

REMOTE WORK: IS IT REALLY THE BEST OPTION FOR EMPLOYEES?

ENG W270: THIRD PLACE

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In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic swept over the United States forcing nearly every company to close their doors or adopt a distanced working environment to ensure that the safety of their employees was met. Since the adoption of this working arrangement, public surveys show that individuals prefer to do their job from the comfort of their home and will only work for companies that accommodate that desire (Cramer & Zaveri, 2020, par. 5). Many employees will argue that since working from home, their work life has not only balanced, but ultimately improved. This new inclination has left thousands of employers at a dead end – adopt the principles of a remote-work environment or lose valuable employees across the board. What should they do? Without creating a strong working foundation, businesses are setting their employees up for a lack of career development and ultimately professional failure. Unlike a remote-work environment, a hybrid-work setting partially accommodates the remote-work desire while ensuring that the value of a traditional office setting is maintained. Employers should consider implementing a hybrid-work arrangement rather than a permanent remote-working arrangement as the traditional interaction of an office setting is preserved which can lead to improved rates of productivity, employee well-being, and team development.

Formal Work From Home Arrangements Lack Incentive

Contrary to what people may believe, there are several types of working arrangements that can be implemented amongst

employees, two of the most popular being informal and formal. An informal working arrangement is an agreement upon the department manager, supervisor, and employee and only to be implemented on an as needed basis (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017, pp. 1052). Whereas a formal working arrangement is an agreement determined by the Human Resources Department and employee which is put into place through documented paperwork (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017, pp. 1052). Usually when a formal working arrangement is set into place, companies will find that it is harder to reverse due to the employee contract that implements this agreement when the employee starts a position. In 2017, a study conducted by a group of professors with a PhD in Operational Management and Organizational Behavior found that an employee with a higher sense of control regarding where they can work and when they can work is more likely to have an increased sense of organizational commitment (De Menezes & Kelliher, pp. 1054). Allowing employees to work from home or flex their hours does not make a lousy employer nor does not allowing your employees to work from home or flex their hours. The issue is that employers need incentive outside of a weekly paycheck to keep their employees motivated. This theory is also known as the gift exchange theory (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017, pp. 1054). The basic principle of this theory is that when an individual is given incentive to complete a task, they are more likely to complete the task not only effectively but in a timely manner (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017, pp. 1054). Implementing a formal work arrangement lacks incentive because there is no reward for this arrangement. However, allowing a company to offer informal working arrangements drives incentive over the employees because this luxury is not guaranteed, but if earned, can relieve some of the added stress that employees argue is removed with working from home.

It Doesn't Actually Improve Your Work-Life Balance

While the trend of working from home is nothing new, the popularity of it has increased over the last two years. This increase has exposed thousands of employees to the benefits of working from the comfort of their own home. At the peak of COVID-19, *The New York Times* released an article showing that nearly “60% of Americans working from home preferred to continue working from home as much as possible, while the other 40% was eager to return back to office” (Cramer & Zaveri, 2020, par. 26). There are many obvious benefits of working from home – less commute time to and from work, more time to spend with family in the evenings, and even reduced stress of getting ready in the mornings – however, the downside of it can be detrimental. Emma Goldberg, editor for *The New York Times*, released an article this past August (2022) discussing the possible effects that companies could face without adopting a work from home arrangement. Employees like Christine Ratcliff and Patrick Kennedy argue that the benefits are not only an added bonus of working from home, but they also have improved their overall work-life balance (Goldberg, 2022). However, this statement is not entirely true. Working from home does not independently improve the balance of your work life. As studies have shown, there are several other factors that can either stabilize or destroy a work from home arrangement. The only way an employee's work life can be truly balanced is when the employer is clearly providing set instructions regarding the scope of work, feedback on performance, and overall expectation as well as ensuring that a structured working environment with little to no distractions is accessible (Rodrigues et. al., 2022, pp. 45). Without these factors, working from home can be detrimental to the employee's productivity and mental health.

Only Working From Home Increases Isolation

Even if employees think that working from home is helping their sense of balance, the reality is that it is increasing their isolation. According to Tulane University (2022), School of Medicine, isolation due to remote-working locations is one of the leading factors for increased rates of anxiety and depression amongst adults (par. 9). However, with the help of management, companies can limit these increased rates of anxiety and depression by implementing policies and procedures that do not allow employees to work from a remote location throughout the year. Unlike the common social groups that an employee would interact with on a daily basis in a traditional office setting, work from home jobs give employees less of an opportunity to interact with people outside of their family members and often detach them from society and into the four walls of their home. In efforts to limit the lack of interaction, people will often avoid paying for childcare to bridge the social gap and save a few extra dollars throughout the week.

According to a study done in Brazil by four psychologists (2020), procrastination and level of burnout are increased tremendously for an individual working from home with the distraction of children under the age of 14 (Arenas et. al., pp. 335). While the extra cash in your pocket is tempting, allowing young children to be present in the home while an employee is working is only debilitating their ability to perform productively and efficiently. Adding the outside stress factors of balancing an employee's career on top of their home life all at the same time is nearly impossible and impractical for an employer to allow.

With the dramatic increase in health risks, are we truly accommodating our employees by allowing them to work from home? The answer is no. The responsibility of an employer is to not only to the company but also to the employee by ensuring that their well-being is met, in addition to maintaining effective performance and productivity rates. When remote-work arrangements are established, employers

are failing their employee by allowing the mental state and physical well-being to slowly deteriorate with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout.

Providing Childcare while Working is Debilitating for Employees

With the transition to a complete remote-working environment, there is no greater temptation for a working parent than to eliminate childcare fees. In 2022, The New York Times published “The Office’s Last Stand”, emphasizing how employees not only enjoy working from home, but prefer it because they are allotted more time to be present with their families, especially their children (Goldberg, 2022, par. 21). The article later goes on to explain how employees feel that working from home during the pandemic has reshaped the norms of a workday in their favor (Goldberg, 2022, par. 32). While companies watch as employees eliminate or reduce this additional expense by allowing their children to stay home while working, employers are slowly reducing the rate of productivity amongst their teams. According to a study published in 2022, one of the five most detrimental factors of an employee’s level of productivity while working from home is the lack of a stable, distraction-free environment in which to work (Rodrigues et. al., 2022, pp. 45). In some cases, the employee is lucky enough to have a designated space to work from such as a home office, but there is no guarantee that their children are completely isolated from them for eight hours out of the day. Not to mention the cases where employees are not as lucky and are forced to work in a family-shared setting like the kitchen or living room. Many might argue that the simple fix to this issue is to ban all children from their homes while their parent is working throughout the day, but it is simply unrealistic and almost impossible to enforce. By not forcing employees into office several times throughout a monthly period, the risk of decreased productivity levels and lack of efficiency will inevitably increase.

Solely Working From Home Inhibits Team Development

Jonathan Wessel, Director of Quality Control and Continuous Improvement at Clopay Corporation in Troy, Ohio, is no stranger to remote working employees. At the start of COVID- 19, Jonathan along with his employees were sent to work from remote locations throughout the pandemic. Being in a management role, Jonathan provides an experienced insight on remote- work arrangements after the COVID-19 mandate sent several of his employee's home.

I had the opportunity to sit down with Jonathan and talk about the effects of working from home not only on the employee, but the employer. He reflects (personal communication, October 28, 2022) on several departments struggling for months to ensure that their employees were set up in "applicable environments as well maintain the same level of productivity that they would do in office." While this wasn't easy, they slowly learned which employees were able to work from home and which ones were not by meeting with the employee on a daily basis.

Jonathan reflects on the lack of team interaction that many departments struggled with. Unlike the traditional office setting, working from home left many to go days or even weeks without talking to their coworkers. He emphasizes the importance of "water cooler discussions" that can not only develop a team but strengthen a team when in a traditional office setting (personal communication, October 28, 2022). When employers are rushing to accommodate the desire of working from home, many times the value of workplace relationships are lost. This detrimental factor can not only affect the employee's productivity, but mental and emotional health. Having the employee come into office at least two days out of the week will give each individual the opportunity to interact and build team relationships within the office.

Promote Hybrid Work Environments

The new desire for employees to work from home has been clearly established, but how far are employers willing to go to accommodate their employees? A hybrid-work arrangement offers the opportunity for an employee to work in a traditional office setting for part of the work week while spending the other half working remotely. This arrangement can only be successful with effective communication and managerial support. According to a recent blog posted by Dayforce Ceridian (2022), a human capital software management system company, there are five factors that can truly promote a successful hybrid work environment. Those factors are to prioritize consistent and clear communication, promote human interaction, hire hybrid talented employees, set clear productivity and workflow expectations, and never compromise the workplace culture (Meeker, 2022). By maintaining a workplace mindset similar to Dayforce Ceridian, employers are bound to see success amongst their hybrid-work environment and employee commitment and overall job satisfaction.

Conclusion

The new work-from home trend is not practical for the employee nor the employer. Do employers run a risk of losing their employees by not adopting this working arrangement? The reality of it all is simple – no. In October of 2022, Zippia – an online recruiting platform – conducted a study that show only 16% of U.S. companies offer fully remote positions (par. 2). Although the desire for this accommodation is high, employers have to visualize the negative effects that outweigh the positive. The argument cannot be that working from home may improve the added stress that comes with an employee getting themselves and any children ready in the mornings, or even commuting to and from work on a daily basis, however, employers are risking the development of team success in addition to their employee's mental health and overall performance. Working from home not only induces higher rates of isolation, but

also can be detrimental for the stability of one's mental health. As an employee in isolation at their home, they are missing out on the daily interactions that not only develop them as a successful employee, but also a successful coworker. Implementing arrangements like a hybrid-work environment (one in which the employee can work a couple of days in office with the remaining at their home) not only give the employer power to regulate employee performance and drive, but also encourage productivity. A hybrid-work arrangement would not only meet the requests from the employee, but also the demand of the company. Regardless of how employers get there, finding the balance of working from home and in-office successfully is the only way to truly ensure that the accommodations are met and the company's efficiency is maintained successfully. By working together, employers can improve the quality of life for their employees one step at a time. ■

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