Chapter VII

Telecommuter Selection: A Systems Perspective

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ABSTRACT
This chapter presents a conceptual framework for the telecommuter selection process. The framework uses a systems perspective to identify critical variables and relationships in selecting effective telecommuters. The purpose of the model is twofold: to assist managers and organizations in developing selection procedures and to identify opportunities for future research.

INTRODUCTION
Organizations experiment with telecommuting to save costs, increase employee satisfaction, improve productivity, tap nontraditional labor pools, and for many other reasons (Apgar, 1998; DiMartino, 1990; Greengard, 1994; Kugelmass, 1995; Piskurich, 1996). In a 1997 survey by Robert Half International, 35 percent of the respondents predicted there would be a strong increase in the number of telecommuting employees in their organization and 52 percent indicated some increase in telecommuting (Messmer, 1998). In the United States, telecommuting is becoming more common in the private sector and federal, state and local government units are implementing telecommuting programs at a significant rate (Mahfood, 1994; McCune, 1998; Pynes, 1997). Given the predicted growth of telecommuting, effective telecommuter selection will become more important in the future.

While telecommuting in the broadest definition includes workers in any remote location, much of the writing focuses on employees who perform jobs from home (Mahfood, 1994). The term telecommuting is often synonymous with terms such as teleworking and homeworking. The three terms will be used interchangeably and the focus will be on individuals who are employed by an organization but work at home on a full- or part-time basis. This is a distinctly different context than mobile workers who may use client offices, remote/satellite work centers, or their cars and hotel rooms for work tasks (Chapman, Sheehy, Heywood, Dooley, & Collins, 1995; Greengard, 1994; Kugelmass, 1995).

This chapter provides a conceptual framework for telecommuter selection. A systems perspective identifies critical variables and relationships to help develop better selection procedures and to suggest opportunities for research.

A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

A review of the current literature indicates the advantages of taking a systems perspective of the selection process. This approach emphasizes the interactive and dynamic aspects of organizational activities as they relate to telecommuting (Chapman et al., 1995). Schuler and Jackson (1996, p. 259) note that selection “must be congruent with the internal and external environment, integrated with other human resource activities, and done in a manner consistent with legal regulations.”

Baruch and Nicholson (1997), in a study of homeworking in the UK, stress the need to focus on four realms: the job, the individual, the home/work interface and the organization. Moorcroft and Bennett (1995) succinctly state the need for the right people, the right managers, and the right jobs.

Successful performance is determined in great part by the work context. For the telecommuter selection process to be effective, it is important to look not only at employee characteristics but also to examine job characteristics, supervisor characteristics, and organizational support systems. Figure 1 illustrates how these four elements can be aligned to ensure a comprehensive and effective selection process.

Employee Characteristics

Desirable employee characteristics are often the first topic in telecommuter selection discussions and that results in a profile of the ideal telecommuter.
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