Telecommuting: Effectively Managing the Telecommuting Employee

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Abstract

Environmental pressures are pushing business organizations to adopt telecommuting, while technological barriers to telecommuting are diminishing. These factors are contributing to the overall trend of increased utilization of telecommuting employees (TCE). Therefore it is crucial for business organizations to recognize which functions can be successfully transferred to TCEs, which characteristics an ideal TCE should possess, as well as the challenges of managing from a distance. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of telecommuting and identify opportunities for research that are relevant to both practitioners and academic researchers.

The environmental pressures are leading organizations to pursue the utilization of TCEs as a viable solution to cost reduction, disaster recovery, and hiring in areas of low unemployment. Incorporating TCEs into the workforce can reduce requirements for parking, office space equipment, utility costs, and incremental overtime pay. Cost savings can also be realized by local municipalities as roadway and access requirements, congestion of public transportation systems, and pollution are reduced. TCEs have also proven to be an integral part of continuing operations after catastrophic events such as the earthquakes in California that crippled transportation systems and the terrorist attacks in New York City. Low unemployment in areas in which an organization has a physical presence can make it difficult to fill open positions; However, an organization can overcome this difficulty by hiring qualified TCEs in areas of the country with higher unemployment. In addition, diminishing technological barriers are also influencing the increased utilization of TCEs, which include reductions in the cost of telecommunications, increased bandwidth, faster computer processing, and user-friendly software, equipment, and channels for web access.

Once a decision is made to incorporate TCEs into the workforce the organization must identify functions that can be successfully performed by a TCE. In order to facilitate success it is also important to test potential TCEs for basic skills, a willingness to ask for help when needed, an ability to work on their own, and an overall understanding of the nature of the job. One of the most important issues in facilitating the success of a TCE is effectively managing the TCE from a distance. This involves trusting the TCE to do the work, providing effective motivation, providing training and support, monitoring their productivity level, supplying all necessary equipment, paying for high speed connections, addressing increased security risks, and fostering social interaction with other employees within the organization. Therefore research is needed to identify measures of successful utilization of TCEs, the functions TCEs can successfully perform, the skills and psychological characteristics of an ideal TCE employee, effective training and support, and a means to involve the TCE as a member of the social work environment.