The Expert's Opinion

Keynote address to the 1994 Information Resources Management Association International Conference in San Antonio, Texas
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Telecommuting and Changing Workplaces

Emerging technologies provide us a view that the next evolution of worker-employer relationships will entail new workplace opportunities. This view is further supported by such considerations as employee morale, economic advantages, environmental considerations, geographic infrastructure limitations, disaster recovery, disabled employees and legal requirements. Additionally, the workplace is undergoing changes due to rapid advances in technology and government mandated shifts in employee transportation. According to Clean Air Act regulations, firms with greater than 100 employees will be required to increase their average vehicle occupancies (or reduce vehicles) in major cities by 1996. This will be accomplished through a variety of methods—car pooling, van pooling, bus service and, most importantly, telecommuting.

We are at the crossroads of the way corporations do work. It is a technology and cost driven-based atmosphere. Outsourcing is a standard option now for people producing work because of the speed of the change of technology. At Compaq we are doing lots of partnerships with corporations and universities and we do that so we don’t have to hire new people when the technology changes.

There are three drivers of change of the work place. Environmental, technology advances, and changing lifestyles of the workforce.

Environment

Environmentally, the Clean Air Act of 1990, which hardly anyone noticed when it passed, is presenting a tremendous influence on the way we do work. For example, Houston and Los Angeles were declared severe non-attainment zones for ozone, meaning that employers must have plans in place to limit the employees’ trips to work. Therefore, compliance with the Clean Air Act will increasingly be accomplished with a number of different technologies. Mass transportation will be part of it but more important things like flexible work schedules and telecommuting will work to achieve these numbers.

Technology

From a technological standpoint, the technology is much easier to use. It doesn’t take someone with a Masters or Ph.D. to use a computer anymore. Everyone can do it. Computing power, which is in everyone’s hands, has migrated down. This power has led to dial-up data communications. Clearly the fax has made a big difference. But so, too, has electronic mail and software like Lotus Notes™, video and data networking and voice response. I have traveled a lot over the past eight weeks and I have used every one of these technologies to stay in touch with my office. I get my voice mail three or four times a day, electronic mail, faxes and I talk to my secretary no matter where I am. Eventually, we can do this by video if we choose through technology that will allow us to have that application available on our laptop computers to take with us.

Lifestyle

Lifestyle changes have changed the way we do work. There is a high demand for higher quality life. That is good for us here in America. The Europeans figured out a long time ago that people can’t work all the time. Flexibility is becoming the key as there is an increased demand for part time and flex-time work. As our work force ages we don’t want to let that valuable resource go, but they don’t want to be at the office 50-60 or more hours a week. We can have access to those people through technology.

Telecommuting is a big buzz word now. It has been in the news a lot. Telecommuters aren’t just people who work at home but those linked to a company by modem, computer and very importantly, company interaction. There are many people who work at home that are connected by the technology, but the important thing is to be tied back to your company in some way.

Why telecommute? It reduces commuting time and saves money. It offers you flexibility and autonomy over your work environment. It reduces overhead cost for your employer because less workspace must be maintained. It offers compliance with environmental legislation in cleaning up the air because fewer cars are on the roads. Early
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