

Telecommuting as a True Workplace Alternative¹

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Introduction

Global technology provides more accessible business modes of communication. One such technology is telecommuting, which is the practice of providing successful business practices through telecommunications. Telecommuting promotes flexibility for associates (employees) to work more efficiently and productively, whether at home, traveling, or at a telework center. The availability of affordable technology is a major contributor to the *any time, any place* telecommuting trend. Telecommuting is a viable alternative workplace option in the business world that benefits associates and management by providing a better work environment for everyone.

This document defines telecommuting, lists desirable traits of telecommuters (associates) and telemanagers, and discusses the benefits and challenges of telecommuting. While it is a great work option, telecommuting is not for everyone. Some do not possess the required qualities and attitudes necessary for being successful in telecommuting.



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Telecommuting Defined

Telecommuting is defined as an alternative way of accomplishing work tasks via telephones, computers, and other telecommunications equipment at offsite locations while at the same time providing a variety of benefits to organizations, associates, communities, and the environment. Telecommuting work arrangements have a variety of forms, depending on the needs of associates and employers. This allows associates to avoid daily commutes for work. Employees can work as independent freelancers or as part of a virtual team who assemble electronically from a variety of locations to solve business problems (ITAC 2002). There

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may be special requirements for telecommuters (e.g., training or years of work experience).

Both the public and private business sectors have embraced telecommuting. The availability of more affordable technology and expensive commercial real estate have led to telecommuting as an alternative work arrangement (ITAC 2002). It is vastly less expensive to provide associates with laptops and phone lines to work from the convenience of their own homes.

Telecommuting can also assist employers in meeting government regulations relating to employing persons with disabilities, who may find daily commuting difficult. Telecommuting provides companies the opportunity to successfully integrate workers with disabilities and pregnant associates into the workplace.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for the move toward telecommuting is the change in the nature of work itself. More Americans are being employed in information-oriented jobs, which lend themselves to working away from a central office. Advancements in Internet and phone technologies have helped increase the number of telecommuters in the United States. In 2015, several million people in the US workforce considered home their primary workplace.

Elements of Telecommuting

Successful telecommuting requires four main elements: the right work, the right associate, the right supervisor, and the right top management support. These four elements must meet the set standards and practices of telecommuting.

Mandatory practices for a successful telecommuting business can be easily identified. First, it is imperative that top management and human resources, information systems, and contracts/legal departments provide organizational support for a telecommuting program to succeed. They can do this by adhering to the following guidelines:

- Develop effective telecommuting business policies
- Plan for technical equipment and support for the telecommuting network
- Select and properly train telecommuters
- Prepare managers for telecommuting supervision
- Regularly evaluate and analyze the program

Not all jobs lend themselves to telecommuting. For instance, jobs that involve direct management, face-to-face

contact with customers, frequent meetings, manufacturing and warehousing of goods, purchasing, and facility management are not suitable for telecommuting operations. Jobs that do lend themselves to telecommuting include systems and information managers, writers, financial managers, computer programmers, auditing reports, data entry, medical transcription, billing, dispatching, appraising, court transcription, claims processing, filling orders, scheduling, researching, computer programming, recordkeeping, and writing (DVR 2002).

Successful telecommuters are self-starters who have proven their ability to do the job well with minimal supervision. They know how to organize their work, manage their time, and work well with telemanagers. In addition, they have low socialization needs and good communication skills, are trustworthy, and advocate the telecommuting concept.

Benefits of Telecommuting

Both associates and management benefit from telecommuting. Benefits for associates include a personalized work environment, more autonomy, greater lifestyle flexibility, reduced workplace expenses (transportation, professional wardrobe, and dining costs), and increased work satisfaction (EEOC 2015). Telecommuting also provides easier work conditions for associates with disabilities. Employers benefit from telecommuting because it reduces overhead costs, increases profits, and provides a better talented labor pool (EEOC 2015).

Challenges of Telecommuting

There are several challenges for telecommuting. These include fewer career/promotional opportunities and diminished access to resources due to workplace isolation. Managers need to carefully coordinate work activities, clearly communicate with associates, and select individuals with the right work habits for telecommuting (EEOC 2015). To do this, some managers schedule non-optional meetings on a regular basis.

Other challenging factors of telecommuting include problems associated with maintaining security of information and files via telecommuting and the lack of group stimulation and impromptu discussions that increase productivity and creativity.

Telemanager Skills

People skills are important. It is mandatory for telemanagers to possess the ability to read people, to understand what is being said and not said, simply by the tone of voice

or words being used. Noneffective telemanagers do not listen and therefore miss important cues necessary for successful telecommuting. In some cases the only communication between managers and associates is via e-mail or telephone. Therefore, the need to communicate well can never be overstated.

Good telemanagers are able to determine when associates need to be encouraged or disciplined. Depending on the job and duties, there are times when it becomes necessary to provide a gentle push to get associates to complete required tasks; an effective manager will know when it is appropriate to do so.

Telemanagers also need to be willing to accept new ideas and new ways of thinking (ITAC 2002). It is beneficial to businesses to encourage telecommuters to make suggestions or bring forth ideas that can improve telecommuting.

Managers who like to micromanage are unlikely to succeed in telecommuting. One method to help micromanagers is to include timetables in the telecommuting policy regarding such things as meeting schedules.

Leadership skills involve knowing when and when not to communicate as a leader. Achieving a delicate balance between work efficiency and communication may be difficult and take time. Telecommuters should not feel that managers are constantly checking up on them.

Effective telemanagers always know the status of their associates' projects. There are a variety of ways to accomplish this (e.g., bulletin board postings to the Internet). Experimenting with different methods may prove necessary to find the right fit for both managers and associates.

The greatest and most valuable skill in telecommuting is mutual trust between managers and associates (ITAC 2002). Mutual trust makes for a better and more productive work environment.

Conclusions

Telecommuting (establishing, developing, and maintaining successful offsite business practices through telecommunication) can pave the way to a more efficient communications system in the workplace. It is imperative to understand that telecommunication is an alternative option and not a substitute for person-to-person contact associated with traditional business settings. When it comes to understanding, research has suggested that 75 percent of communication is nonverbal (Saunders, 2002).

This is alarming when considering telecommuting as a viable business alternative. Because of this data, it may be more beneficial to use telecommuting in conjunction with traditional forms and methods of business practices.

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