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Managerial Approaches to Telecommuting

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Abstract

The purpose of this theoretical paper is to synthesize the current knowledge on the topic of telecommuter managerial approaches by cross-analyzing certain commonalities and differences among relevant literature and scholarly sources. This paper will explore key themes such as trust management, performance-based reviews, communication, boundary management, work-life balance, and social and professional isolation. Additionally, this analysis will identify significant issues and contradictions amidst the research of flexible work arrangement management styles. Furthermore, it will outline the most significant disadvantages and repercussions of telecommuting and discuss them in relationship to the management styles best suited to alleviating these issues. Then, this paper will develop and present a theory which clearly outlines the best approaches for managing telecommuters by succinctly tying together the crucial variables embodying this literature. After, this paper will provide recommendations and methods for implementing these managerial approaches in the organization. Lastly, this paper will explain the theory's implications on the overarching knowledge and topic of telecommuter managerial approaches and nature of the workforce.

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Keywords: telecommuting, management, strategy

Managerial Approaches to Telecommuting

In the past two decades, the number of telecommuters in the workforce has exponentially increased "by 140% since 2005" (Telecommuting Trend Data, 2018, para. 4). This changing nature of the workforce is due partly to advancements in technology and increased importance of work-life balance (Ilozor & Ilozor, 2002). The ability of cloud sharing technology allows employees to access secure company files while off campus or at home. The options to video conference and screen share allow organizations to have "face to face" meetings with employees that work both on campus and off campus. Moreover, many companies and organizations are redefining their values to be more centered around work-life balance and flexibility for their employees. Telecommuting allows employees to cut the commute time out of their day, and instead, put this time toward more productive and self-managed work hours (Ilozor & Ilozor, 2002). As telecommuting becomes increasingly more popular, it is important to understand its implications and what organizational changes are necessary for it remain productive and efficient for a company.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the preexisting research and data about telecommuting to understand how to manage telecommuters for productivity while also helping to manage their work-life balance. Most notably, intellectuals in the field of business management have had continued concern for understanding the relationships between employees and their work settings (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman & Johnson, 2005). This is especially important to organizations and managers that already offer or are thinking about offering work from home flexibility. According to existing information and research, telecommuting has both positive and negative implications to an organization. Companies are incentivized to offer their employees with the option to telecommute because it reduces costs and creates efficiency

(Telecommuting Trend Data, 2018). Employers save money because they do not have to pay for the upkeep of an office space for that employee. Studies also have found that telecommuting attracts new talent and that telecommuters work more productive hours than traditional non-telecommuting employees (Butler, Aasheim, & Williams, 2007). Many employees are inclined to telecommute because of the flexibility in scheduling which allows them to take care of personal things at home like children or pets. Telecommuters also have reduced costs by cutting out a commute. On the other hand, research shows that telecommuters often report feeling isolated and less committed to their organization because of the lack of interpersonal relationships with coworkers. Research by Sheridan (2012) supports the notion that telecommuters also report having trouble balancing their work and personal life causing them stress and tension. Although we are aware of these adverse effects, there is not enough consistent information to determine the best managerial approaches to mitigating and avoiding these issues, while also maintaining a proper work-life balance (Kurland & Cooper, 2002). There are even researchers who suggest that telecommuters can be self-managed, and so, management is not even necessary (Ilozor & Ilozor, 2002). Hence, further research must be collected to better understand telecommuter management.

This paper will address the negative implications of telecommuting and analyze various management styles in order to identify the most useful and effective practices. It will also explain and highlight boundary theory as a recommendation for improving work-life balance of telecommuters. In all, this paper will provide more conclusive and consistent information about the best practices for the management of telecommuters and will help to further advance the overall understanding of fellow scholars.

Adverse Effects of Telecommuting

A majority of the information around telecommuting pertains to the negative effects it has on a telecommuter's work ethic and mental state. For instance, social and professional isolation are predominant feelings reported by telecommuters (Dahlstrom, 2013). Social isolation is when telecommuters feel as though they have less developed relationships with their coworkers from missing out on the daily interpersonal interactions and office banter (Taskin & Devos, 2005). Professional isolation is when telecommuters feel that their performance and contribution will be forgotten about because they are not physically in the office, typically becoming an issue when it comes time for a promotion (Kurland & Cooper, 2002).

Isolation comes hand in hand with feeling less committed to an organization. When a telecommuter feels as though they do not have strong relationships or communication with their coworkers they often feel left out and disengaged with their teams' goals and projects (Ilozor, Ilozor, & Carr, 2001). Furthermore, telecommuters are not able to brainstorm and problem-solve with their coworkers as much as non-telecommuters because it is necessary for a telecommuter to set up a meeting or phone call rather than walking over to their desk to chat. This causes them to feel less engaged in their teams' efforts and forces them to take on the majority of their projects individually, further reinforcing isolation (Taskin & Devos, 2005).

One of the biggest commonalities among research is that telecommuting creates an overwhelming communication barrier. In recent years, corporate communication has become far less face-to-face and far more digital (Mackenzie, 2010). For instance, a large portion of communication between telecommuters and non-telecommuters is shared either online, over the phone, or email where information and messages can be misinterpreted (Fay & Kline, 2011). In the long run, having ambiguous communication, expectations, and guidelines between managers

and subordinates can lead to discrepancies and larger issues for an organization. Therefore, it is imperative to have proper approaches to managing telecommuters for an organization's success.

How to Manage Telecommuters for Productivity

As mentioned previously, managing a telecommuter poses many potential roadblocks and difficulties due to the nature of their work. A manager cannot use the same approach as they would with their traditional non-telecommuter subordinates. Among the existing sources regarding management of telecommuters, the majority emphasize the importance of trust management, performance-based reviews, and clear communication.

Trust management. Trust is an essential value to many organizations regardless of having flexible work arrangements or not. Thus, "productivity can no longer be associated with presence" (Bernardino, Roglio, & Corso, 2012, p. 290). For instance, just because an employee is physically in the office, it does not mean that they are *always* working productively. At any given time, a non-telecommuter could be using their computer for personal reasons rather than for work. It is up to the manager to trust that their employee is using their time and browsing for work regardless of whether or not the employee is in or out of the office (Bernardino et al., 2012). Since telecommuters are rarely in the office this sense of trust is more imporant. In order to improve trust management, many studies suggest that it requires not only the manager and the telecommuter, but also the entire team (Sheridan, 2012). Each individual on the team should foster a trustworthy environment.

Interestingly, Sheridan (2012) reveals evidence which supports the notion that cultivating a fun atmosphere among team members can promote trust. For example, "games, joking, and storytelling can help build camaraderie and trust among remote team members" (Sheridan, 2012, p. 34). A fun atmosphere can promote trust amongst telecommuters because they are able to get

more comfortable with their coworkers that they rarely interact with face-to-face. This type of atmosphere is extremely different than over the phone, because it gives employees the chance to break down walls and get to know each other on a more personal level. Even if a company has telecommuters, there are many video games and online games that can be played remotely between non-telecommuters and telecommuters. Trust is imperative when coworkers are working together from separate locations. Coworkers need to trust one another to get their work done, so they do not need to micromanage one another. Another way management can get teams engaged is by setting days for telecommuters to come onsite to participate in activities or story-telling with the rest of the employees. Team building exercises like the trust fall or rock-climbing are great opportunities for employees, whether telecommuters or not, to get to know each other and build trust. However, it can't be all fun and games; in order for to managers to ensure that their trust is not being violated, they must assess their telecommuters' work correctly.

 Performance-based review. It is necessary for management to shift their focus from assessing telecommuters based on work *time* to work *outcomes* (Bernardino et al., 2012). As mentioned previously, telecommuters are often isolated from their managers, making it difficult for managers to implement control. Measuring performance solely based on work outcomes brings control back to the manager by making it crucial that the telecommuter gets their work finished (Kurland & Cooper, 2002). Among most information regarding assessing telecommuters, not only is the completion of the work stressed most frequently, but also punctuality. It is suggested that telecommuters keep track of their work results by documentation and or periodic conversation (Kurland & Cooper, 2002). Another point that is commonly stressed among sources is the importance for managers and telecommuters to communicate about

necessary projects and deadlines, so when it comes time for performance reviews, telecommuters and managers are on the same page as to what is expected of the both of them.

Communication. Since communication is such an integral element to the functioning of an organization, it is necessary that managers have specific approaches for improving these transactions. For example, researchers stress the importance for managers to maintain frequent communication to assist employees transitioning from commuting to telecommuting (Lautsch & Kossek, 2011). With the emergence of new technology, this is easier than ever. Managers can set up phone calls, e-mails, webinars and video conferences to keep communication open and easily available so that telecommuters do not feel isolated (Ilozor et al., 2001). Although, there is a point at which too much communication can hinder the relationship between coworkers and the productivity of work. According to Lautsch and Kossek (2011), telecommuters can feel helicoptered by their manager if their manager is overbearing with communication.

Therefore, it is important for managers to find the perfect balance of communication, which, ironically, requires honest communication between the two to decide what works best. Ilozor et al. (2001) argued from the data they collected from their survey that managerial approaches centered around effective communication are strongly correlated to increased job satisfaction of telecommuters. The study found that the most effective communication strategies are clearly defining expectations, responsibilities, deadlines and organizational goals. Additionally, the results show that effective communication strategies have a positive correlation with respect, clarity, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment and engagement (Ilozor et al., 2001). Even while implementing effective communication management, telecommuters can experience stress in other aspects, such as, balancing work and personal life.

Implications on Work-life Balance

Although many people believe that working from home reduces stress, research demonstrates that telecommuters experience increased stress in their personal lives (Konradt, Hertel, & Schmoock, 2003). Having to balance work and personal lives within the same environment can cause many issues when one is typically used to having them clearly divided. According to Taskin and Devos (2005), telecommuters report experiencing many consequences to their work-life balance. Since telecommuters do not have to commute back and forth for a typical nine to five day, they report experiencing lengthened work days. They also report experiencing increased availability to the company because they are *always* at work if work is *in* their home (Taskin & Devos, 2005). Many telecommuters struggle to create a definitive boundary between their work and personal lives because their phone and email is always available.

Although working from home allows employees flexibility in scheduling, it can also cause work to require more time, and so, "increased flexibility in work may be viewed as a double-edged sword" (Mellner, Aronsson, & Kecklund, 2015, p. 10). This can become especially difficult when an employee loses personal family time because of work. It causes stress at home, perpetually causing the employee to lose satisfaction in work (Mellner et al., 2015). Thus, managers need to help telecommuters create a boundary between work and personal life.

Boundary Management

A key study about managerial styles argues that telecommuters will reap more benefits from a management that reinforces segregated work and family boundaries (Lautsch & Kossek, 2011), also known as boundary management. Boundary management is at the crux of a profitable work-life balance, highlighting the need for further research (McDowall & Lindsay, 2014).

Within boundary management, there are two types of employees: segmenters and integrators. Segmenters are individuals who prefer to have a strict divide between these two (Voydanoff, 1998). Integrators are individuals who have less strict boundaries and prefer to blend their work and personal life together. According to Mellner et al. (2001) the majority of employees prefer a segmented work life balance. This tendency may be due to the fact that the integration of work and personal lives has a positive relationship with work-family balance issues (Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006).

Some common themes in literature for managing a segmented work-life balance are that managers and telecommuters are suggested to communicate about how to create segmented, rather than integrated, work and personal lives (McDowall & Lindsay, 2014). For example, telecommuters are encouraged to negotiate with their managers about when to turn off their work phone, when to stop checking their email, and how many hours they should aim to work a week (Mellner et al., 2015). Additionally, some ways managers encourage a segmented work and personal life is by suggesting the use of signals. For example, managers suggest that their telecommuter do certain actions, or signals, to create a distinction between and work and home life. If it is the start of the work day, managers might suggest their telecommuters to power on their laptop by a certain time. On the other hand, managers might enforce their telecommuters to power off their laptops by a specific time to signal the end of the day (Fonner & Stache, 2012). Signals like these seem very simple but they can be very beneficial to the telecommuter. Often times, telecommuters feel constantly available to work because they can easily open up their laptop at home. On the opposite hand, commuters are able to leave work and not be reached. If telecommuters and managers can agree upon signals, like the time for powering off the laptop, then this will minimize the telecommuter's stress by freeing them from work. Thus, it is

extremely helpful for managers to encourage making this divide when one's work is *inside* one's home, and vice versa.

Clearly there are many ways in which managers and subordinate telecommuters can negotiate their terms of boundaries. Although, some researchers think that certain studies suggest that boundaries are applicable to all employees and do not take into the consideration that individuals have different preferences (Ammons, 2013). Moreover, Ammons' point suggests that there is not enough data to confirm which specific signals work best. Therefore, it is necessary that further research and studies be conducted in order to better understand this phenomenon.

Trends in Findings

It is important to understand the changing nature of work so that organizations and companies can make the necessary changes to keep up their productivity and efficiency. As flexible work arrangements become increasingly prevalent and "4.3 million employees now work from home at least half the time" (Telecommuting Trend Data, 2018, para. 4), it is crucial to collect more information to better understand how to manage these trends. Although much of the available research today addresses the need to collect more information about managing telecommuting, the majority of the resources share common themes.

For instance, most sources validate the notion that telecommuting has negative and positive implications on both the company and the telecommuter. However, most researchers focus on defining which implications are the most common and how to alleviate them. What we now know is that telecommuting can cause employees to feel a sense of social and professional isolation, decreased job satisfaction and engagement, and barriers to communication. Therefore, the more flexibility employees have, the more they are at risk for a decreased work ethic and personal well-being. All of which directly and indirectly affects the organization's productivity

and the relationship between managers and subordinates. Moreover, data about telecommuting shows that it can have negative effects on work-life balance. Consequently, when boundaries become blurred, employees can become stressed and disengaged from their organization. Although there are many negative implications that derive from telecommuting, the majority of research suggests proper telecommuter managerial practices such as trust management, performance based-reviews, clear communication and boundary management help to diminish these issues.

Theory

Based on the information and research from the literature reviewed, I developed a theory which outlines the best practices for managing telecommuters for productivity. The theory is based off of the incorporation of four integral managerial focuses. I propose that a managerial approach with a strong emphasis trust management, performance-based reviews, clear communication and segmenting boundaries between work and personal life, will cause the telecommuter's productivity, job satisfaction and commitment to the organization to increase.

The current knowledge of managerial approaches to telecommuting suggests that trust management benefits telecommuter job satisfaction, commitment to the organization and productivity. If managers create an environment built off trust, telecommuters will have stronger relationships with their coworkers and be able to work together more effectively. As coworkers feel more confident in one another, they are more likely to feed off of each other and enhance the organization's morale. Telecommuters and commuters will be able to make decisions more efficiently because they are able to hold one another accountable to the same standards. Similarly, performance-based reviews will encourage telecommuters to work more productively and efficiently. If the value of their work is based off of meeting specific deadlines and putting

forth certain efforts, then they will most likely push themselves to accommodate, if not exceed, these requirements.

Performance-based reviews will go smoothly if managers communicate effectively with their telecommuters. If managers are able to clearly outline their expectations, quotas, and goals, then telecommuters will know exactly what is needed of them, and when. Furthermore, communication will help minimize social and professional isolation by keeping telecommuters in the loop of office chatter and company goals and ideas. Which, in effect, will increase job satisfaction and organizational commitment by minimizing stress and discrepancies. For example, fostering clear communication will reduce stress and feelings of social and professional isolation, and improve productivity. Moreover, frequent and clear communication allows telecommuters to better understand the organization's goals and help build stronger coworker relationships, thus increasing job satisfaction and commitment to the organization (Igbaria & Guimaraes, 1999).

Lastly, a framework of management which encourages segmented boundaries will have significantly beneficial effects on the telecommuter's productivity, engagement and commitment. For instance, telecommuters report feeling more committed to their organization when their managers encourage segmenting their boundaries (Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005). Furthermore, this will positively affect telecommuters by reducing stress, both at home, and at work (Kreiner, 2006). Moreover, boundary management not only helps the telecommuter's productivity, but also, well-being. For example, "a workplace environment that fits an employee's boundary management preference is found to contribute to reduced work-life conflict and stress and improved job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and mental health" (Bogaerts, Cooman, & Gieter, 2018, p. 3). Even though this theory outlines the framework for

the best managerial practices for telecommuters, the effects of this theory wouldn't be successful without proper implementation.

Discussion & Recommendations. The development of this theory exposes the need for organizations to reconstruct and redefine managerial approaches for flexible work arrangements. The majority of organizations have outdated human resource management guidelines that only take into account traditional commuter jobs. It is imperative that management be able to accommodate and understand how to oversee and accommodate workers in this particular environment, especially since, flexible work arrangements are an appealing attraction to potential employees (Rau & Hyland, 2002). Therefore, it is necessary that managers understand how to implement these methods into their companies.

In order to foster an environment which exemplifies trust management, managers should remember to not helicopter their telecommuters. Managers should remember that the use of performance-based reviews allows them not to constantly check in and bombard their telecommuters. Additionally, managers are recommended to have at least one trust building exercise per quarter to allow employees to meet face to face and get to one another better in setting other than work. Certain events such as a videogame competition can get coworkers out of their shells by encouraging them to be competitive. Furthermore, employees could be encouraged to do something more physically challenging like a ropes course, where employees have to work together to achieve something. There are many different trust building events and exercises, but the main point is to get employees to have fun and feel comfortable with one another.

Feeling comfortable and trusting one another is not just about having fun, but more importantly about communication. Managers are recommended to communicate through check-

ins either once a week, twice a week, or whatever frequency they find most effective. Check-ins should involve aligning on project timelines and organizational or team goals. Check-ins are suggested to be over the phone versus via email. Although, virtual meetings and video chatting are even better options for more effective and personalized communication. Furthermore, check-ins should involve a moment to ask one another about their well-being and how they're doing to get to know them on a more personal level. This conversation may be helpful to segue into asking telecommuters about their work-life balance.

It is necessary that managers ask their telecommuters about their work environment at home to understand how to manage boundaries. Managers should have some idea of where the telecommuter is working and be sure that their telecommuters have the necessary electronics and access to online company files. Second, managers can encourage telecommuters to create segmented boundaries between their work and personal lives by helping them create their signals. To do so, managers should negotiate with their telecommuters to decide upon hours that work best. Then, they figure out when they should power on and off their laptop. Furthermore, a manager may suggest that the telecommuter set up an office space more secluded from their home. In all, the most important factor to proper boundary management is for the manager and telecommuter to frequently communicate about how working from home is going. By using these implementation strategies, hopefully managers can properly supervise to not only increase telecommuter productivity, satisfaction, well-being, commitment and engagement to the organization, but also, increase the organization's overall effectiveness and productivity.

Conclusion

In sum, this theory shines a positive light on the future of work. This framework suggests that incorporating a management style focused on trust management, performance-based review,

communication, and boundary management can diminish the adverse effects of telecommuting and increase organizational productivity and efficiency. That being said, this is not where the research ends. As telecommuters, gig workers and on-demand workers become more prevalent in the workforce, the demand for further theoretical and empirical research on managerial styles to flexible work arrangements becomes even more crucial.

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