Chapter XII

Telework: A Guide to Professional Communication Practices

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the emergence of telework or telecommuting and the need to rethink professional communication practices for this remote working arrangement. The chapter conceptualizes variations of telework and discusses distinctions within the telework arrangement in light of its impact on communication. Furthermore, the chapter lays the groundwork for effective employment of telework by discussing the importance of communication during design of the system, as well as the importance of communication while engaged in telework from both task-oriented and personal interactions perspectives. Case scenarios are used to illustrate key considerations and to begin a dialogue between teleworkers and those who manage them.
Introduction

According to a recent report published by the U.S. Census Bureau:

“Efforts to describe the American economy over the last quarter century have generated terms such as post-industrial, service-oriented, information-based, and more recently, a plethora of e-terminology. These terms capture not only the technological advances, but also economic and social changes that have transformed our way of life—both at work and at home.” (Kuenzl & Reschovsky, 2001, p. 1)

One manifestation of these changes has been the emergence of telecommuting or telework. While statistics can significantly vary depending upon how remote work arrangements are conceptualized, Telework America estimated that as many as 28 million Americans worked from home, in satellite offices or telecenters, from the road, or in some combination of these remote locations in 2001 (Davis & Polonko, 2001). Why the boom in alternate work arrangements? The traditional case for teleworking has always been relatively straightforward. For the organization, it has been promoted as a way to increase productivity, attract and retain qualified personnel, reduce absenteeism, reduce facility costs, address larger environmental issues such as air pollution and congestion among our roadways, and be more socially responsive to the needs and preferences of its workforce. For the employee, it has been a way to reduce commuting time, improve flexibility, have better control over work schedules, better meet dependent care needs, and reduce stress. And while these arguments for remote work arrangements remain valid, according to a recent study by AT&T, the real “business drivers” for telework in today’s marketplace are “better technology, globalization, and cost pressures” (2003, p. 1).

With standard business practices so rapidly changing, the trend toward increased numbers of employees engaged in telework is expected to rise. While it is important to understand the motivating business forces behind the trend, and equally important to understand the current technologies that enable the arrangement, one must also take into consideration the importance and shifts in workplace communication. To address these concerns, this chapter will: 1) conceptualize the telework arrangement; 2) discuss distinctions within the telework arrangement in light of its impact on communication; and 3) lay the groundwork for an effective telework arrangement by discussing the importance of communication during design of the system, as well as the importance of communication from task-oriented and personal interactions perspectives.
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