Editorial Preface

Special Issue on Telecommuting and Virtual Offices

Nancy J. Johnson, Guest Editor
Metropolitan State University

Telecommuting: Not Whether to Do it, but When?

It is difficult to pick up a business magazine or newspaper today without reading about an organization offering telecommuting and virtual offices for remote workers. The idea is spreading quickly as technology and telecommunications advances make it feasible and affordable for employees to work at home, on the road, or on the customer site. Employers are constantly searching for means to attract and retain good employees, as well as ways to trim overhead costs of office space. Telecommuting offers a possible resolution to cramped office space and increasing employee satisfaction. The ‘electronic cottage’ predicted by Alvin Toffler is coming to fruition and creating as much satisfaction as frustration.

The Families and Work Institute recently released a report stating that Americans are being asked to work longer hours (3.5 hours more per week on average in the past 20 years) and take more work home. However, offering telecommuting as an option for increasing flexibility in start and end times of work, as well as locations of work, increases the satisfying personal control and choice aspects of work for the employee as well as significantly reducing commuting time and expense. While the benefits of telework for organizations and employees are easy to recognize, the resistance is primarily coming from managers who are forced to change their managing paradigms and the explicit/implicit contracts with subordinates. Understanding the real costs for infrastructure support and potential downsides for implementing programs is not as well understood.

Why should academic researchers and educators study the effects of telecommuting on workers, organizations, and employees? Academics have always been accidental teleworkers working from their homes and at other sites gathering research data or at conferences, but haven’t been called teleworkers formally. Remote work is an implied part of any academic job but with few articulated expectations in work load or infrastructure support. Educators and administrators are redefining what constitutes work in terms of outcomes, not location of delivery, when advising and teaching over the Internet, or communicating from a dial up laptop connection. Without a solid base of grounded theory developed from scholarly research, telecommuting programs will be implemented without a clear understanding of what works and what doesn’t. The popular media creates falsely optimistic or gloomy scenarios of the success and failure of programs based on biased anecdotal evidence without providing enough factual information for a reader to draw a meaningful conclusion.

Organizations need to be cognizant of the infrastructure support needed to successfully implement telecommuting programs: human resource policies on employee selection for eligibility, information systems hardware/software/telecommunications network support, manager training, employee work contract models, employee technical self sufficiency training/education, risk/liability management for off-site workers, legal/insurance issues, data safety precautions, redefining compensation systems to accommodate off site work schemes and realistic cost/benefit models. Launching into programs without planning is a sure way to create dissension and failure. Lack of awareness of potential pitfalls will only serve to derail programs when encountering normal resistance or overly enthusiastic expectations are not met. The additional strain on technical employees for setting up and supporting home offices and laptop communications is usually much greater than anticipated.

Employees are not all pre-disposed to successfully work in isolation with self direction and motivation, just as not all managers are ready to realign their thinking and managing styles for workers who are out of sight. Human resources departments will have to develop screening and evaluation tools to identify the most appropriate employees and job positions for telework situations. Orientation programs for the open collar employees to introduce the potential benefits and stumbling blocks of telework are needed to ensure that the best solutions are chosen for the employee and the department (not the least of which are zoning ordinances and proximity to the refrigerator!). Managers need training, too, to understand the concept of contracting for outputs of knowledge workers instead of managing by time in seat observation. The social networks of the on-site offices may be disrupted by physically absent employees.

Communities are also affected by telecommuting pro-
grams in unexpected ways. Idyllic remote towns may want to attract telecommuters to live there, but massive improvements in communications infrastructures require investments and maintenance to sustain feasible telework arrangements. Zoning may have to be adjusted to allow for work at home. Downtown support businesses may be adversely affected when significant portions of resident workers are sent out on the road or home. The positive side of reducing the traffic congestion and pollution may be offset by the costs to the restaurant and parking ramp operators.

Some organizations have created guides based on their own experiences to share with other interested firms (e.g., State of Minnesota Department of Administration, http://www.state.mn.us/ebbranch/admin/ipo). These experiences and others serve to help organizations from starting programs off poorly, but a solid base of theory still needs to be developed. There is a wide range of topics still to be explored and researched by scholars and practitioners.

Conferences on the theme of telecommuting (The Third International Workshop on Telework is being held in Turku, Finland in September of 1998) as well as special topic journal editions (such as this one) widen the range of dissemination venues for research studies. Consulting opportunities abound as organizations seek advice on successful implementation strategies.

The articles in this special issue provide guidance for further research and implementation of telecommuting programs. These articles reflect different aspects and current views of the topic. Ruppel and Howard, for example, explored telework/telecommuting in the IS profession via a national survey of IS executives and senior managers to find out why the adoption rate has been so much lower than expected. This group was selected because of the serious shortage of professionals and the desire of firms to recruit and retain them through innovative benefits such as telecommuting. The results of the study were that environmental factors such as competitor’s use of telecommuting and legislative mandates were found to be significantly related to adoption of telework. External corporate communication and competitor’s use of telework were significantly related to the diffusion of telework.

McCloskey, Igbaria and Parasuraman explored gender differences for telecommuters and found no significant differences other than the number of hours spent in eldercare responsibility and salary. Despite the expectation that there would be differences, both men and women in this study demonstrated an equity of work experiences.

Kavan and Saunders examined the adoption of alternative work arrangements from the perspective of managers in a corporation. They found that employee approval and the sustainability of the programs consistently correlated to the likelihood of adoption. Other results indicated that managerial training and support were critical for the success of teleworking programs.

Guthrie and Pick studied the ethical scenarios arising in telework environments. They surveyed Los Angeles managers and professionals for their reactions to 18 situations. Interestingly, the level of responsibility, experience with telework, or gender do not affect the liberalism or traditionalism of views. This result implies that the implementation of a program will not create new ethical issues or change the views of the individuals participating in the programs.

Dixon and Webster investigated the family structure effects resulting from a family member telecommuting. Not surprisingly, the higher the level of organizational support, the lower the stress level for the telecommuter. Stress was not significantly different for telecommuters and office bound employees. The limits of the small number of cases studied creates many further research opportunities on sources of stress in workers with family responsibilities. Organizations are awakening to the reality that the wholeness of employee’s lives is critical to support for optimal abilities to work effectively.

The evolution of employee’s and manager’s expectations, accelerated by the advances in portable technology platforms and telecommunications connectivity options, will cause the teleworking option to expand exponentially, and require constant examination and evaluation to ensure full value for it use. The better the possibilities are understood, the better the usage will be. The question is no longer whether or not to telecommute, but rather when to start.

Nancy J. Johnson is the guest editor of this special edition of The Journal of End User Computing. She is an assistant professor of MIS at Metropolitan State University, Minneapolis, MN. Her research interests include human factors in MIS, use of IT in the public sector, and failures of IT implementation projects. Prior to academic life, she spent 20 years as a practitioner in the public and private sectors, in IS and as an end user manager, in banking and consulting.