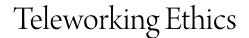**Association for Information Systems**
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Teleworking Ethics

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Abstract

Telecommuting is an emerging form of work that promises greater gains in productivity and in worker satisfaction. While telework is growing in popularity, it is far from accepted working condition. This paper examines ethical scenarios that could arise in a telework environment. Most of the scenarios posed examine issues of people who telework from home offices. The paper shows that societal norms of behavior have not yet emerged for teleworkers and managers.

Introduction

In the past five years, reports on the gains associated with telework have been remarkable (Murphy, 1996 and Hesse, et. al., 1991). Productivity can be increased by 30%, workers are more satisfied with their jobs and telework could reduce traffic and pollution problems. There is also research that speaks about the resistance to telework. Firms are reluctant to adopt telework programs and employees are reluctant to give up traditional work structures (Westfall, 1997). Part of this reluctance can be described in terms of ethics and evolving behavioral norms. New technology is often accompanied by suspicion and skepticism. Telework is posing new questions about rules of conduct, work ethic and work privacy.

Ethics are a system of principles that tell us what acts are right and wrong. Teleworking ethics are an evolving code of conduct that dictate employee, managerial and corporate behavior to do 'right regarding telework'. Using ethics to describe telework is useful in that it gives us thousands of years of philosophical thinking with which to examine our actions. This paper will define teleworking ethics, describe some scenarios used in examining ethical issues in telework and show the results of a recent survey of business students and faculty. The surveys are deliberately vague to capture how people evaluate telework in accordance with their own work values and feelings about telework.

Methodology

Thirty-one Los Angeles area professionals enrolled in professional degree programs responded to a survey that asked them to judge eighteen telework scenarios as ethical, questionable or unethical. The respondents were mostly from aerospace, education, telecommunications and computer industries. Job descriptions given by respondents include managerial, clerical, marketing, teaching, sales, accounting, and computer related jobs. Data were recorded about the degree program, gender, and age of the respondents. The scenarios cover five categories: freedom of work ethic, work place monitoring, compensation, work and family, and equity. This study is simlar in design to a study of ethical values in computing (Benham and Wagner, 1995).

Results

Results of the survey indicate that there is a wide range of opinions about all of the ethical scenarios posed

(Table 1). The raw percentage data indicates that people are highly supportive of families and supportive of flexible work hours as long as the person is available to the office or accountable for an acceptable amount of time. Moonlighting was viewed as unethical by half of the respondents. The survey results showed sympathy for telecommuters in that 48% of respondents felt it was unethical to reward in-house employees more highly than telecommuters, while 63% felt awarding telecommuters higher raises based upon productivity was ethical.

Chi-square significance results of a cross-tabulation analysis are shown in Table 2. A chi-square based upon educational level showed that people with higher education are resistant to managerial monitoring. This is reasonable in that a more highly educated person may work in a job where they are given more autonomy and are expected to be self directed. Men were much more comfortable awarding a merit increase based upon productivity (0.008). Men also saw less of an ethical issue with requiring telecommuters to supply their own equipment (0.003). It may suggest that men are more accustomed to working in sales, consulting or a delivery capacity where owning their own equipment is a requirement. It may also be that men are more likely to own or purchase computer equipment so that meeting this requirement is not an issue for them.

Older respondents did not feel a company was liable for injuries that resulted from working at home while younger respondents were less sure. Older respondents were more averse to monitoring personal phone bills than younger respondents. One explanation is that older respondents have a lower expectation of corporate social responsibility than younger respondents. Analysis based upon type of work and position had no statistical significance.

Table 2. Results of Chi-Square Analysis

Finding	Significance
People with a higher educational level felt that it was unethical for managers to check their personal phone logs (scenario 14).	0.079
People with a higher education felt that it was unethical for a manager to check their houses during the lunch hour (scenario 15).	0.074
Women predominantly felt that requiring an employee to supply their own telework computer equipment was unethical while men did not (scenario 7).	0.003
Men strongly (80%) felt that a merit increase for teleworkers based upon productivity was ethical. Women mostly answered questionable (scenario 6).	0.008
Older respondents did not feel the company was liable for injuries resulting from work at home while younger respondents did (scenario 11).	0.000
Older respondents felt monitoring personal phone bills was unethical while younger respondents did not (scenario 14).	0.013

Conclusion

Five ethical issues related to telecommuting emerge from this study:

1. Privacy/work place monitoring: Management of teleworkers can challenge beliefs about personal privacy.
2. Work and family issues: Teleworkers may have family and home responsibilities that conflict with accomplishing organizational goals.
3. Access to resources: Teleworkers may not be fairly compensated for home resources used towards corporate goals.
4. Equity: Compensation for telework needs to be fair. Access to teleworking jobs needs to be fair.
5. Work ethic: Teleworkers need broad work parameters so that flexible forms of work are accepted and so that ability to achieve goals is measured instead of 'seat time'.

Posing conflicts with telework in ethical scenarios is interesting because it gives people a concrete way to explore their values regarding telework. It is important to go beyond corporate policies and guidelines for telework so that companies can create organizational and societal acceptance of this work form. Understanding the policy does not necessarily tell us if the policy is fair or how people feel about it.

This survey provides results on a small sample from a highly diverse group. In the future, querying telecommuters versus non-telecommuters, examining another culture and collecting additional, qualitative data about gender may enlarge the findings. Ideally, if the percentage of telecommuting workforce grew significantly over a period of time, the results of this study would change. Giving these scenarios to workers who are experienced with teleworking forms in the future may reveal that a telework ethic has evolved. Scenarios that are controversial now may become moot. The pressures that exist between an employee's freedom and managerial trust, and between the boundaries of the office and the home may dissolve as society becomes more experienced with telework.

References

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Table 1. Ethical Scenarios for Telecommuters

Scenario	Ethical	Questionable	Un-ethical
Jan usually has a few personal things to do in the morning and begins work in a flexible manner between 9:00 to 10:30 each day.	60%	36.7%	3.3%
When Joe finishes his work ahead of schedule, he does personal work around the house. He remains available by phone to the office until the close of business.	74.2	22.6	3.2
On days when Karen finishes her work early she typically goes to exercise or to do her grocery shopping.	29.0	32.3	38.7
Ken has found that he can have two full time jobs by telecommuting full time for two different companies.	25.8	22.6	51.6
A manager of a group of telecommuters and traditional employees is determining merit increases for the year. While he knows that the telecommuters are more productive, he feels that the 'in-house' employees have contributed more towards running the business. He values the 'in-house' employee efforts more highly and gives many of them higher raises than the telecommuters.	12.9	38.7	48.8
A recent company report showed that telecommuters were 30% more productive than traditional employees. Consequently, employees who telecommute got higher raises.	63.3	30.0	6.7

A company allows workers to telecommute if they provide their own computers, software and communications equipment to support their job from home.	32.3	35.5	32.3
Eric needs to connect to his company to complete his work. He has trouble connecting and finds that the network will be down for four hours. Eric decides to play tennis at the club and resume work after the network is available.	41.9	32.3	25.8
Anna telecommutes 3 days a week. On days she works at home, she keeps her kids at home saving $200/week in day care fees.	58.1	32.3	9.7
Anna telecommutes 3 days a week. At 3:00 p.m. on her telecommuting days, Anna picks up her kids from school. Anna continues to work from 3:30 to 5:00, while her kids are at home.	67.7	32.3	0
Phil develops Carpal Tunnel syndrome from working at home. The company refuses to pay compensation reasoning that Phil did not set up an ergonomically correct workstation for himself and that his condition did not develop on company premises.	6.5	41.9	51.6
Some of the work Dave does at home is a highly routine. He found that he can make several personal phone calls while he is making database corrections.	58.1	32.3	9.7
Fred is the manager of several telecommuting workers. He is concerned with how to evaluate their performance. He keeps an ongoing log of their connect time.	51.6	41.9	6.5
Janet is the manager of several telecommuting workers. She uses their logged computer hours, and phone bills (work and personal calls) to evaluate their work.	9.7	45.2	45.2
Martin is a hands-on manager. To monitor his traditional employees, he would walk the floor to see who was doing what. When he became responsible for some telecommuting workers, he drove by their houses occasionally during lunch.	25.8	29.0	45.2
Martin periodically spot checks his telecommuting workers by stopping at their houses to see if they are home.	25.8	32.3	41.9
Martin periodically spot checks his telecommuting workers by phoning them at home to see if they are in.	54.8	32.3	12.9