



TELECOMMUTING: THE NEW WORKPLACE BALANCING ACT

Working from home, also referred to as telecommuting or teleworking, has become strikingly common in recent years. About 9 million Americans telecommute—and the numbers seem to be increasing by more than 10 percent every year. A complex array of forces seem to be driving this trend, including the widespread use of fax machines, intranets, and other communications technology; the currently low unemployment rate; and a growing awareness of the importance of balance in people's work and home lives.

Telecommuting offers benefits for employers and employees alike. For employers struggling to retain high-quality workers in a tight labor market, the policy helps to attract and retain desirable personnel. It can also help trim overhead costs by saving on office space and, for some companies, office equipment. Because it reduces driving time, it demonstrates a company's commitment to protecting the environment. And finally, it can boost productivity. For employees, the policy offers flexible work hours, a healthier balance between office and home life, and an escape from the rush-hour grind and the distractions of the office.

A Dark Side?

Yet telecommuting also has its down side. Some managers are uncomfortable with what they see as a loss of control over workers. Employees whose jobs don't lend themselves easily to working from home can also become envious of what they consider a special arrangement made for their home-based colleagues.

For telecommuters themselves, being away from the office can prove isolating and lonely. Many people who work from home also express fears of being left out of important goings-on at the office, and of being skipped over for promotions because the company might view them as less committed to their jobs than their in-house colleagues.



Telecommuting can also be prohibitively expensive for some employees when companies don't pay for home office equipment and other work-related expenses.

Because many firms expect upper managers and executives to be at the office all the time, those who telecommute tend to come from the nonmanagerial ranks. They make less money than executives do, and if they're also footing the bill for office equipment and expenses, they may decide that working from home just isn't affordable.

Perhaps the biggest potential problem for telecommuters is what some call "the teleworkaholic syn-

drome," or a tendency to put in more and more hours at home on the job. This often occurs simply because telecommuters—freed from traveling to an office—can work longer hours from home. It can also arise when teleworkers put in more hours to assuage their guilt over colleagues' envy. Moreover, telecommuters may work longer hours in order to reassure skeptical managers that they really are getting the job done. Finally, the syndrome can become especially prevalent during times of corporate cost-cutting. As one management consultant observed, "With organizational loyalty low and the risk of being downsized high, many workers feel increased pressure to produce, produce, produce, and that is especially true of telecommuters. . . . Because they . . . may view telecommuting as a perk, they feel they have to always do more work in order to justify their situation. That leads to burnout and resentment." ■

Source: Matthew Brellis, "Beyond Lonely: Life as a Telecommuter," *The Boston Sunday Globe*, January 19, 1999.

—Lauren Johnson

YOUR WORKOUT CHALLENGE

Systems Thinking Workout is designed to help you flex your systems thinking muscles. In this column, we introduce scenarios that contain interesting systemic structures. We then encourage you read the story; identify what you see as the most relevant structures and themes; capture them graphically in causal loop diagrams, behavior over time graphs, or stock and flow diagrams; and, if you choose, send the diagrams to us with comments about

why the dynamics you identified are important and where the leverage is for making lasting change. We'll publish selected diagrams and comments in a subsequent issue of the newsletter. Fax your diagrams and analysis to (781) 894-7175, or email them to lauriej@pegasuscom.com. Remember, most situations can be examined at several levels of complexity—there's something here for beginners as well as for advanced practitioners.