well suited for telecommuting. Sales employees benefit from the remote access capabilities which permit them to spend more time with customers. Telemarketers can more comfortably shift their schedules in order to reach more prospects. Field service employees save time and stressful traffic by not having to report to the main office for service offers. While many jobs have some aspects that may lend themselves to telecommuting, white-collar jobs that require a great amount of independent work are the most suitable for telecommuting. These jobs include sales, consulting, writing, and research analysis, all of which can be conducted outside the traditional office environment. However, assembly line manufacturers who require a centralized approach and need to have employees on site would not benefit from the line workers telecommuting. Many other job functions can be redesigned, however to benefit from telecommuting through planning and proper implementation.

The Right Person.

Selection of employees is one of the keys to successful implantation. Motivation and discipline must come naturally to those who choose this change in lifestyle. The absence of stresses of commuting and office policies are the most valued aspects of

telecommuting. However, being away from the office also means missing the mental stimulation of an exchange of ideas with colleagues. Telecommuters often worry about the impact they make as employees of their companies. And working from home does not necessarily mean less distraction—children, television, neighbors, door-to-door salesman, friends and family calling all hours of the day. However, telecommuters tend to work more hours than they would in an office.

The right person for telecommuting is important. Someone who has the ability to be self-motivated and can work alone is optimal for this new work environment. Employees who can accommodate telecommuting are already working and successful in businesses that require independence, planned operating methods, and extended periods of focused effort. These workers are usually more achievement-oriented, are good planners, are enduring in their endeavors, and are self-directed. They have the ability to balance their time and can avoid interruption. These individuals are part of an organization's most highly motivated, disciplined, and reliable staff.

Effective Telecommuting Rules

Those who telecommute use technology such as computers and modems in order to keep in touch with the company and with the supervisor. However, in order to have a successful telecommuting program, it is critical to understand that technology alone will not be sufficient. The worker and the manager need to communicate about what is expected before telecommuting begins. Clear goals are absolutely essential. After the job goals have been defined, the manager and the employee need to agree on the deadlines for the project or projects. If the project is large and time-consuming, it may be necessary to break it down into smaller segments. This will help the manager and employee monitor the overall progress of the project's progress on a continual basis. A deadline for each segment of

the project can be set by the employee with the manager's consent, who will evaluate the performance of the telecommuting employee. Every telecommuter, even with autonomy and independence, still requires some form of supervision. Good setting, communication, coordination, feedback, mentoring, and guidance when needed and performance appraisal are crucial to the productivity of the telecommuter.

Well-planned telecommuting programs share a number of practices including top management support, departmentalized decision making, good guidelines, a carefully written telecommuting contract, and training for telecommuters and their supervisors. Since the manager / supervisor knows that the telecommuting employee will not be in the office every day, it is the manager's responsibility to be clear and specific about what is to be accomplished by the telecommuter. Ramsey (1997) offers managers on tips on working effectively with telecommuters:

- Find out how other managers or organizations are setting up telecommuting programs.
- Provide telecommuters with important resources, materials, and supplies.
- Give technical assistance as often as needed.
- To evaluate performance, it is important that the manager look at the results accomplished rather than the amount of time spent on the project. The manager needs to record the costs and productivity of telecommuters and compare them with the costs and productivity of the traditional office workers to ascertain whether telecommunicating is truly contributing to business effectiveness.
- Communication with the telecommuter should be conducted daily. Phone, fax, and e-mail make communication a very simple process. It is difficult to keep organizational goals in sight and mind if the employee feels isolated.

- The telecommuters should meet face-to-face with managers on a regular basis. It is very important to have the support of managers and co-workers who act as a representative for the telecommuter inside the workplace.

Many companies require their telecommuters to provide their own equipment which often includes a PC with modem, phone and phone lines as well as a fax machine. For example, Hewlett-Packard's telecommuters purchase their own computer programs. Other companies are more supportive and provide these necessities at limited cost. In addition, it is important for organizations to provide technical support in case of hardware or software problems. Certainly, problems can occur all the time and they can be costly and time-consuming, if not corrected in a timely manner.

Many organizations, both public and private, are telecommuting. Some have formal programs, but the rest are taking a more informal approach. Blue Cross/Blue Shield, AT&T, Ernst & Young, DuPont, IBM, JC Penney, New York Life, American Express, State of Washington, City of Los Angeles, and Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta are a few of the more visible organizations that have successful telecommuting programs.

Research into the link between management-communication strategies and the job satisfaction of telecommuters at IBM Australia shows how management communications can affect positively employee loyalty, productivity, stress and general feelings of satisfaction with both the job and its content. The research reveals that telecommuters are more likely to be loyal to their employer, if he or she clearly communicates the employees' job responsibilities, goals, and objectives. Also, telecommuters are more likely to submit high quality work, if their employer clearly communicates any deadlines which the work involves. Additionally, employers who clearly communicate what they expect of their

telecommuters are more likely to be rewarded with employees who are loyal and productive, and submit high quality work.

The employee who wants to telecommute needs to have a work arrangement that will make the job more productive. It is essential to attend team or group meetings at the company to share and receive work experiences with other telecommuters and staff members. The telecommuter is responsible for managing the job in the most efficient way possible. The workday needs to be organized by batching tasks. This means similar activities need to be compartmentalized in order to use the time more effectively. The jobs that can be done in the office should be saved for the time the telecommuters spend in the office. The off-site location or the home office can be used to finish tasks for which that place is best suited.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Telecommuting

Advantages of telecommuting for the individual

- **Autonomy / independence:**

In any work structure, an absence of direct supervision is likely to increase the individual's level of responsibility within the organization and this is even more so for the telecommuter. Working independently can fulfill an individual's need for autonomy, control, responsibility, and challenge. The individual's control over work occurs more freely and naturally.

- **Flexible working hours:**

Another factor contributing to independence is the flexibility of working hours. A work station at home enables work activity to take place at any time of the day or night, increased by a more efficient use of technological equipment, planning of leisure time, and a balancing

of other tasks that individuals fulfill in the domains of family and community.

- **Work when most productive:**

Telecommuters do not have to work the same hours as those in their main office. Some people are most productive after their afternoon nap.

- **Improve time management:**

Telecommuting creates the possibility of working with less exposure to distractions, avoiding events such as unplanned meetings, conversations by the water or coffee machine, or chats with colleagues who make impromptu visits.

- **More efficient management of free time:**

A telecommuter working at home can devote more time to the family, social life, volunteer work, leisure, etc.

- **Saving in travel time and expenses:**

The individual does not need to waste long and stressful hours stuck in traffic on journeys to and from work, so **reducing a source of pressure and stress**. Significant savings are made in travel expenses. Also, the saved travel time allows more time for greater productivity, leisure, preventing stress and fatigue and further contributing to the quality of life.

- **Reduced clothing costs:**

Working at home helps telecommuters to reduce the expenses of purchasing special clothes for work.

- **Fewer phone interruptions:**

Because telecommuter is not at the office location as other workers, in-office colleagues seem to have a psychological aversion to calling the at-home worker unless it's important. Although this mindset reduces unnecessary interruptions, it can become a negative, if the result becomes out of sight, out of mind.

- **No need to relocate:**

Sometimes the spouses of telecommuters change their jobs to work in another city. But telecommuters don't need to relocate or apply for a position in a new company because it doesn't matter where the telecommuter is based, since their jobs can be performed at home.

- **Flexibility in caring for family members:**

Changing the home into the workplace additionally provides the important option of caring for the disabled or older family members as well as young children.

- **Professional flexibility:**

Telecommuting enables individuals to work in their desired profession, with more freedom of choice, and even the possibility of working for a number of employers at the same time, thereby opening additional promotion opportunities.

- **Family time:**

The saving in time commuting is a family-time bonus for telecommuters. Surveys show that telecommuters report more satisfaction with their family life.

Disadvantages of telecommuting for the individual

- **Impaired feeling of belonging:**

There is likely to be an impairment of the feeling of belonging to a team, and a related reduction in a feeling of common aims and effort. The satisfaction that arises as a result of the individual's status and value within an institutional system may be missed by those who work from home.

- **Feeling of isolation:**

Telecommuters report experiencing isolation, solitude and feeling like outsiders whenever they enter the organization to fulfill various

necessary tasks. Working at home can impair the individual's ability to influence other people and events in the workplace. This can be detrimental to people who have a strong need for social interaction and for an extensive social life. Telecommuters report that they miss talking to other people or sharing their achievements with them. It suggests that **interests** would be best suited to the telecommuter position.

- **No separation between sphere of work and home:**

The easy transition from home-related aspects to work issues and vice versa can potentially be a problem for telecommuters. Among other things, this stems from a lack of boundaries or partitioning between the two domains. Under normal circumstances, leaving home to go to work provides a space between the two roles. Without clear boundaries, family members are likely to perceive that the person working at home is constantly available for their demands, and this could impair the worker's efficiency. In certain circumstances, telecommuting may endanger telecommuters' status or recognition as a worker, which could result in constant disturbances from family members and even neighbors making demands upon them. In other circumstances, the family simply may not treat working from home seriously, thus eradicating the telecommuter's status as a worker simply because of the lack of an established workplace. On the other hand, the stress or pressures of work could fall on family's members because telecommuters, working at home alone without a supervisor or co-workers for consulting or discussing, may put pressure on family members to help with work-related problems.

- **Self-discipline:**

The autonomy granted to telecommuters raises the issue of self-discipline, the ability of an individual to work according to a self-imposed schedule. While this issue may result in low work output, it can also lead to work addiction, where the individual does not know when to stop working.

- **Lack of professional support:**

When an individual experiences problems in the workplace, there is usually a support team including secretaries, maintenance team, suppliers, technical support, and so on. At home, this type of support is not normally available and the work itself may be affected. Also, the question of services should be considered. In the office, a worker has access to various services such as copy machine, postal distribution, library services, social service, etc. If telecommuters need such services in order to fulfill their duties, the achievement of their tasks may be delayed.

- **Career advancement:**

It is difficult for telecommuters to develop their career when they are out of sight. It has been claimed that a correlation exists between the worker's visibility, including involvement in organizational policies, and promotion opportunities. Individuals who work in the environments of a organization get most of the attention, and this, in turn, can aid their prospects of advancement and promotion.

- **Personal unsuitability:**

Various personal qualities are liable to make telecommuting difficult. There are those who are not used to working independently, others who are inflexible, or who are used to working under close supervision.

- **Legal issues:**

Most industrial legislation today does not cover the specific problems raised by the new flexible work arrangement. This can allow exploitation of existing loopholes in regulations governing proper work relations. A lack of clarity on such matters may affect the worker in terms of employee-employer relations, or issues of insurance. Is the worker entitled to social security or worker's compensation when an accident takes place at home? What are the worker's right regarding sick leave, overtime and holiday?

Advantages of telecommuting for the organization

- **Increased productivity:**

Reports point to an increase in productivity among telecommuters in comparison to their site-based colleagues.

- **Job satisfaction:**

Studies have shown that telecommuting may enable employees to have more flexible time and autonomy in their work. This increases employees' job satisfaction which in turn leads to higher work productivity.

- **Increase availability of human resources:**

Working from a distance provides access to a wider range of workers, and an increased in employment possibilities and thus a more talented and highly skilled workforce pool. Workers can be enlisted wherever they may live-from anywhere in the country, and even beyond its borders. Telecommuting opens the organization's access to pools of skilled individuals who were physically inaccessible in the past, such as parents of small children, disabled or older people, and those who have to deal with other issues of family, culture or

sheer physical distance. Additionally, the work-force pool is widened to include those who wish to work only part time with flexible hours.

- **Retention:**

Because of company's reduced need to re-locate employees and the dissatisfaction that creates, telecommuting can reduce turnover.

- **Significant decrease in absence levels:**

A sick child, urgent matter, or bad weather conditions are no longer reasons for tardiness or absence, nor do these delay work tasks.

- **Reduce sick leave:**

Employees working at home call in sick less often. Since they are located in relatively comfortable surroundings, many continue working even when they are not feeling well or are sick.

- **Saving in direct expenses:**

In 1997, a survey addressing the employer benefits of telecommuting was conducted. From 1,000 surveyed, most executives see many benefits stemming from the practice. As depicted in Table I, a reduction in costs is an important advantage of telecommuting. Real estate prices are skyrocketing, especially in urban areas where many businesses are based. If fewer workers are coming into the main office to work, a company can maintain a smaller building. Reduced spending on parking, transportation, travel expenses, as well as a significant **reduction in payments for overtime**. For some companies telecommuting may be an alternative to expansion when office space is becoming crowded and expensive. All this adds up to substantial saving for any company trying to stay within budgeted operation parameters.

Table I
Employer benefits from telecommuting workers

Benefits	Percentage of executives who agreed
Higher morale	79
Reduces costs	64
Employee retention	63
Reduced absenteeism	61
Increased productivity	58

Source: CDB Research and Consulting Inc. as reported in March 1997, *Performance Strategies*, p. 5

- **Increased motivation:**

The creation of more attractive working conditions increases worker motivation. It can be assumed that this, in turn, will increase the individual's level of job satisfaction.

- **Creation of a positive image of the organization:**

An organization that facilitates telecommuting is perceived positively by the public as modern and progressive, since it makes use of new work methods and technologies.

Disadvantages of telecommuting for the organization

- **Difficulties in the application of centralized management:**

Telecommuting is liable to hinder managers who tend to centralized, and therefore need employees to be at their side in order to supervise their work closely. This is a difficulty particularly for heavily centralized organizations, which are typically fearful of change and loss of control over their employees. One can assume that such organizations are less likely to favor telecommuting.

- **Investment in training and new supervision methods:**

Telecommuting necessitates new training and methods of supervision that are in contrast to the managerial style common to many organizations. Managers who work with telecommuters need to consolidate a new managerial approach that is more decentralized. Thus, an application of such a flexible work arrangement requires some investment in training of supervisory personnel, at the very least, in order to broaden their attitudes.

- **Changes in work methods:**

Change is not necessarily a disadvantage, although every change usually brings about the need for an extra investment of effort and other expenses. Telecommuting necessitates a change in existing working methods, and organizations need to set clearer goals for their telecommuters. Supervision, reporting and communication become more complex. These aspects make work processes more difficult, creating the need for more frequent feedback, preservation of all communications

that include instructions and decisions, greater allocation of trust to the worker, and the investment of more energy in carrying out the work itself.

- **Costs involved in transition to telecommuting:**

Significantly among these costs are needs analysis, training, and adjustment to change. Likewise, the purchase of special equipment for the worker and providing technical support at home, necessitate special logistics.

- **Legal issues:**

Organizations must take various legal issues into account that are likely to arise as a result of the transition to telecommuting. Among others, these may include issues such as the question of workers' insurance deciding on work hours and overtime, establishing holiday, sick leaves and confidentiality.

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Advantages of telecommuting for community

- **Improvement in the quality of the environment:**

A decrease in travel to and from the workplace reduces pollution caused by cars as well as noise pollution.

- **Decrease in traffic:**

A reduction on the roads lessens the potential for road accidents, and puts less pressure on public transportation.

- **Energy conservation:**

Fewer cars in traffic means less gas used.

- **Solution for populations with special needs:**

Telecommuting may provide an opportunity of incorporation, under regular terms of employment, populations that were not part of the workforce due to various disabilities, and as a result generally became a financial burden to

society, such as the handicapped and the unemployed. In this way, employment opportunities are made available to more members of the community, and various types of discrimination are reduced. Women with small children, the elderly of those who have difficulty leaving the home for reasons of religion, tradition or culture can be incorporated into the workforce through telecommuting.

- **Savings in infrastructure:**

Working from a distance helps to reduce municipalities' investments in, for example, transportation infrastructure, road repair, electricity, and drainage in city centers.

Disadvantages of telecommuting of community

- **Creation of a detached community:**

There is the possibility that with the significant growth of the number of telecommuters, and a detached society will emerge where individuals are cut off and isolated from one another and from public institutions.

- **Job and revenue loss:**

Companies that have telecommuters do not bring the number of jobs to a community. The community also loses additional jobs, like bus drivers, parking lot attendants, and home builders.

Table II

Summary of the advantages and disadvantages of telecommuting for the individual, organization, and society

level	Advantages	Disadvantages
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Autonomy / independence ● Flexible working hours ● Work when most productive ● Improvement in time management ● Saving in travel time and Expenses ● Reduced stress ● Reduce clothing costs ● Fewer phone interruptions ● No need to relocate ● Flexibility in caring for family members ● Family time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Impaired feeling of belonging ● Feeling of isolation ● No separation between spheres of work and home ● Need for self-discipline ● Lack of professional support ● Impeded career advancement ● Personality unsuitability ● Legal issues
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increased productivity ● Enhanced job satisfaction ● Increased availability of human resources ● Higher retention ● Significant decrease in absence levels ● Reduce sick leave ● Saving in direct expense ● Increased motivation and satisfaction ● Creation of a positive organizational image 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Application difficulties for organizations with centralized management ● Investment in training and new supervision methods ● Changes in work methods ● Cost involved in the transition to telecommuting ● Legal issues
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reduction of environment damage ● Decrease in traffic / congestion ● Energy conservation ● Solutions for special-needs populations ● Savings in infrastructure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creation of a detached community ● Job and revenue losses

Conclusions

Technology has made it possible for us to enter a new era of telecommunications that will impact our lives, how we work and our productivity. The uniqueness of telecommuting is the variety of benefits for both the employee and the employer. Individuals searching for ways to be productive in a society where demands of both work and family needs are to be met, or those who long to reside in rural areas, have found great comfort in the opportunity to work away from a centralized office location. Employers reap the benefits of decreased costs and improved productivity-an unusual combination.

Organizations that face the choice of implementing more flexible working arrangements, such as telecommuting, need to pay attention to the personal suitability of candidates for these positions and the special demands entailed in carrying out the job. When an organization adopts a telecommuting work pattern, or even when individuals take it upon themselves to work independently in this manner, it is important to examine

the potential suitability of the individual for the job, in order to improve the chances of success and satisfaction for all parties involved.

In order to gain a competitive edge, companies are wise to explore the possibilities surrounding telecommuting and develop a strategic plan before implementing such a program. There are limitations and challenges to a telecommuting workforce, but the negatives can be greatly minimized by taking the proper steps to maximize the chances of success.

In conclusion, it is difficult to anticipate the future impact of telecommuting, although it seems that telecommuting can offer the employee an efficient solution in the search for a more balanced and satisfying lifestyle, and can contribute to an improvement in the quality of work and family life as well. In general, it seems that the advantages of telecommuting outweigh the disadvantages. Yet, before we can conclude this in all certainty, more systematic studies need to be done on the different aspects related to the phenomenon.

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