Preface

In assembling a book about telecommuting, the scope of the stakeholders offers many venues for analysis and exploration. The growth of employees interested in telework is not limited to the US, and is growing as quickly as the technology advances in portable computing and telecommunications. Communities, employers and employees are all venturing into uncharted territories of working independently and away from corporate center face-to-face interaction and support. Learning curves are steep, grounded in experiences that are examined and refined, as well as learning from other organizations that have tried it and are still doing it. Employees are now routinely asking for the option as a condition of employment.

The definition of telecommuting is elusive at best. Each organization and employee has a different perception of the characteristics of the structure of it as well as a myriad of names for it: telematics, virtual offices, mobile workers, home workers, and more. Does it mean working at home a few days a week or completely? Does it mean working out of a hotel or car while visiting customer sites? How is the nature of work output changed for an information worker as compared to the industrial era model of the employee chained to the means of production (e.g., a loom or a lathe)? Many managers are still grounded in managing by walking around (MBWA) and are extremely uncomfortable with the notion that a worker could be productive working out of view. Yet, this discomfort exists for managing information workers in the office too and managers are slow to shift evaluation paradigms and management styles.

Employers are faced with unexplored issues of responsibility and liability for offsite employees’ health, as well as deploying thousands of dollars of equipment to employees traveling through airports and in vehicles. Servicing
the equipment, protecting the data on it and ensuring ease of use/quick problem resolution for employees pushes against the assumptions of ease associated with stewardship of in-office employees and equipment. Ergonomic issues arise in any work setting, and access security to databases is a threat all the time. Labor unions are seeing potential for exploitation of employees, as well as inconsistent organizational expectations for teleworkers.

Communities are challenged to reduce traffic/parking congestion, improve the quality of life in residential areas, reduce pollution from cars, and attract competent workforces for local employers. Telecommuting offers reductions to many of these concerns, but requires communities to examine/upgrade zoning ordinances regarding working out of homes, traffic patterns, public transport options, telecommunication infrastructures (or lack of them), and support networks in the communities for teleworkers.

The authors in this book provide answers and guidance for many of the problems associated with introduction of telecommuting, and suggest many topics for more research. Learning from experience has been the mode for many employers and employees, and examination of these experiences with the rigor of academic study benefits all concerned. An academic perspective in the investigation is appropriate because professors have been ‘accidental telecommuters’ for many years (in the sense that Anne Tyler, in her book The Accidental Tourist, used to describe the traveler who didn’t want to travel in the first place but had to for work). Academics quickly learn that a home office is necessary to have a peaceful setting for writing, especially at non-standard working hours and frequently have better computer equipment than the university, due to budget constraints, can provide. Academics frequently work in collaboration with colleagues far distant, and were early adopters of the Internet to share information and papers. Academics are also being driven to offering classes in a distance education delivery model to meet the needs of nontraditional students who are working from their own homes or from the road, at non-standard class hours.

The practitioner perspective in research is also important because the world of theory only has tangential connections to the reality of today’s workplace: working smarter with fewer employees, globalization of multinational firms, serving the customer’s needs (not the employee’s wishes), keeping up with the accelerating pace of technological change and finding and keeping good employees in a tight labor market. The employer’s voice of experience is critical in balancing the academic studies of different aspects of telecommuting.

This book presents the best work of a wide variety of authors and styles: practitioners and academics, US and internationally based, formal studies and
case studies and information from the perspective of the community, the employer and the employee.

In the community section, the legal aspects of offering the programs are explored by Baruch and Smith. While based in England, the issues are universal. The potential for telecommuting in Ireland contrasted to the actual rate of adoption is discussed by Adam and Crossan. Establishing and running a national promotion center for telework in the Netherlands is presented by de Bruin. Tackling the thorny issue of using public telephone network infrastructure for telecommuters is done by Bumblis.

Henquinet provides guidance on the selection of the right employee for telework, and Platt and Page provide tips for managing the virtual team of telecommuting employees. Harrington and Ruppel examine organizational style as a factor in measuring the potential for successful telecommuting programs. St. Amant addresses the awareness needed for effective intercultural communication in global organizations. Johnson provides a case study of an international insurance firm that has refined its virtual office program over six years of use.

From the perspective of the employee, Pinsonneault and Boisvert review the effects of telecommuting on both the individual and the organization. Staples addresses improving the effectiveness of offsite workers, and Rodstein and Watters describe ergonomic issues for all employees. McCloskey skewers the myths that have evolved about telework through a formal study.

The authors open a Pandora’s box of many more issues ripe for further study and examination. Through sharing of knowledge in formal and informal channels, employers, employees and communities will increase their effectiveness in supporting this new paradigm of working environments.

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