Chapter XI

Making Remote Workers Effective

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ABSTRACT

The use of telecommuting is lower than expected because of manager resistance. This chapter describes research conducted to identify two things: (1) the key issues of working and managing remotely, and (2) the activities that employees and managers should do to increase the effectiveness of remote employees. Three major categories of activities were identified. The first deals with the employee’s ability to carry out the right tasks and the manager’s ability to assess the employee’s effectiveness. The second category reflects the essential role information technology plays in enabling remote work. The third category deals with the employee’s need for advice and support. Suggestions are provided for how organizations can make the activities more common. If organizations do this, the potential of telecommuting and virtual office arrangements will be more fully reached as remote employees become more effective and resistance to these new forms of working decreases.

Advances in information technology (IT) are making it possible for more people to work remotely from their main office, co-workers, and managers.

As a result, telecommuting and working from a virtual office are becoming more common. In the past decade or so, there has been some research on telecommuting to understand the practice of working remotely from the main office (e.g., Baruch & Nicholson, 1997; Dixon & Webster, 1998; Fritz, Narasimhan & Rhee, 1998; Guthrie & Pick, 1998; Igbaria & Tan, 1998; Kavan & Saunders, 1998; McCloskey, Igbaria & Parasuraman, 1998; Neufeld, 1997; Ruppel & Howard, 1998). These changing work practices are challenging traditional organizational designs and practices.

Managing employees who are located remotely from their manager is a key issue in telecommuting and virtual organizational structures (Beyers, 1995; Kavan & Saunders, 1998; Tapscott & Caston, 1993). Managers’ roles are changing as traditional, hierarchical methods become inappropriate largely because distributed working arrangements make observing behavior more difficult or impractical (Grenier & Metes, 1995; Jenner, 1994; Lucas & Baroudi, 1994; Snell, 1994). The fear of lost managerial control is reported to be a significant factor in preventing widespread adoption of telecommuting by many researchers (e.g., DeSanctis, 1984; Duxbury, Higgins & Irving, 1987; Duxbury & Haines, 1991; Goodrich, 1990; Kavan & Saunders, 1998; Phelps, 1985; Risman & Tomaskovic-Devey, 1989; Roderick & Jelley, 1991). Learning how to manage remote employees well and how to make remote employees effective contributors to their organization should reduce this fear.

The study reported in this chapter adds to the understanding of managing and working remotely and provides guidance to organizations on how to do this better. The study was done in two phases. First, the key issues of working and managing remotely were identified, from both a manager’s and an employee’s perspective. Second, additional information was gathered to examine the effect of potential best practices and abilities on employee effectiveness. Combined, the information suggests important areas on which organizations should focus with regard to resource allocation and training and skill development of their managers and employees.

This chapter is organized as follows: Previous work relevant to remote work and management of these workers is reviewed. Then the methodology and results of the first phase of the study are presented, followed by the methodology and results of the second phase. The last section discusses the implications of the findings of both phases of research and offers suggestions for practitioners on how to improve their remote working environment.
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