



Learning to Support a
Remote Workforce

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CHANGING NATURE OF WORK AND TRENDS WHITE PAPER

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Telework, remote work, mobile workers, telecommuting, distributed work, and other similar alternatives to traditional, central-office based employees represent fast-growing trends for many—if not most—organizations of all sizes. How best to encourage, motivate, measure, support, and integrate these employees constitute some of the primary challenges facing managers in the new millennium. Although the inexorable move from “one-worker, one-place” to much more flexible, adaptable definitions for corporate work strategies began in the ‘80s and accelerated in the ‘90s, several more recent events combined with certain economic realities have forced even cautious, conservative organizations to begin developing and adopting strategic remote-worker policies in the new century.

For example, globalization and internationally distributed teams, the threat of terrorism, rising fuel costs, the continuing departure from traditional family units, traffic congestion and commuting times, concern about global warming and the environmental impact of burning fossil fuels (as needed for transportation), and the plethora of technology tools that allow workers to be productive outside a typical office building have all converged to produce a dramatic shift toward many different forms of mobile work. In order to secure top talent within interdisciplinary teams and to offset the high labor costs in North America and Western Europe, multinational firms increasingly turn to globally distributed, self-managed work groups organized around specific projects. Such work groups do not easily lend themselves to being located in the same place at the same time.

Although little consensus exists regarding the likelihood of large corporations being the targets of terrorism, the prospect of a calamity wiping out much of entire organizations’ workforces—as happened on September 11, 2001 and earlier in Oklahoma City—did not pass unnoticed by top corporate leaders. In such extreme cases, the advantages of a distributed workforce linked by technology and common goals seem obvious. In situations where workforce strategies have embraced remote, distributed forms of work, IT/IS concerns over data security, technology reliability, and suitable support for efficient collaboration tend to replace worries about car bombs, contamination from bio-hazards, and other forms of collective violence.

Forecasts that world oil prices will continue to rise or at least stabilize at much higher prices than the already steep costs of today have also contributed to the trend toward workstyles and strategies that do not require commuting—particularly in single-passenger vehicles over long distances. Savvy executives and managers have begun to realize that without lengthy commutes, telecommuters not only save money, but they can also work longer and perhaps be more productive. Governments at the national, state, and local levels have begun to explore in earnest the advantages of various forms of telework in terms of reduced fuel consumption, reduced emissions and pollution, reduced congestion, higher employee satisfaction, reduced absenteeism and turnover, and in some cases, even higher employee productivity.

Wage earners in single-parent families and other nontraditional family units can often be reclaimed by organizations willing to provide the tools and flexible schedules that let them work from home. Spouses who prefer to stay at home with children may also choose to earn a paycheck if that opportunity is available. In such cases, companies usually benefit from committed, loyal workers, and these employees save commuting and daycare costs.

Challenges faced by telecommuting, distributed work, and other remote work strategies.

Although relatively little systematic, rigorous research has been conducted comparing co-located work groups and teams with groups comprised of distributed team members, many corporate leaders have assumed numerous advantages for bringing

members of work groups together in one place at one time. Traditional, centralized corporate headquarters—in urban cores and suburban office parks—continue to be designed and built around the world. The question is rarely, “Should we build a corporate office or link remote employees with technology?” Instead, it is usually, “How can we best balance the needs of co-located group collaboration with those of distributed, mobile workers?” or “How do we best integrate our fixed-in-place real estate portfolio with a distributed, mobile work program?” The following discussion focuses on the latter questions and similar issues.

Technology support.

Perhaps this is too obvious to mention, but ideally, distributed workers should enjoy all the access and connectivity of their co-located counterparts. To the extent that mobile workers experience technological or other barriers to being productive any time, any place, their performance—and value to their organizations—will suffer. The more realistic and similar to real-time, face-to-face interaction videoconferencing, virtual presence, and other such technology tools are, the closer they will approximate the advantages of co-located groups of workers. However, for many types of tasks, old-fashioned teleconferencing provides adequate support—particularly for groups of workers who have previously met face-to-face. Exactly which types of tasks benefit the most from realistic, full-scale, virtual-presence technology platforms has not been confirmed by research.

Group identity.

The relationships among team members—both interpersonal and task-related—constitute an important determinant of group performance and effectiveness. An assumed maxim that has nonetheless not yet received adequate empirical scrutiny is that remote team members should first meet face-to-face to instill confidence and trust among group participants, to determine optimal roles and leaders

among self-managed teams, and to outline the scope and timeline of the project to be completed. Certainly, strategies are needed to provide meaningful boundaries for group membership and, as far as possible, a detailed description of successful task completion or the goal to be reached by the group.

Organizational culture.

Organizational leaders differ in terms of how integrated with the dominant, majority culture of their companies they would like distributed team members to be and feel. Some prefer that mobile workers become oriented to their broader corporate culture, while others merely expect the members of distributed teams to forge a common set of best practices, expectations, and interpersonal and task-related heuristics that can drive group process toward shared, organizationally relevant goals. In any case, the psychosocial dimensions of distributed work groups must be considered along with their task-defining constraints, because groups sharing a common purpose and set of values tend to be more motivated throughout the duration of their projects.

Shared mental models.

Research has shown that groups whose members share a common conceptual framework for defining success and for addressing task-related problems outperform those with less similar “mental models.” Thus, efforts to provide group members with a common orientation, a common purpose, and a shared understanding of the group’s mission and vision can be very productive. Whether such experiences are more effective if given in the same location or whether equivalent experiences can be provided to remotely located team members awaits future research to be established. In any case, intentional education and training techniques with the purpose of increasing the similarity of particularly task or project-relevant cognitive schemata among team members—

before the team begins a project—will pay many dividends throughout the life of the team.

Incentive structures.

Many organizations remain somewhat naïve in practice regarding how the members of teams in general—and distributed teams in particular—should be reviewed, evaluated, and compensated. If adequate attention has been paid to defining a work group’s mission, it should be possible to assess and reward group performance collectively, in addition to any individual incentive plans in operation. Of course, initial definition of team member roles and the scope of responsibilities and contributions is extremely important, and any consequences of group productivity must be tied to these criteria. Often, distributed teams suffer from insufficient rewards and acknowledgement of their contributions to the larger organizational goals. Although collective incentives should be provided, non-monetary rewards—such as acknowledgement of individual team members’ contributions to chat rooms, e-rooms, or other project-relevant repositories of collective, task-relevant wisdom and lore—should be embraced as well. Believe it or not, very few employees are motivated solely by money.

Definitions

Telecommuting: refers primarily to working from home or at a semi-permanent location away from a corporate office

Telework: any of a number of alternative approaches to work that contrast with “one-worker, one-place” strategies

Distributed work: primarily denotes work groups or teams whose members are not co-located temporally or geographically

Mobile workers: employees who intentionally work anywhere, any

time, and usually have the tools and technological savvy to do so

Satellite office: a remote site that still allows workers to access the company network and collaborate on various projects; usually features videoconferencing, virtual presence, or other similar technology tools

Alternative officing: any of a number of corporate real estate and facility management strategies that differ from providing a traditional, assigned office for each employee

Hoteling: scheduling and providing office workspace similarly to securing reservations at a hotel; usually includes concierge services and management of secure, mobile storage and other work tools

Hot-desking: providing a number of flexible office spaces usually available on a first-come, first-served basis; assumes fewer seats than employees within the groups accommodated

Just-in-time officing: a flexible menu of spaces that can adapt to various levels of occupancy and individual or group task needs; assumes fewer seats than employees within the groups accommodated

Touch-down spaces: usually a fixed number of small, individual workspaces to accommodate mobile workers, such as external consultants or sales members, at corporate headquarters or satellite office locations; may or may not provide plug-and-play network access; invariably assumes only transient use.

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