

Telework

Considerations for an Effective Program

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Introduction

There is a change in the way work is getting done, and with the change comes a transformation in the workplace. While not all organizations may be prepared for teleworkers, the chances are high that market competitors are thinking about telework (if they haven't already implemented). Given the competition to attract key talent, whether an organization decides to accept a new way of working could be the determining factor for future success.

Telework in practice has grown out of the need to address a variety of issues, including:

- **Specific work-life issues:** Whether they stem from a personal scheduling challenge, many managers often find themselves allowing single, one-time accommodations. Frequently, there is little or no thought to expanding or opening the change as an ongoing, regular arrangement for the employee or entire team.
- **Business continuity predicaments:** It is impossible to know when an interruption to operations will strike. From calamities like hurricanes or terrorist acts, to seemingly minor events like severed power lines or traffic tie-ups, the risk of sudden disruptions needs to be managed to mitigate the effects on an organization.
- **Cut costs:** Whether it's a workstation, private office with a window or conference room, most spaces in traditional offices are drastically underused. This underutilization has led companies to develop solutions allowing for more efficient use of office space, such as shared workspaces.

Regardless of how it came about, teleworkers have become one of the fastest growing employee groups in Corporate America as well as in many other parts of the world.

One of the biggest hurdles an organization faces when implementing a telework program is cultural. If the cultural aspect of telework is not addressed and meaningfully handled, the best technology or best-written policy is moot. And this is true for any major organizational change: If there isn't acceptance among employee and manager ranks, the initiative will fail — plain and simple.

While many questions will surface when telework is introduced, the question addressed in this white paper is, "How does a manager manage this new workforce?" Most managers have only worked with employees who are physically present. And some employees will not be allowed to telework.

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Building the Foundation: Written Policy

Guidelines need to be established before jumping into the tactical issues related to managing teleworkers. These guidelines are the foundation from which managers and employees will build a solid working relationship.

A written policy ensures consistency throughout the organization and sends the message from senior management that telework is a program that the organization stands behind. Without at least some parameters, there is a potential for inequity to creep into practices across the organization.

The level of formality for a policy should be determined by each organization and what fits best within the culture, but it is important to have a starting point for managers and employees to open the conversation. This helps all employees to clearly understand their roles and it gets everyone on the same page.

Eligibility

The policy should include who is eligible for telework. Questions to address regarding eligibility include:

- Will telework be limited to certain classifications (e.g., exempt, nonexempt)? Certain locations (e.g., headquarters, field)?
 - Is there a waiting period after an employee is hired before he/she is eligible to telework (e.g., coincide with eligibility periods for other benefits)? After certain other requirements are met (e.g., length of service coupled with performance review)?
 - Will consideration be given to entire jobs that can be done remotely? Or is telework based only on portions of a job (i.e., perhaps not all aspects of a job can be done remotely)?
- Will consideration be made for those functions that can be done remotely that would allow more employees to telework?

Schedule and Core Hours

The frequency that a teleworker is permitted to work offsite depends on many variables, and often is set between the manager and teleworker. It is a good idea to set a standard that the organization deems appropriate, or clearly define what is meant by an occasional teleworker (usually up to no more than four days per week) and a remote worker (usually full-time at his/her home office).

The employee's work hours depend on many factors, including the supervisor's comfort level and the organization's overall acceptance of a telework environment. Some jobs demand that core hours be defined based on customer interaction or co-worker dependency. When dealing with nonexempt employees, it is vital to clearly indicate specific core hours.

However, for some positions, allowing employees to work when and how they work best — as long as project deadlines are met and customer and co-worker interactions are handled appropriately — might make for a better overall work arrangement. For example, Sue finds that getting online and working on projects late at night after the news allows her about two hours of very productive time. She usually is highly energized, and always has been a night owl. Clearly, allowing this schedule and autonomy works best in an organization that has a high degree of comfort with telework as a viable work environment. This also could be the case for a job that geographically does not mesh with traditional office work hours due to time-zone differences.

Furniture, Equipment, Software and Supplies

It is important to address the equipment that will be used at the alternate work location — even for those employees who only occasionally work offsite. For telework to be successful and the job to be performed properly, the work being done at an alternate work location still needs supporting equipment.

The telework policy should provide guidelines for both the occasional and full-time remote worker regarding the type of equipment that will lead to success. However, for full-time remote workers, the policy should be very clear on what equipment will be reimbursed by the organization and for what the worker is personally responsible.

The policy also should include details about available technical support for both software and hardware issues, as well as information about how to access that support. When a teleworker begins working from another location, he/she may take on a role that may be unfamiliar in terms of both software and hardware. The company's help desk, if one exists, needs to be sufficiently (and proficiently) staffed with employees who can walk the teleworker through any issues.

It also is vital that the policy address security issues surrounding company collateral that is permitted to be removed from the building or accessed remotely. This should include disciplinary action for violations as well.

Family Care

It is typically considered inappropriate to care for dependents during established work hours, and this should be noted in the policy. However, this does not necessarily mean that no dependents can be in the home during working hours. The policy should indicate that employees should take appropriate measures to separate the remote workspace so that it is free from distractions. Employers may recommend to teleworkers that they set up guidelines with their family members as to when it is appropriate to have contact, such as lunch time and morning and afternoon breaks.

Termination of Arrangement

The policy should address the applicability of terminating the agreement and should be available to both the manager and teleworker. Nothing changes more than change itself, and there can be many reasons

why a remote-work arrangement might need to be terminated. Perhaps the position itself is no longer needed, the employee is not fulfilling the requisites of the position, or the employee may find that the arrangement is not suitable for him/her.

When a remote-work arrangement is terminated, the considerations for the occasional teleworker may be geared more toward establishing a permanent workspace at the traditional office if there had not been one there before. But it can be more complicated in the case of full-time remote workers. Because a full-time worker may oftentimes reside at a distance greater than the average person is willing to commute on a daily basis, then the employment status for that individual is in question. It is best to clarify upfront, when the position becomes a full-time remote position, what will happen should the arrangement be terminated.

Outlining Expectations

Not every position and not every employee is a good candidate for telework. This is something organizations need to assess individually. There are templates available that can assist the organization in beginning to look at the candidate, the job and the manager to ensure that all aspects are considered.

Working with Co-Workers, Managers and Customers

When the telework arrangement is presented to the manager by the employee, the manager should examine several points:

- Does the job lend itself to a telework environment?
- Does the employee who is requesting the arrangement demonstrate a strong work ethic and does he/she continuously meet his/her work deadlines?
- How often is the teleworker requesting this arrangement to occur?
- How will the arrangement affect day-to-day operations with co-workers, customers and the manager?

The teleworker and his/her co-workers and manager should all have a clear understanding about the expectations of the work arrangement, as well as the roles they each play. It is important that a seamless operation be established to keep operations running smoothly and productively.

Often, expectations about how a team of co-workers will be successful with a dispersed work arrangement can be worked out among the team members. Due to the nature of the work and the way a team already has been working, the members will have the best ideas for working together, and they will be more apt to buy into the arrangement if they are part of the solution. However, there are some standards that should be consistent and that allow co-workers outside of the team and customers to be in contact with the right person.

There will be times when some employees feel slighted because they are not able to telework. In fact, it is common for managers to feel reluctant about approving telework requests based on a fear that all of his/her direct reports will request telework arrangements. If some jobs are not conducive to telework, perhaps that employee can benefit from another type of flexible work arrangement (e.g., compressed workweek). If an employee is simply not disciplined enough for a remote-work arrangement, a good manager would have already started counseling this employee on how to work toward his/her goal.

Co-workers, managers and teleworkers all need to be able to do their jobs with the same ease as if everyone were in the same building. There may be a learning curve in accommodating this new work style, but remember that, as flexible work arrangements are becoming more common, so too are the accommodations that support them.

Establishing guidelines for the team is important in determining how members will communicate among themselves. There are various methods to accommodating communication, which is addressed in the section titled “Keeping the Lines of Communication Open.” One thing to remember, though, is to create a reasonable expectation for all of these individuals about how “available” they should be and what is considered reasonable within the unit and overall organization. For example:

- Perhaps messages should be returned within a specific period of time. Is it reasonable to expect a return call within the hour or within a block of time (e.g., two to four hours)?
- What if the teleworker is in a meeting and cannot access his/her messages within the timeframe?
- Sometimes onsite employees are not able to return messages immediately; is it different for remote workers?

Setting a standard, although it is the right thing to do, must be trusted to work under normal circumstances, but still be flexible for other circumstances. Trust is one of the most important ingredients to the success of these programs. Supervisors must be able to trust that their employees are doing the appropriate thing given their specific circumstances.

Supervisors also need to be assured that jobs and projects are being completed as they should. Regular one-on-one meetings should be scheduled to check on work progress and see how the arrangement is working for everyone. Asking for successes and challenges can keep the program on track and intact. In the beginning, challenges will occur at all levels, but the organization’s and manager’s commitment to making the program a success will allow for tweaks along the way. “Try, try again” is a good motto to remember as this culture shift occurs.

And challenges likely will seem greater for full-time remote workers. Supervisors should schedule frequent one-on-ones via phone or webcam at least at the beginning of the arrangement to ensure that everything and everyone is working out satisfactorily and that any problems can be addressed immediately before they become insurmountable.

Because the remote worker will be unable to easily drop in when a situation arises, extra time and effort may be needed to ensure that the teleworker is engaged with both the team and the organization. For example, perhaps all team members, including the teleworker and manager, can meet, discuss situations that involve the remote worker and brainstorm how to handle these situations. It is too easy for remote workers to be forgotten, and the last thing anyone wants is to lose a good employee due to lack of communication.

Tracking Progress and Performance

Supervisors often ask, “How do I manage someone who I can’t see?” The answer is: “How are you currently managing?” Good managers do not constantly watch over their employees’ work every hour of every day. So how, then, are managers updated on employees’ work progress? Regardless of where employees work, there certainly is a standard of measure that supervisors track in terms of work progress. That same standard should be applied to the teleworker. This is managing by results — not by face time.

At the beginning of flexible work arrangements teleworkers and supervisors should sit down and establish goals to clearly establish expectations and ensure the employee and supervisor agree that goals are reasonable. This is the same protocol for any onsite worker in a performance management environment. Managing by results is the primary way in which work should be evaluated. Goals should be set to help determine progress on that performance.

It also is a good idea to build performance expectations related to managing the teleworker into the supervisor's annual goals. This ensures that the supervisor embraces telework and can see the viability of allowing work to be performed offsite.

It is important to allow for in-office visits for individuals working remotely on a full-time basis. Depending on budget and perhaps even the nature of the job, employees should be permitted to come into the office regularly (e.g., quarterly). By allowing these visits:

- It ensures that the employee re-establishes relationships with co-workers and managers. This helps the team maintain its cohesiveness. Additionally, being a remote worker can be an isolating experience at times, which can lead to boredom and a lack of enthusiasm for the job and the organization. By reconnecting with the team, the remote worker re-establishes himself/herself back into the culture of the organization.
- Remote workers can meet and greet other employees outside of their "regular" teammates. For employees who typically would not have any work-related interactions with the remote worker, this is a way to create a culture of camaraderie that can pay off later.
- It fosters awareness throughout the organization about remote work, and positions the remote employee as a champion for the work arrangement.

Top Concerns for Management

Increased communication difficulties and reservations about managing and monitoring the performance of off-site workers are the top reasons organizations do not offer telework programs. These are legitimate concerns, but both are easily manageable with the right strategy and tools.

For telework to be widespread in an organization, top management needs to not only provide approval, but also truly buy into the concept of a dispersed workforce. Having top management both champion and emulate the desired behavior that will be asked of managers, teleworkers and all other employees is vital for success.

Once an organization embraces telework as a viable work option and business tool, that's when the work really begins. Even in the most open company that believes its culture is ready for telework, some aspect of the culture will still need to be addressed.

Many managers are not used to managing from a distance, and even the best managers who already manage by results will have questions about what works best or how to ensure work is being performed as seamlessly as possible. How will logistics be worked out? How much training is needed? Will there be lost work time? How will emergencies be handled? These are all good questions that, through communication within the team, can be answered.

Keeping the Lines of Communication Open

Communication may seem more difficult with telework, but it doesn't have to be. Following are some simple techniques:

- Organizations can provide the ability to transfer the work phone to a remote location (e.g., home phone, cell phone). Consider:
 - Does the home or cell phone receive voicemail?
- Does the home or cell phone go directly to voicemail if the teleworker is on a call (to avoid a missed call)?
- Does the voicemail that the co-worker, manager or customer hears have a professional message?
- For the occasional teleworker, providing notice that the employee is working at an off-site location for the day can be helpful for co-workers, particularly those who are not members of the immediate team.
 - For organizations with instant messaging capabilities, post an alert on the employee's status for the day, along with information on how to best reach him/her.
 - Shared calendars should be updated to post the days that teleworkers are not in the office.
 - Post a "teleworking" note on the doorway of the cubicle of office or on a whiteboard in the space. Include the date and a way to be reached (e.g., phone extension or direct line).
- Maintain business as usual. Continue to schedule regular meetings to make teleworking a natural part of business.
 - When conducting meetings with off-site employees, it is advisable to consider a way to demonstrate that all attendees are accessible. For example, speaker phones are effective, but it is important to be mindful of the room's acoustics. And if the room is too big, has high ceilings or if the phone does not have the capability to pick up voices from around the room, the teleworker can become disengaged (as well as frustrated) in the call. Ask teleworkers for feedback.
 - The meeting facilitator should announce who is physically in the room and who is attending via remote access. If the budget allows, video

conferencing adds another element of inclusiveness. It also is advisable to provide some type of physical representation of the teleworkers who are calling in. This way, attendees in the room are reminded that there are callers on the phone. It is all too easy to have a discussion in the room and simply forget that there are others involved. This helps keep the teleworker included not only in the call itself, but in the team's activities.

- Develop a system by which teleworkers who are calling in can “raise their hand” to make a comment. Asking them to hit the star or pound key on the phone can be a signal that the person on the phone has something to add to the conversation.

It's a good idea to occasionally check in with the teleworker on the phone in case he/she misses anything, to ask whether he/she has a question, or if the technology is working well. Working with the company's technology group, the teleworker and the rest of the team to keep everyone engaged will enhance meetings and their desired outcomes.

Over-communicating, especially at the beginning of this new arrangement, is probably a good thing; it helps get everyone accustomed to being able to contact each other. Over time, the best type of communication will emerge on a team-by-team basis. Also, it is important for all team members to talk about how things are working in this new situation, and consider modifications where needed.

Training for All

For successful teleworking to become a reality, across-the-board training is a must. Telework doesn't just apply to those who work remotely or even for co-workers and managers who have someone on their team teleworking. Everyone who has contact with a teleworker needs to be trained on the program and the communication modes that will be in place for this type of work.

- **Teleworkers** need to be trained to understand their role and especially how their work setting will affect co-workers, supervisors and customers.
- **Co-workers** need to understand their role and how to communicate effectively with teleworking teammates. Also, explain how the program affects their jobs and define their opportunities for flexibility.

- **Managers/supervisors** need to accept and support this program, as this will either make or break it. Specialized training for this audience is important to explain their role as effective remote supervisors.

Pilot the program first to ensure it works as planned and to determine acceptance levels. Work out the kinks and move forward to organization-wide implementation.



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