Chapter VII

Trusting Remote Workers

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the nature of trust from a number of theoretical bases, with reference to remote workers more often referred to as teleworkers or telecommuters. It examines the relationship between a manager and the remote worker (teleworker). It is concerned with the nature and conditions of trust rather than an examination of the importance of trust or how trust can be created. As well as examining the bases of trust, the chapter examines different levels of trust that can support a teleworking relationship. It draws a distinction between individual and organizational trust and between the conscious and unconscious states of trust. It concludes with a conceptual model that provides a framework to explain some of the anomalies and confusion in the debate regarding the nature of trust in teleworking arrangements. The chapter also suggests how the model may be used to analyze trust in these remote working arrangements and as a framework on which to build trust using different bases and at different levels.

INTRODUCTION

As we move further into the 21st century, technology is providing the opportunity to work anytime and anywhere. There has been an increase in remote working (teleworkers) and virtual teams, which brings new challenges and opportunities for managers and employees. This phenomenon highlights and exacerbates existing tensions and issues. Trust is an issue that managers have wrestled with for decades but as location independent working becomes the norm, the issue of trust needs to be re-addressed. The importance of trust amongst a particular group of remote workers, known as teleworkers, has been noted by many authors (Handy, 1996; Huws, Korte, & Robinson, 1990; Olson, 1988). These authors suggest that the successful management of these remote workers requires trust and new forms of supervision and means trusting and empowering employees to complete the work when and where it suits them best (Korte, Steinle, & Robinson, 1988). Despite the fact that there are many who argue that trust is required for the successful
management of remote teleworkers, there has been very little discussion regarding the nature and condition of trust. Other studies concerned with trust and telework have not examined the nature of trust and have not clearly defined the type of trust that is necessary for remote working to be effective. Some authors have failed to recognize both the multidimensional nature of trust and the different levels of analysis of trust, referring to trust as if there is only one definition, one source, one type, and that trust has only one state. This chapter seeks to address this by examining the nature of trust from a number of theoretical bases including economics, sociology, philosophy, and psychology. It is not concerned with an examination of the importance of trust or how trust can be created but seeks to explore the nature and bases of trust between a manager and a remote teleworker. It draws a distinction between the conscious and unconscious states of trust and between individual and organizational levels of trust. The chapter finishes with a theoretical model that provides an explanatory framework for some of the confusion and inconsistencies in the trust debate regarding remote working arrangements. The model illustrates both the awareness level of trust and the type of trust that can exist in a remote working relationship. It suggests that the model may be used as a framework on which to build trust using different bases and at different cognitive levels as well as offering an analytical framework to examine trust in remote working.

TRUST AND TELEWORK

One of the difficulties in examining trust in telework is that not only are there a number of different opinions regarding the fundamental nature of trust but there are also a plethora of definitions of telework. Nilles, Carson, Gray, and Hanneman (1976) considered telework as working from home with electronic support. The time-space distantiatiion incorporated into telework practices provides a number of alternative work forms such as satellite centers, neighborhood work centers, and mobile work as well as home-based telework (Jackson & van der Weilen, 1998; Kurland & Bailyn, 1999). Many recent studies, (see, for example, Felstead et al., 2001) distinguish between two types of remote workers: the home based teleworker and the mobile teleworker. This chapter is concerned with both of these types of remote workers, as they are both located independently from the organizational office. However, for the purposes of discussion, the UK’s Labour Force Survey (LFS) definition of teleworkers as “people who do some paid or unpaid work in their own home and who use both a telephone and computer” will be used in this chapter. In addition, the employment relationship examined is that of an employee rather than a self employed teleworker.

The successful management of teleworkers requires trust and new forms of supervision that may be contrary to current practice (Huws et al., 1990; Olson, 1988). Most organizations tend to be arranged on the assumption that people cannot be relied upon or trusted (Handy, 1995) and this lack of trust by managers is frequently seen as a constraint on the development of telework, as trust requires a change in the way managers have traditionally managed. Remote working requires a new style of management and organizational culture that relies more on trust between the manager and employee and calls for productivity to be judged in terms of output or service delivery rather than the number of hours worked.

Trust can be seen by some managers as a contradiction in terms as it is both necessary and risky. It can be demonstrated that it is cheaper and more efficient to trust employees rather than regulate and control them, but it carries an element of risk. Furthermore, empowering employees by trusting them with more responsibility also requires them to be supplied with information that will allow them to make decisions. Handy (1995) argues that flexible working requires that management adopt a service role, supporting employees.
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