Chapter XI

An Examination of the Work Outcomes of Professionals in a Virtual Organization

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Although there has been plenty of speculation, little empirical research has addressed the impact of telecommuting on the work outcomes of professionals. This research proposes that telecommuting will have an impact on a number of work characteristics and experiences, including autonomy, work-family conflict, role ambiguity and role conflict, which will in turn impact three critical work outcomes: job satisfaction, career advancement prospects and turnover intentions. Data was collected from 89 professionals who telecommute and 71 professionals from similar job types who chose not to telecommute. Contrary to popular opinion, telecommuting was not found to have a significant impact on the studied variables. These findings are discussed and the chapter concludes with study limitations and directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

The popular press has heralded the “virtual organization” as the solution to many of today’s most pressing concerns. Organizational, individual and societal advantages may result from telecommuting. By allowing employees to work anytime, anywhere, the organization will be able to reduce costs, increase productivity and improve retention. The increase in flexibility will allow employees to balance work and family commitments, which will contribute to increased job satisfaction and reduced stress. By allowing employees to eliminate commuting, this work arrangement will also result in less pollution and a cleaner environment.

Although rarely acknowledged, there is a dark side of the telecommuting phenomenon. It has been suggested that telecommuting could actually have very negative effects on the work experiences and outcomes of participants. Employees who work from home may lose contact with peers and supervisors. Because they are isolated, telecommuters may no longer be thought of for promotions and for
interesting and challenging projects. The inability to separate work from home may cause telecommuters to overwork, experience additional stress and eventually burnout. Telecommuting may contribute to loneliness and isolation, exploitation, increased stress and limited career advancement prospects.

Such negative experiences may cause employees to stop telecommuting. Retention of telecommuters is very important because there may be substantial organizational costs to establishing a telecommuting program, including such things as equipment and training. Many large organizations, including AT&T, IBM and Lucent Technologies, provide telecommuting employees with laptops, dedicated phone lines, software support, fax/printer units, help lines and full technical backup (Apgar, 1998). Each corporation will spend an average of $8.5 million on remote network access by 1998 (Managing Office Technology, 1997). The pay back period for one telecommuter could be 30 months or more (Fryxell, 1994). Due to the high cost of implementation, it is very important for managers to understand factors that may contribute to dissatisfaction and turnover for telecommuters. Additionally, it is important for practitioners to understand and minimize the potential negative outcomes so that they can continue to encourage employee participation.

According to a survey conducted by CyberDialogue, there were 15.7 million telecommuters in the U.S. in 1998 (Gordon, 1998). Telecommuting is expected to grow in the U.S. by 15% annually (Managing Office Technology, 1997). Given the continued growth of telecommuting and the potential advantages this work arrangement offers, there is a need to fully understand its effect on work outcomes. This research addresses this need by exploring whether telecommuting has an impact on work characteristics and experiences, which in turn impact three critical work outcomes, job satisfaction, career advancement prospects and turnover intentions.

**PROPOSED MODEL**

**Antecedents to Job Satisfaction**

Although telecommuting is generally believed to result in increased job satisfaction, empirical research has never established that there is a difference in the job satisfaction of professional employees who telecommute and those who choose not to telecommute. Additionally, research has also never addressed the way in which this work arrangement contributes to increased job satisfaction. This research proposes that telecommuters will have higher job satisfaction than non-telecommuters due to increased autonomy and reduced role ambiguity, role conflict and work-family conflict.

Autonomy is the degree to which a job provides freedom, independence and discretion in the completion of work (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Telecommuting is generally believed to increase autonomy by providing flexibility and control over the completion of work. A professional employee in the traditional office environment may have control over the prioritization of work. If this employee chooses to telecommute she/he will experience additional autonomy. The employee still has control over the prioritization of work, but now the employee may also choose when and where the work will be completed. Telecommuting provides professional employees with additional control and discretion over the completion of work,
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