The Mobile Worker
in the Flexible Workplace
Trends and Issues Alert No. 10

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New information technologies, changing work force demographics, rising customer expectations, transnational companies, and cost pressures are forcing companies to reconsider ideas of what the workplace is. New strategies such as telecommuting, telework centers, nonterritorial offices, and team space are creating the "virtual workplace." This Alert looks at the trends and issues regarding work in alternative environments such as the home.

Two factors promote acceptance of telework or telecommuting: employee flexibility in work space, time, and productivity and employer profit margins and cost savings. Savings in time and effort mean dollars earned or saved on each side. Workers are drawn to the flexibility afforded by working at home or from mobile locations. New technologies are making such flexibility increasingly possible. Groups of workers for whom travel represents an extensive part of their job descriptions may use the Internet for collaborative and community-building activities as well as for training, market research, and product tracking (Dyssel 1999). Parents who have child or elder care responsibilities may access their work online from home, allowing them to balance work and family life. These extended work options are appealing to many workers and are becoming more common.

A mobile work force appeals to employers as it can save money typically spent on office space, computer equipment, travel time, and conflict resolution. Surveillance of teleworkers, however, is a major consideration offsetting these cost benefits. For example, how can employers monitor the work of teleworkers when they are not on site? How can employers ensure that the at-home telework workplace is protected from invasion by other, nonwork forces—e.g., children, household tasks, visitors, etc.? Managers must take such issues into consideration before allowing an employee to enter into an alternative work environment (Schilling 1999).

The employer has to ensure that the monitoring of teleworkers does not result in invasion of privacy or practices that are perceived as negative or resented by the employee (Fairweather 1999). Field (1998) contends that "flexible home-based work arrangements succeed only if employers are comfortable assessing a worker's performance and commitment primarily by the results produced, not by the time spent on job during 'normal' business hours" (p. 7).

Also of key importance is the need for employers to help "hoteling" employees cope with feelings of isolation and rootlessness triggered by separation from the onsite work environment (Duggie 1999). Too much open or team space at the work site can also cause stress as it ignores privacy issues. A guiding rule for team space is to keep it small, a practice that encourages communication between team members and the rest of the organization.

The new mobile work arrangements—telecommuting, telework centers, nonterritorial offices, and team space—are changing the way companies and workers do business with each other and with their respective clients. Key elements to consider in these arrangements are flexibility in work time, space, and performance; cost-effective production of goods and services; worker satisfaction and learning through social interactions with others; and strategies for facilitating brainstorming, team work, problem-solving, and collaboration. The following resources offer additional information about mobile workers and employment.

Resources


Examined the effects of telework arrangements on intra-organizational communication, finding that few exceptions part-time telework did not influence the quality of intra-organizational communication.


Examines incentive programs offered to at-home workers. Noting that such incentives do not promote teamwork or reward quality improvement, recommendations are given to tie incentive pay to business issues that are critical to success.


Discusses the alternative workplace, the combination of nontraditional work practices, settings, and locations that is beginning to supplement traditional offices. Looks at myths and realities, options, advantages and disadvantages, and implementation of alternative workplaces.


Digital Equipment Corporation's virtual workplace strategy was initiated in its Newmarket, England office. Interviews conducted after this practice was initiated revealed that the organization was more pleased with this arrangement than the workers, who missed the socialization and face-to-face interactions.


A case study of 10 telework centers and 2 resort offices in the United States, Canada, and Japan shows that employee responses were very positive, indicating that telework centers enhanced their productivity. Japanese workers, however, experienced a greater sense of social isolation and difficulty in self-management. The goal of reduced fuel consumption and traffic congestion was realized.

"Building Team Relies on Project Extranet." Building Design & Construction 40, no. 9 (September 1999): 35.

Describes the creation of an online virtual office by builders of the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas, noting that workers were able to access through the project's extranet over 4,500 blueprints and drawings, hundreds of photos, schedules and requests for information.

Transformations of the physical workplace are explored, with distinctions being made between the norms and practices that have guided the "executive row" layout and the "team-space" environment plan. Gives examples of three organizations that have initiated new organizational designs and reexamined the process of organizational transformation.


Emphasizes the need for investment in training to help mobile employees deal with feelings of isolation caused by such strategies as hoteling. Identifies an organization's need to help employees find creative ways of coping with changes caused by mobile work strategies.


Presents the benefits of subscribing to a Web-based virtual-office service and identifies two categories of services: business-collaboration services and community-building services.


A "neighborhoods" approach to office arrangements is exemplified by the executive suites in Steelcase Inc.'s Grand Rapids, Michigan headquarters. Grouped by job function and responsibility, executives use individual cubicles and team space areas along with a central communications center.


Ways of allowing managers to monitor teleworkers are presented, along with the drawbacks and employee resentments of policing methods.


Identifies five strategies for making flexible job arrangements work to advantage: an environment that encourages self-motivation, a relaxed approach to work that adheres to standards, continuous communication, enhanced performance expectations, and adopting a win-win mentality.


Presents 18 ethical scenarios related to freedom of work ethic, workplace monitoring, compensation, work and family, and equity.


Studies the influences of working from a virtual office—productivity, morale, flexibility, extended work hours—through comparisons of 157 IBM virtual office teleworkers and 89 traditional office workers. Qualitative findings for productivity, flexibility, and work/life balance were positive; those for morale, teamwork, and work hours were not.

Hudson, Marion E. "Hoteling: Offices a la Carte." Office Systems 16, no. 9 (September 1999): 28-34.

Introduces the concept of "hoteling"—the provision of a temporary work space for mobile workers, which is triggered by the need for workers who telecommute, to have a space to meet for concentrated work efforts or to engage in team work (brainstorming, comparing notes, etc.).


This book provides practical guidelines for good practice in regard to teleworkers that recognize that teleworking is not a single category, but covers at least five distinct groups with different needs: multiple teleworking, tele-home working, freelance teleworking, mobile teleworking, and relocated back-offices.


Highlights the benefits of converting traditional offices to virtual ones: faster interactions, reduced inefficiencies, and increased earnings potential. Details a $6 million cost savings plus an annual savings of $3 million realized by Heritage Mutual after the company's offices went virtual.


Relates new technological changes to the evolution of smart and motivated U.S. workers, workers who have increasingly new opportunities for mobility.


Discusses the issue of labor laws regarding health and safety compliance as well as third-party injury claims. Offers guidelines to reduce unwarranted wage and hour claims by at-home workers.


Describes the challenge managers face to learn new ways to manage staff, technology, and real estate as a result of telecommuting employees.


Explores the role of new technology in the information age as a strategy for avoiding economic deterioration, higher unemployment, and industrial strife in Britain. It explores ways in which the new technologies and telework options are attractive for management and identifies the stresses that surface as a result of such changes.

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