Synthesis essay

WRTG 394

Teleworking

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The arrangement that an employee maintains with his or her supervisor has become more complex as the workplace has integrated more technology, as people's lives have become more demanding, as urban areas have become more congested, and as jobs have changed in their focus. As a result, teleworking has emerged as a popular alternative to working on-site for many companies and organizations. Various studies have been conducted on teleworking and its impact on employees and on employers as this trend has evolved. A review of the popular, trade, and scholarly literature on teleworking has shown three major categories: the impact of teleworking on employees who telework, the impact of teleworking on the social and working relationships among all workers, and management strategies and behaviors that influence the success of a teleworking arrangement.

The Impact of Teleworking on Employees who Telework

Studies show that teleworkers can feel isolated and detect increased demands on them as a result of teleworking. One common theme is stress. Teleworkers can "suffer from heightened stress and anxiety if it is not easy for them to switch off" (Crundon, p. 11). Such stress might be contributed to by longer work hours. Teleworkers are likely to work more hours and less likely to less likely to work a regular schedule (Noonan & Glass, 2012). In fact, Kossek, Thompson, and Lautsch (2015) shed light on both increased stress and longer work hours as they identified several "traps" that can ensnare teleworkers, including one of "altered work-life dynamics" (p. 7). Employees, they argue, can feel "isolated and distant from the social life of the firm" and, thus, not feel as much of a part of the organizational culture as non-teleworking employees do (p. 7). Furthermore, "job or family creep" can intensify with a teleworking arrangement, often caused by the inability to set boundaries between work and family lives (p. 8). In fact, "…heavier users of work-life flexibility supports actually experienced *increased* work-family

conflict" (p. 8). Thus, Kossek et al concluded that, while teleworking is often designed to reduce stress among workers, it can often increase stress among workers who are unable to separate work from family life in a clear fashion.

Teleworkers can also sense a different set of evaluation criteria than those of non-teleworking employees. Caillier (2013), in his study of teleworking federal employees, concluded that employees who chose not to telework did not report that they were being managed for results as much as teleworking employees reported. Cailler surmised that it is possible that teleworkers are evaluated more on "output-based controls," while non-teleworking employees are evaluated more on "behavior-based controls" (p. 650). It is possible that workers who telework face more pressure to produce results than employees who work on-site.

The Impact of Teleworking on Social and Working Relationships among Workers

The literature on the relationships between teleworkers and non-teleworkers is mixed. Some studies show a sense of unfairness on both sides, while other studies show that social and working relationships are not compromised when some employees telework and others do not. However, the results seem to be influenced by the level of intensity that an employee teleworks.

Some research indicates that tension can result when teleworking is offered. One of the "traps" that Kossek, Thompson, and Lautsch (2015) identified was the "fairness trap" (p. 8). Workers who do not telework can feel unfairly treated if others are allowed to. In such cases, a clear understanding of why it is allowed for some and not for others is needed. The authors maintain that, if an organization allows teleworking on a case-by-case basis and decides to allow teleworking for some employees who show a need for it, then employees who do not show an apparent need can feel slighted. An example they give is that, while one employee might have

elderly relatives to care for and be allowed to telecommute, another employee who has a pet to care for but might not be given the opportunity to telecommute.

In addition, employees working on-site can feel that more is demanded of them because they are not teleworking. Kossek, Thompson, and Lautsch (2015) noted that, at one high-tech company, employees were more likely to leave the company because of a perceived need that they had to be available for last-minute tasks due to the fact that they were working onsite. In addition, the authors found that employees felt that they had to be more flexible to arrange meetings around teleworkers' schedules and had to rely on more formal communication methods like email rather than face-to-face interactions when communicating with teleworking employees. The authors concluded, "…co-workers may resent any apparent favoritism by supervisors and any appearance that work is being transferred to them because of the flexibility-user's work arrangement" (pp. 9-10.)"

On the other hand, teleworking employees can feel a sense of unfairness because of a feeling of higher expectations and social isolation. Teleworking can result in increased expectations from management. Noonan and Glass (2012), note that "…the ability of employees to work at home may actually allow employers to raise expectations for work availability during evenings and weekends and foster longer workdays and workweeks." Moreover, Kossek, Thompson, and Lautsch (2015) argue that the physical separation that employees who work from home feel from employees who work in the office can lead to a sense of lower respect among colleagues and management. In an analysis of two high-tech companies, they found that the physical distance teleworkers maintained "reduced the amount that individuals working flexibly felt respected, and in turn made them feel less like full members of the organization" (p. 7). This effect is most likely contributed to by the lack of immediacy that teleworkers discern. Caillier

(2013) notes that, because they "do not receive the same amount of face-to-face contact as traditional workers,…a lot of information teleworkers receive is sent through less rich mediums" (p. 641).   Thus, teleworking employees can sense that higher expectations are placed upon them with lower quality communication channels available to them.

However, Gajendron and Harrison (2007) found that social relationships among fellow workers were not compromised as a result of the opportunity for some employees to telework. They noted that, in their analysis, "being a commuter does not appear to damage social ties with others at work" (p. 1535). However, it should be noted that their study did show that the intensity with which an employee teleworks can "amplify a negative or damaging effect of telecommuting on coworker relationship quality" (p. 1535). They defined high-intensity telecommuting as working from home more than 2.5 days per week. Thus, their study did indicate that negative repercussions can occur among employees as a result of teleworking, but the frequency with which an employee teleworks seemed to be the pivotal factor. Their results are echoed by those of Torten, Reaiche, and Caraballo, who concluded that "The most significant effect on teleworking success was demonstrated by the number of days worked per week" (p. 325).

Overall, some research shows that a lack of inclusion can create resentment from teleworkers toward those who are able to work onsite, while a sense of unfairness can pervade the sentiments of employees working onsite toward those who are allowed to telework. Other studies conclude that such resentment does not necessarily result from teleworking but that high-intensity teleworking demonstrates a higher propensity for such conflict than low-intensity teleworking.

Management Strategies for Supervisors Overseeing Teleworking Arrangements

The dynamics mentioned above lead to the conclusion that supervisors have to manage the teleworking arrangement effectively in order to experience positive results with it. Management has to be clear on its criteria for establishing teleworking policies, effective in its methods of including teleworkers in the day-to-day operations of the office, and generous in the training offered for teleworkers.

The literature suggests that teleworking should be allowed based on ability and experience, not on personal need.   Kossek, Thompson, and Lautsch (2012) warn, "Managers should not let an employee's family status factor into the decision-making process when considering whether to offer workplace flexibility to employees" (p. 9).   Daniels supports this notion as well, maintaining that teleworking should be an earned privilege (as cited in Freifeld, 2014).

Moreover, management can help create a successful teleworking arrangement by including teleworkers in the day-to-day operations of the workplace. Crunden (2016) maintains that teleworkers' must "feel like they are part of a cohesive team" and that they should be included "even where last-minute ad hoc meetings are arranged" (p. 11). In fact, Daniels argues that the level of engagement that employees sense is not determined by whether or not the organization allows teleworking but rather by "management systems and behaviors" (as cited in Freifeld, 2014, p. 16).

This concept leads to another important characteristic of effective teleworking arrangements: training. Yost recommends a combination of in-person or Web-based training meetings (as cited in Friefeld, 2014), while Stanley confirms, "We see more success in organizations that train managers, telecommuters, and co-workers in some aspect of teleworking

policy, organizational culture, and senior management's views on this way of working" (as cited in Freifeld, 2014, p. 11).

Conclusion

The literature on teleworking shows that employees who telework can feel isolated and can often sense a higher set of expectations put on them than those that are put on non-teleworking employees. However, analysis also shows that non-teleworking employees detect unfair treatment if the guidelines for when to allow teleworking are not clearly defined. Moreover, non-teleworking employees can feel that more is expected of them than is expected of teleworking employees because non-teleworking employees are working on-site. It is interesting to note that both groups can feel that more is expected of them, but for different reasons. The frequency with which an employee teleworks seems to have an impact on the significance of such tension.

Management can help create a successful teleworking arrangement by setting clear guidelines on who is allowed to telework when and by providing training on how to telework. Research indicates that training programs result in increased levels of success for companies and organizations that allow employees to work from a distance.

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