

Managing a Remote Workforce:

Making Sense Out of Today's Business Environment

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ABSTRACT

Telecommuting has become a given facet of our working environment. The author remembers a time not so long ago (OK, it WAS a long time ago) when a department was located in the same office as each other, and "working from home" wasn't in our vernacular.

Technology has allowed workforces to become virtual; the past 10-15 years has seen an exponential increase in the number of programmers that rarely, if ever, see the inside of an office building.

While this is a positive from almost every aspect, it also creates some interesting management opportunities. This paper will attempt to dissect telecommuting, from its origins and evolution, to our current state, and where we're headed as an industry.

INTRODUCTION

While telecommuting (also known as telework or work from home) is almost a given in today's business environment, there are inherent challenges to go along with several benefits. Telework has evolved rapidly over the past few decades and is changing the landscape of how programmers operate. A growing work from home population also impacts managers; with proper planning and strategies in place, an organization can benefit from such mutually beneficial arrangements.

HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF TELECOMMUTING

Technology has been the enabling factor in the evolution of telecommuting. Sometime in the 1970's, most satellite offices became connected to their respective headquarters. Specifically, this linked "dumb terminals" to a mainframe.

One of the pioneers of modern telecommuting was Control Data Corporation (CDC). In the 1970's, there was a scarcity of programmers. CDC "began offering the option of working at home, an attractive incentive to independent-minded programmers who really hated driving the clogged freeways of Silicon Valley." (Amigoni , Gurvis)

Major companies like AT&T became early adopters of telework "because of their desire to be compliant with the Clean Air Act." When their positive survey results were published, other organizations followed suit. "Companies realized that while doing something favorable for the environment, their employees also experienced a new degree of work/life balance, enjoyed wasting less time sitting in traffic, and realized other savings related to commuting costs." (Amigoni , Gurvis)

My first experience with a telecommuter was in the late 1980's, when one of my EDS co-workers left to move to Connecticut to be near family and began working for Travelers Insurance from her home. This was always interesting to me, as this lady seemed to be a social creature and I wondered how this strange new world would be satisfying to her. Yet, each and every end of the year letter would detail her continued enjoyment of the work arrangement (and her cat Joey).

These were the days when dial-up was the standard, blazing the trails at 1200 or 2400 bits/second. Those of us who are a certain age will vividly recall the sound of the modem dialing and (hopefully) connecting to a distant mainframe. This was even a precursor to the modern "information superhighway."

The first IBM personal computer was introduced in 1982. Ever since, prices have dropped dramatically and home computing power has increased exponentially. Advances in hardware and technology increased the speeds at which a household can connect to the internet. Throughout the 1990's DSL became more popular with families, allowing a computer to use standard phone lines at a much higher rate. Still further advances in technology allowed consumers to connect via cable internet at speeds unimagined just a few years earlier, and many companies began establishing a means for their employees to connect via a virtual private network (VPN).

Recent estimates by Reuters suggest that approximately 20% of workers worldwide telecommute frequently, and that 10% work from home every day. As technology and the workplace continue to evolve, it is likely that these percentages will increase over time.

7 HABITS OF SUCCESSFUL TELECOMMUTERS

Not everyone is cut out to work from home on a regular basis. There are many who are very adept at working wherever they have a Wi-Fi signal. What sets the latter group apart? Here are but a few strategies practiced by productive teleworkers:

- **Communication!** It is only logical that this is listed first; a good teleworker always over communicates. A coworker should be able to get in touch with a remote worker, not unlike wandering down the hall if they were collocated in the same office. Set 'out of office' notifications if one is out for an extended period of time, send advance notices of appointments and vacations, and send weekly status reports (even if they're not required). Be on time with time reporting and other regular communications. Never give your manager or other coworkers a reason to wonder if you're pulling your fair share of the workload.
- **A functioning, organized home office** is essential, with clear distinctions between home and office. When one is in their office, one is working. The home office should have all the necessities, such as a clean work space, office supplies, phone (or cell phone), computer (likely a laptop), etc. A separate room is preferred as it makes it easier to "leave work at work."
- **Establish a routine.** Try to establish core working hours and stick to them as much as possible. Take a lunch break about the same time each day, and
- **Maintain focus on your work, your day and your life.** Sounds easy, right? According to Debra A. Dinnocenza, "few things will undermine your telecommuting effectiveness as swiftly and significantly as a lack of focus." While this is important no matter where one works, it is decidedly so for telecommuters to be successful. Have a personal mission statement posted in your home office and start each work day by setting short term goals. Work related phone calls are necessary, but don't let a ringing phone or chiming emails derail your day.
- **Maintain a healthy work/life balance.** This is critical for everyone, but especially for someone who works from home. The above practices will help in this matter; having a set end time to one's work day (with exceptions for "crunch times") allows one to appreciate the yin and yang of one's life. Stay fit and healthy – make time for stretching each day or even a walk around the neighborhood. Take frequent short breaks throughout the day as needed.
- **Work well with your family.** Many of the reasons for telecommuting revolve around a family situation. Call a family meeting and set expectations for all involved parties. Kids and partners should respect the boundaries of a home office (unless, of course, a limb is dangling from a shoulder). Family management can often be one of the most difficult areas to negotiate.
- **Work well with Tools & Technology.** Make sure you're equipped to work from home. Aside from a home office, have a fast internet connection with battery backup and a good surge protector. Make sure your work is backed up automatically and frequently. Make your workstation comfortable with the best mouse & keyboard for your needs. Effective use of video and audio conferencing is a must for telecommuters; be sure to have all the software installed BEFORE a meeting starts!

AND A FEW PITFALLS TO AVOID

Like everyone, even the best teleworkers need to be cautious of certain pitfalls that can cause a wrinkle in a work day.

- **Motivation** is critical, and is not likely to be an issue on most days. A good way to stay motivated to avoid procrastination. According to Dinnocenza it also helps to:
 - Establish a system for tracking accomplishments
 - Organize work into manageable chunks
 - Set deadlines for tasks
 - Do the hard stuff first

- Take breaks and/or switch activities periodically
- **Isolation** can be an issue. While most teleworkers enjoy solitude, too much can be a problem. Staying connected to the office is a two way street. Don't be afraid to reach out to your coworkers every once in a while, but be mindful of their time. Attend and participate in all scheduled team meetings, and schedule a regular meeting with your manager. Use appropriate instant messaging tools to check in occasionally.
- **Avoid bad habits** that hamper productivity. The news can wait till a short break (or a newspaper can wait till the end of a work day). Social media is fine, but don't have it open on your desktop continuously. Similarly, personal email or phone calls can generally wait. Set boundaries with habitual offenders and call them back later.
- **Don't become a workaholic!** Without a drive to the office, productivity almost automatically increases. As addressed above, establish a routine in one's workday. There will always be times in projects that require extra effort, but be cautious to establish a realistic benchmark for what can be accomplished in a given week. Set goals for the number of hours worked per week and truly aim for the target.

NOT YOUR FATHER'S WORKFORCE: IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES IN TODAY'S ENVIRONMENT

In my college Management classes, I don't recall any instruction or chapters devoted to telecommuting. Today, there is a plethora of materials available, both on how to telecommute effectively, and how to manage a teleworker. Here are a few points to keep in mind:

- Not all employees are cut out for telecommuting. Set expectations in advance with a teleworker, and measure productivity with accepted metrics. Expect weekly status reports and schedule regular meetings with each teleworker.
- Are they really working? This is a question more often asked regarding teleworkers than their office counterparts. It can be very subjective; if someone is seen, they're being productive, right? Again, establishing expectations regarding a telecommuter can set everyone at ease.
- Does the employee have past experience with telecommuting? If so, ask about their experience – what works well for them, what doesn't, and how can you both ensure success? If not, is it possible to establish a trial period? Try once a week at first, and add a day as the programmer proves they can work effectively away from the office. Set a probationary period for telecommuting if necessary.
- There are many benefits to a telecommuting experience. It is often less stressful to work from home which can lead to a happier workforce. This in turn leads to more productivity and happier clients and management.

DEVELOPING STRATEGIES TO MANAGE A VIRTUAL TEAM

Managing a largely virtual team takes work, as does managing any team. These are some strategies to help manage a team that is largely virtual:

- Maintain a pictorial org chart and when speaking to a telecommuting programmer, have their picture available. This helps to put a face with a name if one has never met the programmer in person.
- Similarly, maintain a map of where the teleworkers are geographically located. Knowing where a programmer is located helps when calling at the end or beginning of one's day; does the call fit into the teleworker's core hours?
- Establish trust early, and work to maintain it. Setting expectations for each team member regarding status reports, team and individual meetings will start the relationship off on a good footing. Find out what motivates each programmer and what their likes/dislikes are to help with regular conversations.
- Maintain regular contact with remote programmers to reduce isolation. This can be accomplished via IM, email or phone calls. This should not be done "just because," rather should have a purpose. If productivity is extremely high, call the programmer to thank them. Conversely, if productivity is low, call them as soon as possible to discuss the matter.
- Monitor workload and hours worked per week. If a programmer is continuously working 55 hours per week, make sure the project workload is evenly distributed.

CONCLUSION

Telecommuting has exploded in the past several years. It has become a large part of most business' continuity plans in the event of a natural disaster or even a local blizzard or power outage at the office. With foresight on the parts of the programmer, colleagues, management and the company, gains in productivity, job satisfaction and retention can be achieved.

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