Chapter XIII

Telecommuting Experiences and Outcomes: Myths and Realities

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ABSTRACT

There are many contradictions concerning expected telecommuting experiences and outcomes. At one extreme telecommuting is believed to benefit the employee by providing increased flexibility and job satisfaction and reduced stress. On the other extreme telecommuting has been said to result in very negative experiences and outcomes for employees including isolation, increased stress and limited career advancement opportunities. This research attempts to separate the telecommuting myths and realities by examining the impact of this work arrangement on work experiences and outcomes for professional employees. This research found telecommuting experiences and outcomes are largely positive for professional employees. The telecommuters reported significantly more autonomy, boundary spanning activities and career advancement prospects and significantly less time and strain-based work-family conflict than their non-telecommuting peers. The only negative experience that was found was that telecommuters received less...
career support than non-telecommuters. The lack of career support did not hinder career advancement prospects.

INTRODUCTION

Rarely has a work arrangement inspired as much anticipation and trepidation as telecommuting, a work option in which organizational employees work from home in lieu of the traditional workplace. Advertisers sell the flexibility and life balance that telecommuting will bring while editorialists forecast the isolation, overwork and stress that comes from the ability to work anytime, anywhere. Even researchers are divided on the potential outcomes of telecommuting. It has been suggested that telecommuting will increase flexibility and job satisfaction and reduce employee stress (DuBrin & Barnard, 1993). Conversely, other authors have implied that telecommuting has negative outcomes for employees, including loneliness and isolation (Lewis, 1997), increased stress and limited career advancement prospects (DuBrin & Barnard, 1993). Despite the mixed opinions concerning the outcomes of telecommuting, this work arrangement has experienced a tremendous amount of growth. According to a survey conducted by CyberDialogue, there were 15.7 million telecommuters in the US in 1998 (Gordon, 1998). It has been estimated that as many as 51% of all North American companies allow employees to telecommute through ongoing or pilot programs (McShulskis, 1998), and expansion is expected to continue. With the continued growth of this work option, it is imperative that the impact of telecommuting on work experiences and outcomes be addressed so that organizations can maximize the potential benefits and minimize the potential pitfalls. This research attempts to separate telecommuting myths from reality. This process begins by briefly examining why there are so many contradictions concerning telecommuting.

The primary cause for the numerous contradictions in telecommuting research is methodological issues. (For an in-depth discussion and an expanded literature review, please see McCloskey & Igbaria, 1998.) First, the definition of telecommuting varies widely. Farmers, self-employed people who work at home, people who manufacture shoes from home, business people who work at home in the evening and organizational employees who work at home in lieu of the office have all been characterized as “telecommuters.” Work experiences and outcomes would be expected to differ for such a diverse group, yet all too often they are combined under the
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