Proc Telecommute
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ABSTRACT
Many years of surveys and other documenting information support telecommuting as a net asset to the corporate industry. Telecommuting is discussed both from a perspective of advantages from the corporate viewpoint and also from the employee perspective. A summary of surveys and many years of documenting information support telecommuting. Additionally, our personal experience of more than ten years of working from a home office substantiates the advantages, but also illuminates challenges facing the telecommuter. Issues are raised to help clarify the lag toward the progression of telecommuting from the corporate culture of the in-house employee. The net tally of pros and cons demonstrates a bottom-line savings for a company to accept the progression to home office telecommuter as the way of the future for the global network of its work force.

INTRODUCTION
Teleworking is growing at a brisk pace in the United States. Today, about 20% of the U.S. workforce teleworks at home, at a telework center or satellite office, works on the road, or works at a combination of work sites. The term “telework” is starting to replace the past term “telecommute” because it is a more accurate description of the concept. The prefix “tele” means distance, therefore the term “telework” means “work at a distance”. In Europe and other countries, the term “telework” is what is preferred. Here in the U.S., we seem to prefer the term “telecommute”. It is not realistic to think that there will be a day when everyone works from home, however, the days of everyone going to an office five days a week is very quickly disappearing.

Considering the globalization of all industries, teleworking is already in place with multiple company sites operating worldwide. Even if one is in a physical corporate office, one is teleworking with other corporate office sites nationwide or worldwide. Although teleworking has been practiced by many, for well over a decade, the progression of the “off-site” teleworking to a full-time home- “net-centric”-, or “virtual” office for many working disciplines has been fueled by broadband internet access. Internet connection through cable modem, DSL, or satellite immediately cyber-enables the teleworker’s home and closely approximates the corporate office T1 line capability for information transfer. In further support of the home office teleworker, several surveys have a documented monetary savings to companies that utilize teleworking. The savings include increases in employee productivity and employee retention. Other savings are realized through reduced company expenses: employee absenteeism, office spaces, parking spaces, relocation expenses, and other overhead costs.

Personal experience covers over ten years of tele-“commuting”, “working”, whatever one would like to call working from a home office. In this paper we use the two terms interchangeably. Today, the barrier for telecommuting is employer perceptions, not technology. Some of those perceptions are: a fear of loss of control of the employee if one cannot physically see an employee at their desk, loss in productivity, and also, a loss of company commitment or allegiance. Following is a summary of reported information combined with our own experience of teleworking to document the advantages as well as some challenges to working full time from a home office.

HISTORY
Many reasons could be contemplated for becoming a telecommuter; we each became telecommuters for different reasons. One of us became a telecommuter when her spouse was relocated to pursue professional endeavors in a remote part of California. The other became a telecommuter after the buyout of the local pharmaceutical company and subsequent re-location of research functions. A resolution was made to remain close to the extended family rather than move. We each have over 10 years experience of working at home in the pharmaceutical industry. Both of us are SAS® programmers. We are full time employees; we should not be confused with someone who is a contractor or a consultant. We receive the same benefits as our in-office counterparts and work a forty-hour week.

In 1994, we had to provide our own computer, printer and office supplies. At this time, the employer merely supplied a telephone line for dial-up access to the client’s computer system. We worked mostly on our local PC, downloading necessary files and then uploading the completed programs. Broadband connections have made response times as good as being in the office. By this time we were provided some of the basics for a home office: a computer, a high-speed printer, a telephone line, broadband service, and office supplies. The employer contribution has definitely changed for us over the last 10 years.
When surveying the literature, we found that telecommuting is not a new idea. It has been around for many decades. The first telecommuter can be traced back to 1887. A Boston bank president had a phone line strung from his office to his home. Telecommuting began here...who knew? In 1963 a programmer working on the Arpanet project (the precursor of the Internet) had to resign from the project because his wife was confined to bed due to a difficult pregnancy. One of the project team members suggested that an extra phone line be installed at his home. The programmer was able to program via a tele-type machine. Both baby and project were delivered on time. In 1973, Jack Nilles invented the term ‘telecommuting’. Nilles was a rocket scientist working on NASA satellite communications projects in Los Angeles. Nilles, exasperated with traffic gridlock, decided that it was best to move work, not workers. In 1978 Blue Cross/Blue Shield of South Carolina started a ‘cottage keyer’ project. The company showed a 26% increase in productivity over the in-office counterparts. In 1980 Mountain Bell started a telecommuting project for managers. The U.S. Army also started a telecommuting pilot; this project was expanded and more employees became telecommuters. The army coined the term ‘guerilla telecommuting’. Management saw that remote employees were among its most productive and loyal employees. By 1990 telecommuting had established roots. Telecommuters had proliferated in a number of companies and governmental agencies in the U.S. Telecommuting also spread to Europe, Australia, and Asia. And by 2004, over 50% of corporations had telecommuters; the current telecommuting count is approximately 25 million people.

WHAT DOES TELECOMMUTING/TELEWORKING REALLY MEAN?
In the introduction, we described telecommuting and teleworking as the same concept. The meaning of the concept is ‘to work at a distance’ or, in our case, ‘to work from a home office’. The concept seems simple, but implementation requires a slightly different perspective from both the employee and employer.

Amy Lyman, from the Great Place to Work Institute, Inc. defines telecommuting with a more in-depth definition in her presentation “Creating a Great Place to Work Telecommuting Lessons from the ‘100 Best’.” (April 7, 2004) She defines telecommuting as follows:

- Telecommuting is a flexible work arrangement that conveys respect to all employees
- Telecommuting is a practice that provides evidence of management’s willingness to try new practices to support employees’ work-life balance
- Telecommuting is a creative example of paying attention to employees as people, not just as employees
- Telecommuting is a practice that challenges some traditional assumptions about where and when work should be done
- Telecommuting is a practice that requires that support be provided to managers to teach them management styles that work with telecommuters
- Telecommuting is a practice that requires that a certain level of trust exists between employees and management in order to be successfully implemented in a department of organization

Ms. Lyman’s definition is perfect! Our telecommuting experience over the past 10 years reflects this definition. Flexibility, respect, and trust from the telecommuter and the employer lead to a successful telecommuting experience. Our success in telecommuting has focused on results, not on face time with our employer.

FROM THE EMPLOYERS POINT OF VIEW
A common misconception is that telecommuting only benefits the employee. What are the benefits of telecommuting for the employer? Telecommuting can be used as a recruitment tool, positioning a company to attract and retain top talent and a flexible staff. It allows for an expanded labor pool by tapping labor markets in geographically remote areas. It reduces hiring and training costs. It is cheaper to hire a telecommuting employee than to relocate the employee to the corporate office.

Reduced absences are another benefit. Telecommuters tend to work in spite of a cold or any other minor illness that would have otherwise kept them out of the office. Weather does not usually affect the telecommuter’s ability to work. Telecommuting can accommodate those with disabilities or health problems. It saves on office-space and parking requirements. Telecommuting improves morale and job satisfaction leading to perhaps the most significant benefit to the employer; telecommuters get more done when they are out of the office than when they are in the office. Productivity increases; surveys report increases from 10% to 30% (State of California’s Telecommuting Pilot program) and as high as 58% (AT&T – sponsored survey in October 1995).

Benefits for the employer are substantial when utilizing telecommuting employees; this has been documented with many national surveys. Are there any disadvantages? Of course, there are two sides to every coin. However, we prefer the use of the word ‘challenges’. Some of the challenges an employer may encounter are: start up operating costs for the teleworker (IT equipment and personnel support); some in-office counterparts may be apprehensive of working with the telecommuter; management resistance to telecommuting. For some managers, it may be more of a challenge to manage the remote worker. Some additional training of managers may alleviate this challenge. Security of information could be an issue without proper training. The safety of the telecommuter could be an issue;
historically, very few workers’ compensation claims have been filed by telecommuters. Another challenge is that telecommuting may affect the ‘teamwork’ atmosphere. The challenge of instilling a team effort among in-house and telecommuter may require a re-direction of effort by each employee.

FROM THE EMPLOYEES POINT OF VIEW
Technology is faster, better, and “slicker” than ever. Broadband access exists as cable modem, DSL, and satellite connections; video conferencing software has developed recently, such as Webex, MShow, Conference Place; and streaming video. Some of the technology has been available for 10 years or more. Why aren’t more people teleworking today? And why aren’t more companies taking advantage of the teleworking benefits?

We have re-visited our own experiences and researched this question of why teleworking is moving forward, but its movement is decidedly behind the advances in technology. As stated by Andrew Bibby in his book “Home is Where the Office is: A Practical Handbook for Teleworking from Home”, “Teleworking is not, ultimately, a technological issue but a human one.”

Again, it is true that not all jobs, employees or managers are suited to teleworking. Some workers may perform better at the office where they can interact and socialize with co-workers. Some are dependent on other office personnel for optimal production. These employees thrive on the social aspects of the corporate office environment. If one is prone to put off a project to the last minute because no one is watching and veritably looking over the shoulder, then teleworking is not the better working situation. If one is afraid of technology and/or computer skills are lacking, teleworking is not the better option.

On the other hand, teleworkers are those employees who are able to work in a self-directed environment; they are self-motivated, self-disciplined, have excellent time-management skills and excellent communication skills. An experienced teleworker finds that working in an office is very distracting and that he or she gets more done at the home office. The teleworker must have more communication skills with the spoken word. Excellent organization abilities contribute toward greater productivity at his or her job. Again and again the teleworker will have to prove himself or herself to the boss. Since teleworking is still being assessed by many employers, the benefits to the company must always be shown.

We could go on and on about the benefits and challenges of being a teleworker since this is our point of view. But, we’ll keep the list short and include only the most important issues. The list contains some items that are important to the teleworker but are rather insignificant to the employer. For example, the teleworker saves money on vehicle maintenance and work clothing. Time for commuting to work is not added to the day. The stress of dealing with daily traffic is greatly reduced. And, one is removed from dealing with the day-to-day in-office politics.

Some benefits for the teleworker mutually benefit the employer. When being hired as a teleworker, this saves the teleworker relocation costs and moving hassles; at the same time the employer receives the same benefits. The teleworker is more productive working in his/her home office because the interruptions and distractions found in the in-house office are not present in the home office. Some of these distractions include people walking outside of the cubicle, conversations being held in other cubicles, telephones ringing, and co-workers stopping by for a visit. All of these can seem insignificant, but compared to the controlled home-office environment; the home-office is ideal for productivity. The teleworker respects his/her ability to work from home and therefore is very loyal to his/her company. The teleworker is a satisfied and happy employee, which adds to the teleworkers ability to produce high quality work. The teleworker can have a lot of flexibility with his/her workday. For example, in order to accommodate time zone differences, attending a meeting at 6:00AM is more easily accomplished when one’s office is just down the hall. Working late at night is also more easily accomplished and safer for the individual. Changing your work schedule to accommodate a personal obligation during the day is also made easier by having a home office. However, this all depends on the working agreement made between the employer and employee. A sick child staying home from school does not keep the teleworker from working, and at the same time, the teleworker can be home for the child. The preceding points are not an exhaustive list, but these are the most important ones to the teleworker that we have researched and experienced.

After painting a somewhat ‘rosy’ picture of teleworking, we now present the corollary. Unique challenges are faced every day. Isolation of remote working can be a hard adjustment. Communication has to be re-channeled into email, phone, and video-conferencing. Close friends are often made with interaction with co-workers; friendships are harder to create and maintain when you are a distant employee. Because you work from home, you never leave work. Sometimes it is difficult to pull away from work and let things wait until the next day. Most teleworkers feel like they have to go above and beyond the call of duty, they do not hesitate to do work that is beyond the scope of their workday. When a teleworker establishes the pattern of ‘always available’, he or she can feel used and abused. The teleworker can feel like he or she is being left out of the “Information Loop”. He or she may feel like they do not get enough face time with the boss, or that good assignments or opportunities are being directed to others. Other less
significant challenges include difficulties with server connections or hearing speakers during a telephone conference. All of these challenges can be overcome with the proper perspective and attitude.

SHOULD A TELECOMMUTER BE TREATED DIFFERENTLY THAN AN IN OFFICE COUNTER-PART?
The answer, of course, is ‘No!’. Anyone working at home primarily for one employer should be given full employee status:

- Home-based employees should receive the same rates of pay as on-site employees
- All expenses should be paid
- Employers should try to help reduce homeworkers’ social isolation
- Employers should keep homeworkers informed of new developments in the organization
- Homeworkers should have training opportunities
- Career paths should be kept open
- Homeworkers wishing to return on-site should be able to do so
- Homeworkers should be informed of other vacancies in the organization
- Homeworking should be counted as continuous employment with any previous on-site work
- The employer should supply all necessary equipment
- Appropriate trade unions should be given the means to contact homeworkers

WHY HAS TELECOMMUTING WORKED FOR US?
Telecommuting has worked for us because we have been fortunate enough to work with employers who looked past the need of having us physically in their office space. They quickly adapted beyond an “experimental stage” and a trust has been established between the employee and the employer. The fact that we do not reside in the office does not affect how much we produce in our day-to-day work. We are treated no differently than our in-office counterparts.

If one considers PharmaNet’s global presence with its office locations and how we interact with each of these sites, all employees are working ‘remotely’ at some point or another. The main office (housing computer servers) is in New Jersey. Other U.S. offices are in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Illinois, and California; abroad are offices in the UK, the Netherlands, India, Spain, Australia, China, Germany, France, Poland, and Switzerland. In addition to these offices, there are home offices for those of us who work as teleworkers full time. In the U.S., there are fulltime teleworkers in: New Jersey, Louisiana, Wisconsin, Michigan, and California. The full-time teleworkers include programmers, statisticians, and medical writers. Clinical research associates and sales associates virtually telecommute fulltime, and have always done so. Occasionally, other in-office workers will work from home for a day or maybe part of the day if they are sick or have home maintenance obligations. So, many people are coming and going from their respective offices and on different schedules. At times, coordinating schedules and time zone differences can be challenging; this can work to the advantage of a project if the project is orchestrated according to sequential steps in the production process. By using the time zones differences we have coordinated a project to effect people working throughout a 24-hour day. Not to mention, our server utilization is also maximized all through the day.

In addition to having the support of our employer, we have technical support from our IT department. Our IT department has the ability to log onto our computers and navigate around as if sitting at our keyboard. Today’s software allows them to be able to install new software or pin point the source of some problem. Of course there are security measures that have been built in by the IT department to keep information safe. Passwords are required for computer access (and must be changed on a regular basis), as well as having firewalls set up when using VPN routers. The IT technical jargon is beyond the scope of this paper, but we are sure you get the picture.

CONCLUSION
We have written this paper in an effort to enlighten both employers and employees about the power of telecommuting. Telecommuting is becoming more and more accepted. However, its acceptance is lagging compared to the current technology that so nicely allows for us to telecommute. With advantages far outweighing disadvantages to the employer, employers are suffering a loss in productivity by not taking advantage of the telecommuting power. Higher productivity and happier employees, along with all of the other benefits addressed in this paper, point to the direction of telecommuting. After all, work is what we do, not where we are working!
REFERENCES


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