

# The Ethics and Responsibilities of Telecommuting as Part of a Business System

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## ABSTRACT

A business system is comprised of *people, information, and automated process and tools*. This paper addresses how the topic of telecommuting utilizes these three components. People are addressed in the relationship between employer and employee, the process identified to determine the appropriate individual as a telecommuter, and the advantages and disadvantages to both parties. Information is defined as the communication and data components that exist in this relationship, and the security and system issues to support this. Automated process and tools are the instruments with which telecommuters effectively perform their work functions, communicate, and report time spent on projects. This paper presents the experiences of a small group of telecommuters at RTI International, an independent research organization with a worldwide staff of over 2,600 people. Using a case study approach, we explore the challenges and success factors related to working in a location away from the organization's headquarters and physically isolated from other team members, and touch upon all three components. Also included are ethical issues which should be addressed during the evaluation and approval process when the employee requests telecommuting status, and for which the employee is responsible as a telecommuter. Finally, this paper discusses the qualities common to successful telecommuters.

**Keywords:** Telecommuting, Ethics, Business System, Teleworking

## 1. TELECOMMUTING DEFINED

Telecommuting is gaining increasing popularity with companies.<sup>1</sup> Telecommuting is an alternative to the traditional work environment. It is defined as an arrangement where employees work outside of the

<sup>1</sup> Telework: A Critical Component to Your Total Rewards Strategy. Robert King, Editor. WorldatWork Press. 2007. Softcover. ISBN: 978-1-57963-171-0.

company office environment, usually from their home. Telecommuting can be on a full-time or part-time basis. Telecommuting ranges from living and working in another state or country outside of where the company resides to working primarily offsite but commuting to the company office from a distance a set number days of week.

## 2. ETHICS AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR TELECOMMUTING

One of the main criteria for success is the nature of work performed by the employee. The job performed by the employee should not require handling materials or equipment in a main office, like setting up laptops, preparing paper copies for mailing, or a position which requires regular face-to-face contact with other staff. It is also more likely to be successful if the work of the employee is measurable by results and not by observation.

Equally important are personality characteristics of both the employee and his/her supervisor, especially in respects to ethics and responsibility. The employee needs to be a disciplined worker and must have proven track record as such. The employee needs to have a solid understanding of the job and be able to handle the assigned tasks independently and honestly. The employee must be able to handle job requirements with little or no supervision. Since there will be little or no face-to-face meetings, both the employee and the supervisor need to be good communicators using the phone or email. The employee should act responsibly asking questions when needed in regards to security, intellectual property or other business issues.

## 3. ADVANTAGES TO THE BUSINESS

Providing the employees with an option to telecommute has many benefits to the company. It helps the company retain talented staff when they

are located (or relocated) away from the main office. It also generates costs savings because of reduction in the cost of physical office space, support facilities and parking space. The productivity of the employee may also increase because of fewer interruptions from office surroundings.

Telecommuting increases organizational flexibility because of the possibility of having staff available beyond the normal business hours, especially when the telecommuter is working in a different time zone from the headquarters.

From a social perspective, telecommuting reduces commuting, pollution, and may allow telecommuters to maintain important social roles in their home community.

#### **4. DISADVANTAGES TO THE BUSINESS**

The main disadvantage is a loss of visual contact which may be perceived as a loss of control. Handling that loss can require a different approach to management. The approach may include a measure of trust between the supervisor and employee, setting goals and/or making sure that the work done is in some way measurable.

In their review of telecommuting trends, Crandall and Longge outline the following organizational issues.<sup>2</sup>

- Some managers are concerned about managing telecommuters, measuring their performance, creating a sense of teamwork, and keeping the telecommuters safe and healthy.
- Supervising the telecommuting workforce transforms some traditional management practices. A manager may fear losing direct control over the telecommuter and may not be able to readily determine if an employee is struggling or needs assistance.
- Performance appraisal and other assessments become more difficult as the employee's presence in the workplace decreases. Because employees will need to

<sup>2</sup> Crandall, W., and G. Longge (2005). "An update on telecommuting: Review and prospects for emerging issues." S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal, 70(3), 30–38.

be linked to their offices and have sufficient resources to carry out their work independently, problems with technology and communication can obviously hinder the success of the arrangement. In addition, the lack of infrastructure support such as secretaries, maintenance personnel, and technical support can be an organizational liability.

- Another growing concern is that sensitive work information may be compromised in a telecommuter environment. Because of the need to link company files with the telecommuter's home office, breaches by hackers and theft of the telecommuter's equipment are concerns. Thus, security issues raise questions as to how much and what type of work should be conducted in the home environment.

Identifying good telecommuting candidates requires a close look at both the employee and his/her supervisor. Just as there can be issues with performance on-site, there can be poor employee telecommuting performance.

#### **5. INDIVIDUAL ADVANTAGES**

For the employee, the advantages of telecommuting are tremendous. Some benefits related to telecommuting include increased productivity; reduction in cost associated with commuting, improved health, and increased flexibility. Employees are able to increase productivity as a result of reduced distractions, as working in an office environment results in increased social interaction.

Reducing cost associated with telecommuting helps the employee to save money. Costs savings include food, clothing, transportation (includes bus, parking, fuel, highway tolls) and insurance. Employees can see improvements in their health due to a reduction of the stress associated with daily commuting, decreased likelihood of involvement in traffic accidents and less exposure to common viruses in the workplace. With the benefits associated with telecommuting an employee may be more likely to remain with a company over a longer period of time.

#### **6. INDIVIDUAL DISADVANTAGES**

There are a number of disadvantages associated with telecommuting. A key disadvantage is isolation

from the office environment. The phrase “out of sight out of mind” is commonly applied to telecommuters. This could affect an employee’s opportunity for advancement. Also, the opportunity to learn work – related information from casual conversations (such as in the break room) is lost. Lacking social markers of the end of the work day could result in working excessively long hours, which can be harmful to the individual and to his/her family or social relationships.

The following issues have been described by Crandall and Longge.<sup>3</sup>

- Many telecommuters report isolation from the work culture. They are separated from both the work environment and, to some extent, their social environment. Telecommuters may feel lonely and frustrated, which in some cases can lead to burnout. For some, the negative effects can overshadow the benefits of working at home.
- Employees may also have anxiety about whether their absence in the workplace will cause them to be passed up for promotions or Losing out on good projects. Some employees have no desire to telecommute for fear it will have an adverse impact on their career prospects.
- Concerns about the quality of peer relationships have been reported, stemming mainly from feelings of isolation. For example, some telecommuters report that they feel like an outsider when they visit the organization to fulfill work duties. Coupled with problematic peer relationships is the potential for less influence over the people and events at work.
- A major concern of many telecommuters is the potential for work and family to conflict when work is conducted in the home. While telecommuting offers a distraction-free environment for some, for others it proves just the opposite if family members are home during the day. When the demands of work and family collide, the norms of both are thrown out of balance.

In addition, an employee may not be the right candidate for telecommuting. When an

employee does not know how to independently manage time and work, productivity could be negatively impacted. It does not mean that the employee is not potentially a productive worker, but rather that the employee may require the informal supervisory or peer supports that result from face-to-face interaction.

## 7. CASE STUDIES

In the following sections this paper presents the personal experiences of several telecommuters, to provide concrete examples of the variety of circumstances. Each of these individuals submitted a description of their own circumstances and how they have impacted their effectiveness as it relates to personal experiences, information sharing, and the process and tools required to do the job.

### A. Telecommuter One – Brand New Telecommuter

Telecommuter One opted for telecommuting when her family decided to move back to their country of origin. Since she was a software professional, almost all of her work could be conducted electronically. So when her supervisor asked if she was willing to work remotely, she immediately agreed. The management was confident that she could carry out her duties effectively with minimum supervision.

One important concern discussed was working in different time zones. She agreed to work a few hours of the day at a time overlapping with the office hours in the United States, which meant she would be working part of her evening and night hours.

The next concern was about data security and availability – security such as critical data or information which might reside on her laptop and the possibility of it not being available to other staff when she was offline. That was resolved it by having the desktop that she normally worked located in the company’s main office server room. She could work on it using remote desktop software from her personal machine. This required setting up remote desktop and security systems that would encrypt data.

It was important that her colleagues are aware of her available hours, so she set up automatic out-of-office messages set up in her email. She also set up the MS-Office outlook so it would display the calendar both US and her country time zones.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Overall, this telecommuting arrangement has worked very well for her, since it provided the flexibility of working the hours available. It has helped the company continue supporting the projects she was responsible for without having to look for another hire.

#### **B. Telecommuter Two – Experienced Telecommuter**

Telecommuter Two started telecommuting in August 1998 after working on-site as a survey applications programmer for approximately a year and a half. His wife received a job offer in Texas and he expected that he was going to have to resign his position. He had become the lead programmer on a survey project that required fielding new interviewing software in January 1999. Project management asked him if he would consider working as a telecommuter. It turned out to be a mutually beneficial arrangement - he did not have to find a new job and the company benefited from his continued expertise.

When he has technical problems, he has to be very clear in his communications (email, phone calls) as to what the problem is. He also does a lot of web searching for solutions to technical problems, and also subscribes to some web sites and listservs where individuals discuss technical problems. These have been good resources, but the search time involved may be shifting some of his working hours to duties normally performed by main office IT support staff.

This staff member feels it is essential that a telecommuter establish healthy work habits which do not isolate them from main office staff. It is also important to immediately raise any concerns, whether technical, logistical or professional, as they arise.

#### **C. Telecommuter Three – Experienced Telecommuter**

This person began telecommuting from home to avoid traffic problems caused by the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. Her supervisor at the time was located in a different office already, and had no objection to her working from home a few days a week. She discovered that not having to commute gave her about 1 ½ to 2 hours of extra time each day, making the day less rushed, more productive; a win-win situation for her and the company. A year or so later, her spouse was offered a job in another state and it was an easy step to become a full time

telecommuter. Without that option, the company would have needed to hire and train a new person.

Since then, she has worked for a few different supervisors as a full time telecommuter. Her best experiences have been with the supervisors that are open minded and accepting of the idea of telecommuters. They are out to get the job done, with people they can count on, regardless of where those people are located. They already work with staff in other offices and clients in other places, and are used to working with people remotely. In her opinion the supervisor's attitude is a key success factor

Having strong technical skills is another factor she believes is critical to be a successful telecommuter. She needed to have the basis to start with and be able to use technology to build on it. She had to find new ways to learn the job skills that were needed. Working in an office, she could have gone and asked a coworker to show her. She can still ask a coworker to let her watch how they do something, but now it's a virtual glance over their shoulder using NetMeeting or some other tool.<sup>4</sup> She uses a variety of resources to stay connected to her coworkers.

#### **D. Telecommuter Four – Experienced Telecommuter**

His telecommuting career began as a temporary endeavor, and resulted in a full time telecommute status. He started with the company in April 2004, and planned to relocate the family from New Jersey to the RTI area within six months. However, circumstances changed, and the relocation of family was not possible, which required him to work on site and travel back and forth to home for 3 ½ years. In December 2006, he requested full time telecommuter status, which was granted.

One of his biggest challenges was normalizing his work day. As a telecommuter, work is only a few steps away, and there is a temptation to jump on the computer "after hours" to check e-mail, work when you can't sleep, etc. This is risky, and can lead to burnout, so it is important to separate family life and work as you would if you were a full-time on-site employee.

<sup>4</sup> Thissen, M.R., J.M. Page, M.C. Bharathi, and T.L. Austin (2007). "Communication Tools for Distributed Software Development Teams." In *The ACM-SIGMIS CPR '07 Conference: The Global Information Technology Workforce*. Saint Louis, MO.

He thinks every telecommuter deals with isolation in one way or another, and it is important to stay in the loop and have exposure. One of his biggest fears of being a full time telecommuter is the “out of sight – out of mind” condition. It is important to have ongoing conversations, certainly via e-mail, but picking up the phone and calling is important, even more so than for main office workers. You can get lost behind all the e-mails, but a phone conversation makes it up front and personal.

He also believes that the evaluation and approval process is critical to the success of a telecommuter. To apply, he was required to fill out an extensive form which requested information on the type of work he performed, and the form provided information on the technical and ethical responsibilities he would be expected to maintain as he had as an on-site employee.

He considers himself very fortunate to be in a position to telecommute. He is contributing a lot to the company, his supervisor and peers recognize his effort and accomplishments, and it allows him to balance work and family roles. He thinks it is important that the telecommuter takes the responsibility of making the relationship work.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

These employees had varying reasons for becoming telecommuters, but the most important factors in establishing that relationship is the company’s belief in their skills and their ethical behavior living up to those expectations.

To behave responsibly as a telecommuter, the employee needs to be disciplined about managing and balancing the time between the work and family. Being a good communicator over the phone and by email helps overcome the need to have face-to face meetings to resolve issues. Teleconferencing software makes it possible to conduct meetings over disparate distances while allowing telecommuters the opportunity to be active participants. Staying in constant touch with the team members and talking to them frequently over the phone helps reduce the feeling of isolation. Having solid technical and problem-solving skills reduces the need to depend on the IT department to solve the day-to-day problems with the equipment.

For personnel with in-demand skills, telecommuting can be a way to provide flexibility in their schedule and work environment. For the company, it provides a means of retaining highly-trusted personnel while demonstrating to the employee that they are valued. Giving an employee the choice to telecommute can make them less stressed and more productive. It used to be that the nice window offices went to the most valued people, now the highly-valued people are given the flexibility to telecommute.

Business systems which include telecommuters should be managed with ethical approaches and mutual responsibility. The employer as well as the individual telecommuter need to address issues openly and take advantage of opportunities fairly. Concern for the environment, concern for the well-being of the individual and commitment to delivering a good work environment and responsible level of productivity contribute to success.