



TELEWORK – ISSUES AND CONCERNS FOR ORGANIZATIONS AND WORKERS

In 2008, the human resources association WorldatWork (<http://www.worldatwork.org>), based in Washington, D.C., stated that **42 percent of U.S. companies offered some form of telework arrangement**, up from 30 percent in 2007. Also, about **one in four Canadian employers did so, topping the 25 percent previously established**. The Trade Union Congress in the UK suggests that around 3.5 Million UK employees are currently working from home, an increase of 600,000 since 1997. It is estimated in Canada that there are about 800,000 persons who telecommute almost daily, and about 2 million to 2.5 million workers who telecommute at least one day a week.

In a report to Congress in 2007, the U.S. [Office of Personnel Management](#) indicated that **6.6 percent of federal employees are regular telecommuters**. Congress meanwhile has supported the idea of allowing more government employees to work from home to ease rush-hour congestion and give agencies a way of continuing basic operations in the event of a catastrophe, such as pandemic flu.

Telework, sometimes also referred to as telecommuting, allows employees to work from home on a part-time or full-time basis. With the arrival of the Internet, Intranet and other telecommunications technology, organizations have been provided with a variety of tools to facilitate telework. However, the growth of telework also brings with it a number of concerns for both organizations and workers.

The emergence of telework has been encouraged in recent years by a number of factors:

- ☞ movement to more flexible working arrangements
- ☞ commuting costs (esp. by private vehicle) and increasing distances from home to work
- ☞ environmental considerations (e.g. reduction in road traffic and carbon emission)
- ☞ alternative off-site capacity in event of workplace emergencies and severe climatic conditions

One problem many companies incur is offering telework on a case-by-case basis and not as a blanket policy. In a recent Hewitt Associates (<http://www.hewittassociates.com>) survey, only 27 percent of large employers said they had a formal written policy around flexible work arrangements. Having a written telework policy is suggested in order to inform employees of basic elements such as security measures, access to available equipment required for Internet/Intranet access, compensation for associated equipment and other costs, direct or indirect assistance to ensure that health and safety requirements are met, and general IT maintenance and support.

“Effective telecommuting is all about setting clear and realistic performance indicators for employees, along with debunking the myth that just because someone sits in an office for eight hours a day means they’re productive.”¹

¹ Flexible freedom the telecommuting mantra, Derek Sankey, Canwest News Service Wednesday, October 08, 2008

The Benefits of Telework

For workers, the main benefits are:

- Telework has emerged as one means to provide for more flexible working arrangements. When staff can decide when they are going to work and what particular tasks they will work on, they are afforded the opportunity to integrate work and family obligations (e.g. child and elder care). This means they can make work and family schedules fit together, thereby improving work-life balance.
- In April 2008, Statistics Canada reported that recent census data showed that Canadians were commuting farther to work in 2006 than in 2001, and an only slightly decreasing proportion were driving their car to work. The median distance travelled by workers to their place of work in 2006 was 7.6 kilometres, up from 7.2 kilometres in 2001 and 7.0 kilometres in 1996. Telework reduces time spent in traffic, costs of private vehicles, and associated mental stress. In turn, it can ostensibly increase the number of hours actually worked by teleworking staff.
- A key positive aspect of telework is the opportunity for workers to have maximum control over their work and work environment. As a result of such control, studies have shown that teleworkers are more productive, can significantly reduce their work-related costs and indicate greater work satisfaction. Persons with disabilities may particularly be among the groups most likely to consider a job that allows them to telecommute.

For organizations, the main benefits are:

- By finding alternative ways for employees to do their jobs and lower their stress, organizations can keep valued, experienced people on the payroll. Having arrangements available for telework can serve as an added attraction to an organization with respect to recruitment and retention.
- By encouraging employees to work from home either part-time or full-time, organizations are demonstrating their commitment to the environment (e.g. reducing commuting times and congestion of the roads - a major contributor to green house emissions). In a recent survey by Avaya Inc., it was found that almost 33 percent of companies surveyed were increasing as policy the use of communications tools to help reduce environmental impact
- A growing number of organizations are offering telework as an answer to pricey real estate, particularly in places like Toronto and Vancouver where office space and overhead is expensive. As the current economic downturn continues, telework arrangements may help companies looking for new ways to cut costs, while simultaneously avoiding possible layoffs of valuable employees.
- Organizations can achieve some cost savings in energy, maintenance and housekeeping related to existing office space.
- When public transit stoppages, severe climatic conditions or other events make it difficult for organizations to main their normal operations, available alternative off-site capacity can allow them to function at a higher level than would be the case under the circumstances. As noted, the U.S. government is encouraging off-site capabilities, such as telework, as one means to minimize the impact of emergencies affecting the daily essential operations of agencies.
- Researchers have debunked the concern that not being seen in the office is considered career-limiting. Participants in various studies did not consider their work arrangement a liability. When taken with improved supervisor-staff relations, higher morale and increased productivity, the at-home work arrangement may actually help those who wish to advance in their careers within an organization by being more productive.

“Healthier organizations mean more productive employees.”

The Disadvantages of Telework

For workers, the main drawbacks of telework are:

- Critics also maintain that letting employees work from home should be avoided since it damages staff chances for promotion, undermines supervisor/subordinate relationships and increases family conflict. When staff aren't in the office, managers may consider them to be less loyal and committed. This may damage employee reputations as promotion-ready, only to be sidelined.
- The perception of being isolated from one's co-workers and organizational events is often cited as one of the drawbacks of telework. Some may prefer face-to-face interaction with colleagues and supervisors on an on-going basis. As the **Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS)** notes, on a full-time basis, working from home can deprive workers of the interpersonal and professional benefits that result from ongoing interactions with co-workers, colleagues and mentors. It can also limit the workers' access to professional development activities, and the ability to contribute ideas to the organization. (<http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/telework.html>)

For organizations, the main drawbacks of telework are:

- Employers may be concerned that at-home workers are more easily distracted by family and social obligations and opportunities, perhaps doing less in a day and negatively affecting business results.
- Telework is obviously not suitable for all positions or types of work. A substantial number of employees may be deemed ineligible to participate in telework programs because their jobs require them to be in the office (e.g. medical and clerical staff) or at a certain place (e.g. remote workers). Employees may not be eligible because they handle sensitive/classified information.
- As with any remote telecommunications capacity, organizations have to be prepared to ensure that the appropriate security measures are in place and are used. If an organization fails to take a number of simple precautions, unchaining its employees from their desks could leave the IT manager and services with a serious security headache. Additional IT support can increase organizational costs associated with telework.

Are Teleworkers Safe?

As the **Industrial Accident Prevention Association (IAPA)** notes, teleworking can also keep workers safer and healthier. For example, by reducing driving hazards and exposure to infectious illness in the workplace. But if not properly implemented and managed, the IAPA stipulates that teleworking can expose workers to additional hazards, most normally associated with any kind of office work.²

In addition, telework raises questions as to how employers can respect teleworkers' privacy, while ensuring at the same time they maintain safe working environments. Most definitions of 'workplaces' under Canadian occupational health and safety legislation appear to include a location in the home where an employee is working for an employer. For this reason, an employer is obligated to ensure that the employee's working environment is as safe and healthy as that normally found in its premises.

IAPA itself has a number of employees who use a home office as their primary workspace. IAPA's response to the privacy/due diligence challenge was to devise a series of home office guidelines and support systems for teleworkers, who in turn are responsible for implementing them. As part of any written policy on telework, organizations should have specific guidelines in place outlining how health

² *Are your teleworkers safe?*, Accident Prevention E-News, IAPA, March 2007 · Volume 2· Issue 3

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and safety requirements in the home office are to be met and maintained. Similar to hazards found in most offices, a thorough assessment of the work space used for telework should be undertaken. For example, some of the more common office hazards include:

☞ **ergonomic considerations such as the work station layout, chairs, noise and lighting**

As in any office, ergonomic considerations are very important to ensure that employees do not develop health concerns such as those related to repetitive strain injuries, computer vision syndrome, chronic headaches, etc. Ergonomics is all about adjusting the workplace to the needs of the worker, and generally is the greatest issue for office workers. For this reason, computer work stations need to have adjustability for chairs, keyboard trays, monitor heights, etc. As required under occupational health and safety standards, there also needs to be adequate lighting, as well as no exposure to excess environmental noise in the work area. Preferably, the work area should be designed so as to maximize the benefits of access to available natural lighting.

☞ **temperature and humidity**

Normally, there should be sufficient interior temperature control to maintain reasonable and comfortable temperature ranges during cold and hot periods. Humidity levels may be a concern.

☞ **ventilation and indoor air quality (IAQ)**

In office environments, a majority of workers spend all of their time indoors. As in any office building, adequate ventilation and IAQ can be a concern. The work area needs to be maintained and cleaned properly, and it is preferable to have adequate ventilation to outside air. Work areas with good office equipment and ventilation maintenance practices will decrease the likelihood of exposure to unhealthy airborne particulates, odours and high dust levels.

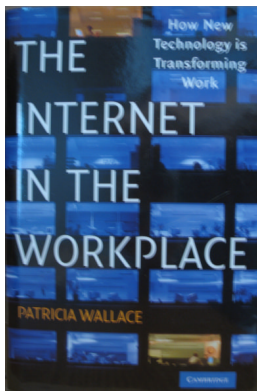
☞ **fire and electrical**

Basic electrical safety should be practised (e.g. no overloading of electrical outlets), thereby ensuring that there are no potential fire hazards in the immediate work area.

☞ **slips, trips and falls**

Through simple good housekeeping practices, the work area can be kept free of any slip, trip and fall hazards.

Recommended Reading:



“The Internet in the Workplace”

(How New Technology is Transforming Work)

by Patricia Wallace

(Cambridge U. Press, Cambridge, UK, 2004)

Recommended Web Sites:

- ◆ Telework/Telecommuting Questions and Answers, Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety: <http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/telework.html>
- ◆ Accident Prevention E-News, IAPA, March 2007 · Volume 2· Issue 3: http://www.iapa.ca/Main/apmag/2007_ enews_mar.aspx#c

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