

Working from Home: Issues and Strategies

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The landscape of the American workplace has been changing dramatically over the last twenty years. In the 1990s, the workplace became both increasingly electronic and a less formal environment. This change ushered in “work casual” dress - no longer were jeans only acceptable on casual Fridays. The shift over the last decade, however, has been more dramatic; this new change has been the movement of the work place from the office to the home. Many companies have started looking at the benefit that can come from employees telecommuting, rather than physically commuting, to a traditional office.

The advantages and savings for the company are tremendous; overhead and building repairs, cost of real estate, electricity, heating and cooling, infrastructure such as phones and internet, cleaning crews, and security all add up. The trend towards becoming more environmentally friendly also helps this movement. The average commuter travels alone in a full sized car to the office generating greenhouse gasses and increasing the consumption of fossil fuels. Reducing, or eliminating, that commute can make a substantial impact on the local environment. The employees also have much to gain in this workplace evolution. Studies have shown that employees are happier working from home than in the office; increased time to spend with the family, less stress of traveling in heavy commuter traffic, and the flexibility that comes with working in the home are all contributing factors to their increased happiness (Gajendran & Harrison, 2008) (Cascio, 2000). For example, in a recent meta-analysis, Gajendran and Harrison compared 46 studies and found “telecommuting is a win-win for employees and employers, resulting in higher morale and job satisfaction and lower employee stress and turnover” (2008, p. 9). In another example, a study examining the work life balance of twenty four thousand IBM employees found those with the ability to adjust their daily schedules by telecommuting to accommodate family and other personal needs could work up to fifty seven hours in a week without burnout or having a conflict with work life balance. However, those in a more traditional office setting with limited flexibility could only work approximately thirty seven hours (Hill, Hawkins, Ferris, & Weitzman, 2004). IBM was again cited in an article in *Business Week* where the financial impacts of telecommuting employees were touted; IBM stated that 42% of their work force telecommutes, saving the company over \$100 million dollars annually in real estate related expenses (Business Week, 2007).

Now that the workforce is making this transition from cubicle to home office in larger numbers, the issues that arise with that change are coming to light. Five years ago IBM asked me to start working from home exclusively after spending five years working in one of their traditional offices. Overall, it has been a great experience and I would certainly not trade what I have to go back to working in a traditional office. There have, however, been situations that required creative adjustments, on my part and the part of my supervisors and employer. Employers also have the responsibility of helping employees with this transition and identifying some of the difficulties that occur with working from home. My goal with this paper is to highlight some of the struggles that I have experienced, some of the issues I know my manager has had to help with, and some of the possible solutions for both.

One of the first things that became apparent when working from home was the lack of exposure to co-workers and other people during the work day. For most, working from home is a rather solitary experience and this can be a distinct advantage. Project based work, where prolonged concentration is necessary and where interruptions can be highly disruptive to that process is a good example of the advantage of a solitary work environment. With no social visits from co-workers, and therefore less unintended distraction, it becomes easier to “find your groove” and really tune in to the project at hand. The solitude, however, has downsides including loneliness and stifling workplace creativity. Those social visits that interrupted also provided sustenance to the work place chemistry, brainstorming, and creative problem solving. Personally, this led to a feeling of disconnection from the rest of the company as I had little to no knowledge on what other teams and groups were working on and a feeling of disconnection from the humanity as a whole. Addressing this situation took a threefold approach. First, it was necessary to make regular attempts at communicating with co-workers on non-work related issues. Often, the only time telecommuters reach out to co-workers is when they need something or when something is broken. One way of addressing this is to create a chatroom, or Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channel, in which all members of the team stay in while they are working. This “virtual water cooler” serves as a place where idle chatter and general social conversations can occur. Second, I have found it helpful to seek out local groups and gatherings of like-minded individuals. Finding organizations with local chapters that have regular meetings have been helpful in increasing both social exposure and work place creativity. Lastly, I find that even something as simple as leaving the house to have lunch makes a big difference in my mindset and feeling connected. The increased human social contact, even something as small as eating in a restaurant with total strangers, can take the edge off that feeling of

solitude that can weigh one down. Preparing to deal with these social issues is not unlike the second challenge that I had to face in preparing a personal environment that was conducive to work within my home.

One of the most common failures I see made when co-workers make the switch from working in an office to working from home is lack of preparation of an appropriate environment. Working from home is not as simple as taking a seat on the couch and popping open the laptop on the coffee table. A serious effort needs to be made in preparing for the high level of innate distractions that are present when working from home. The first thing that I addressed was to segregate an area that would solely be used for work. This can be something as big as an entire room, or as small as a desk. The goal is to provide separation from your home life and your work life, or a space in which you can make that transition from personal to professional - knowing that when you are at that location, the only thing you can do is work. During my first three months of telecommuting, I even went as far as to remove my personal computer from the area so that I would not be distracted with tinkering with iTunes, paying bills or any other personal actions that would be a distraction from the work flow. The second action I took was to invest in a high quality chair and monitor; knowing that you are going to spend eight to twelve hours in a chair looking at a monitor means you cannot use a twenty dollar chair from the local office supply store, the spare chair in the dining room, or a garage sale monitor. Quite often the employer does not supply these types of amenities to a work from home employee. Great deals can be found on used or refurbished office chairs from Herman Miller or Steelcase. Purchasing a high quality LCD monitor is also a good investment for the work from home employee, even for those employees who have a laptop, often provided by the company, as their main computer. A twenty four inch monitor can cost as little as \$200 and will go a long way in reducing eye strain and make for a more comfortable working environment, especially when compared to even the largest of laptop screens. These subtle but significant differences between working from your home and working in the company office are often overlooked and can cause distractions for the employee, impacting their effectiveness. Similarly, distractions of a more personal, rather than physical, nature are a significant consideration often overlooked during the transition to working from home.

One often missed advantage in a traditional office is the isolation from the daily domestic and personal life distractions. Working from home can be problematic in the number of these personal distractions that can, and do, come up on a regular basis. There are always non-work related tasks that

can derail even the most focused telecommuter; laundry, letting the pets out, last night's dirty dishes, and even mail delivery. It is virtually impossible to eliminate these distractions, but it is possible and necessary to plan for these issues in order to manage them. In the book *Time Management for System Administrators*, Limoncelli gives an example about filling his car up with gas (2005). Rather than constantly having to think about if, and when, he needs to fill up his car with gas, he does it every third day, no matter how empty or full the tank is. He found that he no longer worried or gave thought to having to fill up his tank, and this provided a clear mind to focus on work-related items. Personally, I have found that if I set aside time during my lunch break to handle domestic chores, like starting a load of laundry or unloading the dishwasher, I am less distracted by domestic issues. Instead, I know that I have made time to handle those issues, and as a result, am less likely to spend time thinking about them. This eliminates the distraction of thinking "Hey, should I go start that load of laundry now, or wait until after I finish this work task." While these challenges are for the employee alone to handle, there are others where the employer and managers can help.

Managers, and businesses, that have work from home employees have their own set of unique challenges, which require some creativity to cope with. Knowing these challenges ahead of time and setting a plan in place for handling these issues before they become problems benefits everyone involved. Gajendran and Harrison found that employees who worked from home for three or more days a week reported worsening of their relationships with co-workers (2008). This evidence suggests that employers and managers that have work from home employees should spend more time on encouraging and participating in inter-team communications and relationships. The relationship strain that can occur is complicated by the lack of physical access to the employee, which creates two problems. First, managers cannot casually stop by and chat with their employee. Second, without physical access to somebody, it is difficult to pick up on the subtle, but important, body language elements of communication. All distance-based communication mediums (i.e., telephone) do not easily convey body language; the difficulty with this is more evident with non-verbal communication tools, such as IM, in which all non-verbal cues are lost, such as sarcasm and tone. This can create awkwardness and misunderstandings between manager and employee and co-worker to co-worker. The combination of lack of direct communication and strained relationships can limit the ability of a manager to effectively gauge the morale and confidence of their employees. Additionally, the strain in communication can, and often does, result in a lack of trust between managers and employees and

amongst co-workers. The trust relationship between an employee and a manager is important for retaining talent in the workforce. When the manager-employee trust relationship fails, often the employee looks to find a more stable trustworthy environment to work in. This could result in the employee transferring or leaving the company altogether. Managers will find that this change in staff will impact the effectiveness of the groups and projects they are responsible for. A lack of trust between co-workers in their ability to fulfill their obligations and complete their work can cause a significant drop in productivity and derail other efforts to make the telecommuting experience a success (Cascio, 2000). However, there is hope when one knows what the problems are so that they can be worked around. One study that looked at the communication methods of employees found that those employees working from home can be as effective at communicating as those working in a traditional workplace (Duxbury & Neufeld, 1999). One of the factors the authors cited for that success was the increased amount of pre-planned communications. These pre-planned communications are usually more structured and have better organization than those that are conducted in a traditional office.

Employers should also look at providing their employees a greater amount of flexibility in controlling their schedules (Duxbury & Neufeld, 1999). In a traditional work environment, there are usually rigid expectations on when the employee works and for how long the employee works; in the traditional office place, the schedule has typically been Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm. Some studies, however, have suggested that allowing employees to cater their schedules to their lives leads to an increased amount of productivity and an increase in happiness in employees. As previously cited one such study found that this flexibility allowed workers to put in as many as 57 hours of work before burnout symptoms set in, compared to 37 hours in the traditional workplace structure (Hill, Hawkins, Ferris, & Weitzman, 2004). This increased employee satisfaction also benefits the employer because there is a lower employee turnover rate and decreased work-life conflicts for employees (Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006). The benefits for the employer are significant when their telecommuting employees are working at full efficiency and have the flexibility to balance personal and work lives.

The advantages of working from home are great, for both the employer and employee. Telecommuting can give employees the flexibility to have a better work life balance, allow them to be more productive, and put in more meaningful hours. Employers can see immediate financial benefits in less real estate related expenses and increased productivity of telecommuting employees. These gains do not come without challenges for both employee and employer. There are adjustments that have to

be made by the employee to avoid distractions and to handle the flexibility responsibly. Employers need to make sure managers have the appropriate skills to keep their employees engaged and to establish channels of communication. Flexibility on the part of the employee and employer are also crucial to ensure that work from home employees are successful. A number of studies support working from home, and have indicated that the benefits far exceed the challenges; the evidence, however, also reminds one of the importance of establishing ways that employees and employers can work together in advance of this transition in order to prepare telecommuters for success.

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