

Managing Telecommuters and Global Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT

With the globalization of most industries in recent years, telecommuting has already taken place within multiple company offices operating worldwide. The increased popularity of telecommuting is due to a combination of factors such as, the expansion of high-speed and wireless internet access, the desire of climate-friendly companies to minimize work commutes, rising fuel costs, and a growing realization among managers that productive employees require a healthy work-life balance. This raises important questions for supervisors: What is the best way that telecommuting employees should be managed? How should their work schedule be developed? How often should they be contacted? What do companies need to provide for telecommuters to be productive? Corporations and institutions stand to gain significantly from the telecommuting revolution; however it won't happen unless managers learn how to implement this new phenomenon effectively. In this paper, as a long-time manager of several telecommuters dispersed through out the United States and Canada, I will discuss how to construct and manage a team of telecommuters effectively and succeed. In addition, I will layout the tools and skills required to manage virtual project teams in different geographical locations.

INTRODUCTION

Telecommuters are defined as individuals who work from home, the arrangement in which employees enjoy flexibility in working location and hours. A virtual team also known as a Geographically Dispersed Team (GDT) is a group of employees who work across time zones, outside the organizational boundaries or different geographic locations. Powell, Piccoli and Ives define virtual teams in their literature review article¹ "as groups of geographically, organizationally and/or time dispersed workers brought together by information and telecommunication technologies to accomplish one or more organizational tasks." Some of these virtual teams in today's organizations consist of employees both working at home (telecommuting) and small groups in the office but in different geographic locations.

The popularity of telecommuting is due to a combination of factors. These factors include the expansion of high-speed and wireless internet access, companies seeking to hire talented and productive staff globally as well as minimize office space cost. Other concerns entail being sensitive to employee work commutes and rising fuel costs, as well as growing realization among managers that productive employees require a healthy work-life balance. If managed correctly, due to different time zones, global teams can increase productivity on a project by working 24 hours a day. This raises important questions for supervisors. In order to be successful as a telecommuting/virtual manager, there should be a certain level of trust established between the telecommuting employee and the manager. Below are some of the questions I will address in this paper:

- How to build and manage telecommuting/virtual teams?
- Should a supervisor use the same management style to oversee both telecommuters and office workers?
- What technical tools are needed to manage a telecommuting team effectively?
- Is frequent contact with telecommuters beneficial?
- How should a manager define the telecommuters' work schedule?
- How can a manager provide the needed structure to a telecommuter's work and home environment?

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- What is the best communication method when you manage a team in different time zones?

HISTORY

Some very interesting facts about telecommuting: In 1897 a Boston bank president had a phone line strung from his office to his home and became the first telecommuter. In 1963 a programmer working on the Arpanet project (the precursor of the Internet) had an extra phone line installed at his home and he was able to work from home via a teletype computer. In 1973, Jack Nilles invented the term 'telecommuting'. Nilles was a rocket scientist working on NASA satellite communications projects in Los Angeles. Nilles, aggravated by traffic gridlock, decided that it was best to move work to the workers, not workers to the work. In 1978 Blue Cross/Blue Shield of South Carolina started a 'cottage keyer' project, which entailed people working at home. In that year the company increased its productivity 26% compared to its in-office counterparts. In 1980 Mountain Bell started a telecommuting project for managers. That same year the U.S. Army also started a telecommuting pilot. Later, this project was expanded to include more employees as telecommuters. The army coined the term 'guerilla telecommuting'. In 1989 AT&T started a pilot telecommuting program in Los Angeles and in 1990 this program was expanded to include Phoenix. AT&T introduced a formal telework policy in 1992 and started its virtual office training programs. By 1999, more than half of AT&T's managers worked from home at least one day a month, 25% of their managers worked from home one day or more per week and 10% teleworked 100 percent of the time.

TELECOMMUTING STATISTICS

When considering the following statistics, companies saw that remote employees were among their most productive and loyal employees. Although in 1990 telecommuting had first established its roots, within 14 years, over 50% of U.S. corporations had telecommuters. Based on the data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimates, the percentage of Americans who telecommute or work remotely at least once per month increased between 2006 and 2008. In 2006, approximately 8% of Americans telecommuted at least one day per month. In 2008, that figure rose to just over 11 percent¹.

In 2010 according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 153.4 million Americans were employed, down from 155 million in 2008. In relation to this decline, the total number of people who worked from home or another remote location for an entire day at least once a month also decreased. However, the frequency of work was increased among those working as a teleworker more often than once per month. As Rose Stanley, work-life practice leader for WorldatWork, put it: "The decline in the number of people teleworking is likely due to a combination of things. The decline in the overall number of workers due to high unemployment appears to be a factor, along with heightened employee anxiety over job security and a lack of awareness of telework."²

DEFINITIONS

The term telecommuting and the term telework are not the same. Telework actually has a broader meaning. Telework means working from a remote location, which could include telecommuting from a satellite office, from a neighborhood work center, from a home or on-the-road. Some telecommuters may utilize more than one of these locations while teleworking.

The term telecommuting refers to employees who work at home part-time or on a regular basis by connecting to the work place through various telecommunications methods, including a telephone, e-mail, instant messaging software, or remote access software which can be used to connect to work place servers. The most common alternative worksite for telecommuting is the employee's home.

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SOME OBSERVATIONS

The main advantage of telecommuting is increased effectiveness in the use of time, improved family life, flexible working hours, and decreased time pressures. Most of the telecommuting employees view working from home part-time or on a regular basis as a reward or employee benefit. Virtual teams and telecommuters allow organizations to hire and retain the best people in the industry regardless of location.

Employers are beginning to show more interest in using the telecommuting practice as a management technique. However, there are some extra costs and challenges to manage telecommuting employees. Operating costs can involve supplying home office and telecommuting tools. Challenges can involve office-based colleagues' apprehension about the telecommuting co-worker. Challenges can also involve the security of confidential information without supplying proper training and safeguards.

More and more employers are beginning to recognize that the positive impact of telecommuting far exceeds any negative aspects.

MANAGING AND BUILDING A TELECOMMUTING AND VIRTUAL TEAM

As a telecommuting manager, when your team is scattered globally, it is difficult to supervise them. For example, managing somebody remotely is quite different than walking in to their cubical at the same office. Oversight of the telecommuter involves several methods for directing and evaluating project work. These methods often involve team members cross checks and direct access to the employee's workstations and work products. In addition, the key to building a successful remote team is to establish trust through the following means:

- A remote manager should have the ability to develop trusting relationships across cultures, time zones, and different geographic areas.
- It is important that a manager, as a remote leader, be aware that every action taken and every word spoken is involved in building trust, especially across cultural and regional boundaries.
- A telecommuting manager must have the ability to develop and maintain a global team which may have many different cultural values and work ethics. This global team can be a combination of telecommuters working in many different geographic locations.
- The manager needs to have excellent verbal and written communication skills.
- When assigning work, the manager needs to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of each team member.
- The manager needs to bring together all necessary tools and resources for the team to get their job done on time. For example, the manager needs to supply a tool to share the desktop between team members as well as audio and video conferencing tools.

The telecommuting hiring manager has to consider the following points when filling a telecommuting position.

- The telecommuter needs to work independently with little or no supervision. They should be able to prioritize the important tasks and effectively manage their time.
- The telecommuter needs to have strong sense of initiative. Instead of waiting for directions, this individual should take the leadership in finding a solution to a problem.
- As a home based worker, the telecommuter will be working in a socially isolated environment. It is thus important that this individual understands the mission of the organization and the goals of the work group. This knowledge will guide their actions.
- Personal responsibility and accountability is essential to success for any employee in an organization. It is especially important and essential in a telecommuting role. As a telecommuter one should be able to focus on what he or she can do to complete the task successfully and on time.

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- An important quality a manager should look for in a telecommuter is problem solving. Any telecommuter must be skilled at using the resources at their disposal to solve the problems. As a result, an individual who needs to learn basic skills should not be put in this role.
- A telecommuter needs to have good communication skills to keep the management and team members apprised of project work.

Telecommuting boosts employee performance and reduces turnover; organizations will be able to work globally, and save real estate costs. Often employees substitute commuting time for additional work time. One of the challenges faced by a remote manager is handling a combination of remote and on-site employees. These employees often don't see one another and don't understand each others workload. Sometimes on-site employees may feel resentment towards their telecommuting colleagues. According to a study, titled "Supervisory Approaches and Paradoxes in Managing Telecommuting Implementation", the solution to this problem is to treat both telecommuting and office-based employees as equally as possible. This alleviates any tensions between these two employee groups as they may actually be on the same team.

The authors of the study "Supervisory Approaches and Paradoxes in Managing Telecommuting Implementation" surveyed telecommuters, office workers, and managers at two large organizations. The survey found that frequent contact with telecommuters is beneficial. However, managers who monitor telecommuters more closely than office workers may appear to be more distrusting of telecommuters. The survey found that this, in effect, reduces telecommuters' productivity. The authors also found that remote supervisors who use the same management style to manage both telecommuters and office workers reduce tension between the two groups.

To manage a telecommuting team effectively, companies should provide the basic hardware, software and communication tools that people need to complete their job. For telecommuters to work effectively from their homes or from a virtual office, companies must provide appropriate equipment such as,

- A separate telephone line with voicemail.
- A work station or a Laptop with docking station.
- A monitor.
- A good printer, scanner, copier and a Fax machine if needed.
- A broadband internet access.
- A secure server connection and firewall.

In continuing, before granting telecommuting status to employees, supervisors need to set telecommuting guidelines. For example,

- The department and telecommuting staff member must agree in advance on a specific work schedule, including work days and hours. Due to different time zones work schedules often need to overlap at some periods of the day for communications between team members.
- Telecommuting Staff must maintain a standard workload similar to in-office staff.
- Telecommuting staff must use sick leave if they are unable to work because of illness and must report their absence to their manager.
- Telecommuting staff must be willing to be on-site as necessary to attend meetings, training sessions, or similar events.
- Staff who telecommute and wish to take a day or days off must use vacation or personal leave.
- The telecommuting staff must inform their supervisor and the team members if they will be out of the home office for extended period of time during the office hours.

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Finally, if you manage geographically dispersed teams, communication can be difficult especially if the team members work across different time zones. Telecommuting teams depend almost exclusively on technology and software tools to communicate, whereas traditional teams can always depend on face-to-face communication.

Nothing replaces face-to-face meetings or interactions, however, the next best thing is to communicate via modern communication technologies. It is important that managers provide the telecommuting teams with the best communication tools available on the market. For instance,

- **EMAIL**
E-mail can be used to communicate any time of the day. It also can be used as a means to maintain a record of what is communicated and what decisions have been made.
- **Instant Messenger**
Instant messaging software (i.e. Microsoft Lync) can be used to send immediate notifications, start direct conversations, manage your calls, and share your desktop with other team members. It can also be used to log your conversations and determine who is available online to answer your questions.
- **Telephone/Teleconference**
Teleconferencing can be used to contact one or more team members immediately and have detailed conversation and meetings.

CONCLUSIONS

Telecommuting is a privileged work arrangement. It is important that a telecommuter consistently show their manager that they are trustworthy and reliable by delivering the results he or she was hired to achieve.

Since teams with telecommuters have limited face-to-face interaction, the team members must establish ways to help co-workers learn about each other professionally and personally (perhaps by means of an on-site meeting).

Miscommunication and unequal access to information are two major ways to destroy the trust with telecommuters. These can impact negatively on productivity. As a remote manager, the key way to build high performance across the team with telecommuting workers is to maintain trust. A manager must always react on an assumption of trust, not distrust. The manager must treat all team members fairly and equally whether they are telecommuters or on-site workers.

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RECOMMENDED READING

The Distance Manager, A Hands-On Guide to Managing Off-Site Employees and Virtual Teams
Kimball Fisher and Mareen Duncan Fisher

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