Work Ethic Differences Between Traditional and Telework Employees

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Over the past five years, reports on the gains associated with telework have been remarkable (Murphy, 1996; Hesse, et. al., 1991). Productivity can be increased by 30%, workers are more satisfied with their jobs and telework could reduce traffic and pollution problems. However, there is also research that speaks about the resistance to telework. Firms are reluctant to adopt telework programs and employees are reluctant to give up traditional work structures (Handy & Mokhtarian, 1995). Part of this reluctance can be described in terms of ethics and evolving behavioral norms. Telework is posing new questions about rules of conduct, work ethic and work privacy (Kurland, 1996). This study examines ethical scenarios that arise in telework environments. This study reports the ethical attitudes of 134 Los Angeles area managers and professionals on telecommuting scenarios. Eighteen ethical scenarios, Table 2, relating to freedom of work ethic, work place monitoring, compensation, work and family, and equity were posed. Results of the survey show that organizational level, telecommuting experience and gender issues do not strongly influence ethical decisions in the given scenarios. People at lower organizational levels do not appear to be any more traditional in their view on telework than people at higher organizational levels. People who had telecommuting experience were no more liberal in their work ethic views than those without telecommuting experience.

Throughout history, technological innovation has created conflict. In the late 1700s, Claude Chappe introduced the first optical telegraph system across France. Peasants, believing that the device was a spy mechanism destroyed several stations. Technology prevailed, and the optical telegraph was credited by Napoleon as helping him outwit his enemies because of its revolutionary, fast communication (Holzmann & Pehrson, 1994). Cashless society and electronic commerce offer new freedoms. However, people may sacrifice privacy about their buying preferences and become victims of massive target marketing campaigns.

Telework is work done remotely from an employee’s traditional workspace. This can include remote or home offices, airports and hotels. Four forms of telework identified by Gray, Markus, and PonTell (1996) are: (1) Home-Based Teleworking - Working from home; (2) Telework Centers - Working from a remote office as a secondary location to the traditional office. The center may have office support and technological links to the central office. The office space may be used by different people on a regular basis; (3) Found Alternative Workplaces - A virtual office. Hotel rooms, other firms, airports...etc.; (4) Designed Alternative Workplaces - High technology conference centers where dispersed employees meet: for example, Kinko’s teleconferencing centers. A person can telecommute a few days of the week or they can work remotely by him/herself.

The benefits of telework are higher productivity, job satisfaction and reduction of environmental problems (Murphy, 1996; Hesse, et al., 1991). Some of the disadvantages cited are loss of communication with a central office, fear of co-worker resentment and that telecommuting might hinder one’s professional development (DeSanctis, 1984).
In this paper, telework is defined as working from one’s home. The scenarios used in this paper assume that the person is a full-time employee or manager at a traditional organization and that they use their home as a remote office. As with all technological change, the emergence of telework is not without conflict. Companies are reluctant to adopt telework programs even though anecdotal evidence indicates higher productivity, cost savings and other advantages (Westfall, 1997). Flattened organizations, a trend towards employee empowerment and the emergence of knowledge workers are all factors that are forcing management to re-examine the traditional management activities. A manager today has a massive task in organizing hundreds of individuals into collaborative teams to advance organizational goals. An underlying key to this development is that of manager-employee trust. The reluctance of some firms to adopt telework programs may be an indication of their inability to transition into a different relationship with their employees (Ruppel & Harrington, 1995). While productivity demands specialists and knowledge work, a strong tradition of management by control is still evident.

This paper explores ethical issues of telework with eighteen ethical scenarios. The scenarios are deliberately vague to generate ideas and enable respondents to explore their beliefs about work and what corporate policies should encompass. The scenarios are useful in that they give us a descriptive, “snap shot” of ethical trends in technology.

Literature Review

Kurland (1996) points out that telecommuting was born because of air pollution and environmental mandates but today is justified on its own merits. She cites estimates in 1996 of 9.8 million formal or informal telecommuting households. This is a fifty percent increase in five years. The advantages of telecommuting include location of telecommuters physically close to customers, productivity increases due to greater autonomy, and less commuting. Companies have the added benefit of reduced real estate and other overhead costs. There are societal benefits from better air quality. Among the disadvantages are lack of career advancement, reduction in organizational loyalty. For women, telework implies that they mix child rearing and work obligations. Managers are faced with a problem monitoring teleworkers. How can productivity and performance be judged? One way is to evaluate measurable performance results, rather than using qualitative appraisal.

In the area of ethics, employees working remotely may take values with them that deprives the workplace remaining. How can the remaining organization avoid fragmentation of its ethical culture? Telework employees may be perceived by non-teleworkers as taking advantage of the company or not working a forty-hour week. Isolated employees may find it difficult to develop an ethical perspective on their own work because of a lack of interaction with the existing organizational culture.

Ruppel and Harrington (1995) studied telework using a survey of 252 IS departments and building upon innovation theory. Some benefits of telework cited are “coverage of difficult shifts, ability to meet temporary ad hoc needs, improved employee recruiting and retention, ease of business moves, ability to shift workload on mainframe computers to off hours, and continued operation in emergency situations.” The paper’s focus was on telework of programmer/analysts in several organizations and their assimilation of telework. Innovation theory implies two stages of adoption and infusion. Telework adoption was influenced by middle management support, higher administrative intensity, professionalism, and reduced centralization. In adoption, IS managers as “gatekeepers” are neglecting to foster telework. Telework infusion was favored by middle management support, administrative intensity, professionalism, and smaller firm size. Centralization was not a factor affecting infusion. Smaller IS departments may have more manageable projects for telework.

The findings suggest that telework is a bottom-up phenomenon, i.e. that it is not initiated by middle managers but by programmers/technical staff. Out of the respondent organizations, less than half were using telework, and only a small proportion of total programming was done through telework. This is the case even though the sample constituted an ideal job situation for telework, i.e. workers who are already highly computer oriented.

Ruppel and Harrington (1995) suggest that the flattening of organizational control may cause difficulties in the assimilation of telework. They conclude that telework is a bottom-up phenomena and that managers must support telework if it is to be a success. Managers need to see clear benefits and productivity gains if they are to support telework programs.

Recently a Conference Board study (N=155 firms) shows that even with 70 percent of firms offering telework options, only one percent of workers opted for telework. The main reason is that managers doubted telework employees could be productive without management supervision; employees perceived that managers are not supportive of telework.

Yap and Tig (1990) surveyed women computing professionals in Singapore on telecommuting views. This results may be somewhat limited, i.e. apply only to women computing professional teleworkers. They found that two thirds of respondents favored telecommuting and most preferred to telework 1-3 days per week rather than teleworking full time. They favored telecommuting during the life stage when they would have young children. They were concerned about losing rapport/interaction with the workplace. Respondents who were more interested in telecommuting were married, could do most of their work at home, were frustrated with the journey to work, and had supervisors/colleagues supportive of teleworking. Many respondents felt it would be difficult to focus on work with children at home.