

# Telecommuting:

## Benefits, Risks, Tips and More

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# Telecommuting's Powerful Benefits

Telecommuting is becoming a mainstay in America. Today, more than 34 million Americans telecommute on an occasional basis at the least. It's a number that is expected to swell beyond 60 million by 2014.

Recent growth in telecommuting came amid recession and mass layoffs. The movement has largely been fueled by employers' desires to cut costs, an emphasis on being environmentally friendly, and the increasing availability of high-speed Internet connections at the homes of employees. The paradigm shift has a wide array of advantages, including higher productivity and access to a wider labor pool.

Security is a concern related with telecommuting that must be noted by employers and employees alike. Our IT Downloads library contains several helpful documents pertaining to telecommuting. Be sure to check out our IT checklist for managers making sure they cover all their bases – including security -- when making telecommuting arrangements and our Telecommuting Calculator for maximizing telecommuting savings opportunities.

## Additional Resource

### Telework Policy and Agreement

Teleworking can increase employee productivity and reduce costs for an enterprise. Use Info-Tech's Telework Policy and Agreement as a starting point for your enterprise's telecommuting policy.

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### Benefit #1: Lower Cost

Companies can save money on real estate costs due to a reduction in office space needs and associated facilities costs.



### **Benefit #2: Improves Employee Satisfaction**

There is plenty of evidence that telecommuters in many job categories are more productive working at home.



### **Benefit #3: Expand Your Talent Pool**

Telecommuting offers geographic, socioeconomic and cultural diversity that would otherwise not be possible.



#### **Benefit #4: Recruitment Advantages**

Telecommuters can be located anywhere, making it easier to recruit for hard-to-fill positions.



#### **Additional Resource**

##### **Telecommuting Calculator**

This calculator will help you evaluate the potential cost-savings of a telecommuting plan, which are usually dictated by office space costs. Other benefits, such as employee morale, are much harder to measure.

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#### **Benefit #5: Environmental Benefits**

Because it reduces the number of cars on the road, telecommuting is a green business practice that reduces a company's carbon footprint.



# Additional Security Risks for Telecommuters

Is there a better business arrangement than telecommuting? Employees can work in the comfort of their home and save money on gas, business clothes and vending machine raids. For the employer, less money needs to be allocated for office space and productive workers can be kept on the payroll even if they move across the country. The flexibility of telecommuting is especially nice. It's often a win-win for everybody.

However (there's always a however), telecommuting has security risks that are different from those found in traditional office situations. Before allowing employees to work from an off-site location, companies should establish security policies based on these potential risks.

## **Risk #1: Letting Family Members Use the Work Computer**

The computer used for business should have one user: the employee. The more people who use a computer, the more chance there is for it to be infected with malicious malware or for information to be accidentally shared.

### **Additional Resource**

#### **Telecommuting IT Checklist**

This checklist is designed to help IT managers 'cover all the bases' for telecommuting arrangements, including safety and network security issues.

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## **Risk #2: Using the Work Computer for a 'Personal' Computer**

There are reasons your business doesn't allow you to visit certain websites or install unauthorized software in the office, and those reasons extend to home. Better to play games and do your shopping on your own computer, using a personal e-mail account.



## **Risk #3: Using Unsecured Wireless Connections**

Much has been said about using Wi-Fi in public places like coffee shops and libraries and the risks involved. But don't forget about the home wireless setup. If you aren't sure your home Internet is secure, consider using an old-fashioned cable connection.



#### **Risk #4: Backing Up the Computer Outside the Company Network**

Confidential business information shouldn't be saved on a commercial backup service or on external hard drives.



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#### **Risk #5: Altering Security for Administrative Settings**

The settings are meant to protect company data. Messing around with them puts the data at risk.



### **Risk #6: Exposing Company Information to Non-Employees**

People are nosy. They will look at what's on your computer screen or the spreadsheets you printed out.





# Six Tips for Introducing a Telework Program

Want to test the telework waters? There are all kinds of good reasons for introducing a telework program, ranging from reducing real estate costs to giving employees a better work-life balance, which often results in increased productivity. But there are some keys to rolling out a program the right way, such as utilizing a trial period to make sure it's the best option for both employers and employees. Read Ann All's post with a list of tips on introducing a telework program, from companies who have been there and from Ann herself, who's been telecommuting regularly for more than a decade.

## **Additional Resource**

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### **Tip #1: Make a List, Check It Twice**

Create a check list to analyze each job function for telecommuting compatibility. Look specifically at the type of work performed, the employees' personalities, and the performance measurements you'll put in place to optimize the initiative's success.



## **Tip #2: Location, Location, Location**

Think about where the program will be implemented: who will be offsite and when, who will not, and what the company will look like. Most employees will want to telecommute or participate in a four-day work week, but many won't be able to. Be prepared to deal with this fairly and sensibly.



## **Tip #3: Think Technically**

Consider the related IT costs of telecommuting. Ensure that your organization is equipped for virtual work arrangements, including appropriate software, computers, connectivity, security and technical support. Virtual work arrangements can increase demands on IT staff if they are not well implemented.



#### Tip #4: Spell It Out

Use a formal telecommuting agreement that clearly articulates the terms of the arrangement. It should cover company expectations, who is responsible for equipment and appropriate workspaces, scheduling, etc. Most importantly, it should establish telecommuting as an accommodation, not an entitlement, that can be modified at-will by the employer, should company requirements change.

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#### Tip #5: Start Small

Consider launching with a pilot program. This will help work out the kinks in a relatively controlled environment.



### **Tip #6: Some Face Time is Good**

Some time in the office will almost certainly be required for telecommuters. This can help address the decreased teamwork and sense of belonging that may occur in those who are not in the office on a regular basis.





# Optimize Your Business for Telecommuters

Paul Mah, SMB Tech

Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer recently ignited a huge furor by disavowing support for telecommuting at the beleaguered Web firm. Many have criticized this decision, including fellow blogger Rob Enderle who argued that it was a huge mistake for Mayer to micromanage at such a level. Ultimately, only time will tell whether this move will serve to correct the unique human resource and cultural issues to Yahoo.

Regardless of the eventual outcome, the general outrage does make it clear that telecommuting remains very popular. With this in mind, we outline some ways that SMBs can optimize their business in order to better support telecommuting.

## Additional Resource

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### Set up VPN access

One of the most important steps to properly support remote workers would be to set up VPN, or Virtual Private Network access. This could be by means of VPN server software, or a dedicated VPN appliance. When configured properly, an encrypted VPN tunnel protects data in transit between the remote machine and the corporate network. This is useful not just when working from home, but also helps to protect users who may be accessing the Internet from an unprotected wireless hotspot.

### Equip work force with laptops

Nothing beats the portability and convenience of working from a laptop, though tablets look to be gaining a gradual foothold. For now, a good first step for SMBs looking to facilitate telecommuting would be to equip employees with laptops to literally bring the workstation home. Remember to enable full disk encryption for all laptops to protect against data leakage from the inevitable devices lost due to either carelessness or theft.

Obviously, there are situations where laptops will not work, such as for engineers and designers who require additional processing oomph to work with complex CAD drawings or large art files. In general, executive, managerial and sales positions will likely benefit the most from being issued with a laptop.

### Make the workplace laptop-friendly

There is not much point in equipping employees with laptops in a workplace that does not maximize its inherent portability. Moreover,



the idea is for all work to be done from the company-issued laptops to minimize the difference between being at the office and telecommuting for the day.

With this in mind, SMBs would do well to have a speedy Wi-Fi network in place, as well as provide the appropriate peripherals to increase workers' productivity. For example, a large-screen monitor and separate keyboard and mouse would help reduce eyestrain and make a laptop easier to use. Finally, it may also be a good idea to purchase an additional power adapter so that staffers have one less item to dig from their laptop bags in the morning.

# Five Tips for Motivating Virtual Teams

During a 2010 survey, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that 43 percent of HR professionals believe a larger portion of their work force will be telecommuting within the next five years. As a rapidly growing and global trend, telecommuting — a work arrangement in which employees do not meet at a central location — can pose new challenges in employee engagement and motivation. In order to help leaders engage remote employees and overcome potential time and geographical constraints, **The Vaya Group**, a talent management consultancy, recently released its top tips for motivating virtual teams.

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“As more companies expand globally, telecommuting is becoming a common work arrangement for many employees,” said Dr. Paul Eccher, Ph.D., author and co-founder and principal of The Vaya Group. “However, just because these workers are out of sight does not mean they should be kept out of the loop. Leaders must learn how to effectively manage virtual teams in order to improve the bottom line and sustain talent over time.”

### Tip #1: Invest Time Upfront to Form Relationships, Despite the Distance

Getting to know team members is critical, even when face-to-face interaction is limited. Take time to learn about each worker's career aspirations, strengths, development gaps and style.



## **Tip #2: Recognize Accomplishments in Unique Ways**

Recognition is a powerful driver for keeping employees engaged in their work. Consider creating a team newsletter that highlights individual efforts or host yearly award banquets over the Web. For both personal and professional milestones, send employees customized gifts, whether it's a gift card, flower arrangement or gift basket.



## **Tip #3: Schedule Regular Coaching Sessions**

Frequent phone or video conferences with employees will allow you to present new assignments that align with their interests and strengths. Remember to use these or separate conversations as a way to gather feedback. Listening provides an opportunity to learn more about remote workers and ways their work experience can be improved.



#### **Tip #4: Creative Interactive Ways for Teams To Communicate**

Allowing work teams to engage across distances can lead to higher career satisfaction and sense of belonging. Go beyond email to develop an interactive team intranet that allows individuals to share ideas, post accomplishments and ask questions. Utilize Web conferencing, Web cameras and other virtual systems that permit more real-time conversations.

#### **Additional Resource**

##### **Telecommuting IT Checklist**

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#### **Tip #5: Enable Opportunities for Periodic Face-to-Face Interaction**

Schedule face-to-face team kick-off meetings and regularly scheduled subsequent live meetings. These face-to-face meetings can be incorporated with team-building exercises to give staff additional opportunities to develop a personal connection and build camaraderie. If meetings are infrequent, create virtual team-building games, such as having everyone send in little-known facts, then displaying it for the group to guess who it describes.



## Yahoo Eliminating Telecommuting: Misuse of Executive Power

Rob Enderle, Unfiltered Opinion

Marissa Mayer, Yahoo's CEO, has been doing a lot of things right in her effort to turn around Yahoo. However, it was only a matter of time before she made a big mistake. CEOs are no more perfect than anyone else, and she is inexperienced in the role. Eliminating telecommuting was just such a mistake and it could significantly hamper her ability to complete Yahoo's turnaround.

Here's why.

I learned about mentoring while at IBM. It puts its top executive candidates through a massive amount of mentoring and focused training on how to be a top executive. I was honored to be part of that program, and my experiences there lead me to believe Marissa Mayer made a critical mistake when choosing to discontinue telecommuting.

For the damage it will do, I'll actually go back to my graduate and undergraduate work, much of which was in Manpower Management, back when HR was more of a science and less of compliance organization. Professors like Maslow, Firo, and Hertzberg taught that a move like Mayer made could cripple productivity and do far more damage than good.

Finally, and more recently, I watched Intel make this same mistake over a decade ago. Andy Grove often points to it as one of the firms' biggest mistakes (not the biggest, though).

### **Mentoring**

One of the problems facing most new CEOs is that they were never mentored into the role. A CEO job is very different from any other job you are likely to hold. This is because things that worked great when you were an executive and advancing, like self-promotion and pushing the envelope, can backfire when you have the top job. We saw that happen with Carly Fiorina at HP, which is why, even though she demonstrated a talent in line with Steve Jobs, she got fired from that job. In fact, Jobs himself was fired from Apple, which allowed him to season as a CEO before successfully running that company years later.

One of the lessons one of my mentors taught me comes to mind when looking at Mayer's decision. At the time, I was working as an internal problem solver at IBM and was struggling with a



bureaucracy that fought any change with a passion. I asked several executives, who could see the problems as clearly as I did, why they just didn't order a fix.

While one of the answers pointed to the problems in IBM at the time (an unwillingness to make waves and put his pension at risk), the other was to the point. His reason was that you have to allow managers to manage. If you micromanage everything, you'll not only burn yourself out, you'll slow down decisions significantly and you may actually do more damage than good. At the CEO level, you just don't have a sharp enough view into the unique problems that exist at the bottom of the organization. If you focus on them, the problems you should be dealing with at the top, or more succinctly, the job you were hired to do, won't get done.

The decisions surrounding where an employee works are not CEO decisions, they are first-line management decisions. When a CEO starts making decisions for first-line managers, she will likely do more damage than good.

### **Science of Manpower Management**

Specifically, when dealing with entitlements, the research into employee behavior suggests what things work for motivation and what things don't. Whether you are talking Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs or, in this case, closer to Herzberg's delineation, you find that an entitlement, when eliminated, can have dramatic consequences.

This can break down into a number of areas, ranging from a feeling of equity (people likely joined Yahoo at least partially because the firm had a more open telecommuting policy and now feel betrayed) to fairness (removing an entitlement often causes employees to feel they are being punished for something they didn't do). The end result is that, according to the research, removing an entitlement has a bigger negative impact on productivity than putting it in place had a positive impact.

So, assuming the research still holds, by making this decision, Yahoo productivity should drop significantly.

### **Intel Lesson**

This was proven when, over a decade ago, Intel implemented its "Back to Basics" program. Intel was getting beat at the time by AMD and its financials were trending in the wrong direction. Intel executive management decided that one of the big reasons behind this was that too many Intel employees were taking advantage and they made a draconian decision.

All employees were logged in when they arrived in the morning and logged out at night. They were expected to work on campus for the full eight hours they were supposed to be there, and the result of this policy was almost catastrophic.

What was learned was that employees who were screwing around came into work and became more of a distraction. Employees who were working evenings and weekends stopped and started working the prescribed eight hours per day instead. Not only didn't productivity increase, it cratered, because the overachievers who had been driving the company stopped overachieving like they hit a wall, many of them choosing to leave the company and work for competitors.

The policy was reversed and the lesson hard-learned.

### **Wrapping Up: Abuse of Power**

You can't run a big company without delegating. Managers have to be allowed to manage. If there is a good reason for an employee to telecommute, the decision should be made by the manager. Telecommuting should be a privilege and never an entitlement, however, and employees that misuse the privilege should lose it or their jobs. Through this decision, Yahoo productivity should drop, the firm will have a harder time acquiring and retaining key employees, and if Yahoo follows what historically happens next, this policy, or Mayer herself, will be reversed within 24 months.

While this is Mayer's first major mistake, it is one that can be reversed. But until it is, and particularly while the CEO is micromanaging first-line managers, Yahoo will be an employer to avoid.

This is an abuse of CEO power and CEOs who abuse their power often find their career as CEO to be unusually short and, unfortunately, problematic.

# Marissa Mayer, Telecommuting and Honest Abe

Carl Weinschenk, Data and Telecom

Many commentators have weighed in on Marissa Mayer's ill-conceived ban on telecommuting.

Rob Enderle, my colleague here at IT Business Edge, suggests that Mayer is a victim of her inexperience. He writes that being the top gun is a lot different from being a high-level underling, and that Mayer will need to reverse direction if she wants to be successful. Another IT Business Edge blogger, Don Tennant, suggested that Mayer – perhaps losing her bearings because of the amount of money she is making – should remember how important telecommuting is to young mothers like her and to families.

I totally agree with Rob, from his reasoning through to his conclusions. I have a couple of things to add: The Yahoo situation is a great event for telecommuting, unified communications and potentially for Marissa Mayer. Also, Abraham Lincoln was one smart fellow.

Let's start with Mr. Lincoln. In the book *Team of Rivals* -- one of the main sources for the movie *Lincoln* -- author Doris Kearns Goodwin presents the strange image of Lincoln calling on the egomaniacal commander of the Army of the Potomac, George McClellan, and being made to wait in his parlor for long periods. In one instance, McClellan simply went to bed while the president was downstairs. Goodwin describes the wrath Lincoln's staffers felt.

Lincoln, however, displayed no anger. Lincoln understood that his goal – winning the Civil War – was paramount. Nothing else mattered much. A theme of the book is that Lincoln, under the folksy and funny exterior, was extraordinarily shrewd. He didn't care about the slights and probably figured that it was necessary to treat McClellan in this way to get as much out of him as he did (which, it turns out, wasn't too much). Writes Goodwin: "He would hold McClellan's horse, he once said, if a victory could be achieved."

The point of this in the context of Mayer's move is that blanket decisions and edicts from on high rarely are good ones. Lincoln's overriding desire was to win the war, and he naively thought that McClellan was the general to do that. He was mistaken in that – thank goodness U.S. Grant came along – but he managed people in a way designed to achieve his goal, not flex his muscles. Marissa Mayer won't be called on to save the Union, but she should read the book.

Fast forwarding to modern times, it's been an extraordinarily good week for unified communications and telecommuting. Mayer's pronouncement and the firestorm it created is as good a definition of "teachable moment" as is imaginable. Suddenly, the very issue that telecommuting advocates and unified communications vendors have spent years pushing – the value of working from outside the office – is for the moment a high-profile national debate.

People in the marketing departments of UC vendors, service providers, value-added resellers and other members of the food chain should pounce. They should be begging for emergency funds to market and advertise. For once, people are listening.

And what should they be saying? Actually, it's pretty simple. They should cede the point that lots of good ideas happen by the coffee station and in the parking lot and that some of these are lost in a highly decentralized organization. But, after that, they should maintain that people are increasingly at home with electronic communications and the gap between the creativity at play in the hallways and on Facebook is narrowing by the day, especially among younger employees.

The marketing materials should remind people that telecommuting opens the organizations to legions of talented and motivated workers who simply don't live near company offices. Those good ideas that don't hatch because people aren't in the office are offset by an order of magnitude by other good ideas that come from remote workers in Antimony, Ellisburg and Pepin (Utah, New York and Wisconsin, respectively). These workers are isolated and presumably have fewer job opportunities. They therefore are more likely to work hard to keep the job.

Finally, this is an opportunity for Marissa Mayer. She's gotten good grades before this and seems to be a genuine person. At the same time, the upper echelon of corporate executives are thought to be arrogant. Indeed, their collective image is a bit McClellan-esque. Yahoo shouldn't equivocate. Mayer should reverse herself and explain that she is trying to get her arms around an awful lot in a short period and made a bad call. If she does, she will end up more popular than ever.

# Yahoo CEO Needs to Put All Families, Not Just Her Own, Ahead of Business

Don Tennant, From Under the Rug

If you haven't read my colleague Rob Enderle's post about the colossal mistake Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer made when she issued the perplexing directive to ban telecommuting at the company, do yourself a favor and read it. Enderle makes a great case for why the micromanagement of first-line managers is an abuse of CEO power. And Carl Weinschenk argues that Mayer may soon rue throwing off all the great advantages that unified communications (along with telecommuting) have brought to her company. But I would argue that there's something even more disturbing about her decision: She's kicking what she claims to be her own core values to the curb.

The irony here is fascinating. Just three months ago, Mayer proclaimed that her priorities were "God, family, Yahoo—in that order." Two months earlier, she had given birth to a baby boy, so it seemed only natural for a new mom to put family ahead of business. It's a shame that Mayer has taken such a senseless step that seriously harms the ability of all the other moms and dads at Yahoo to live their lives with the same priorities.

Banning the option to work remotely deprives those moms and dads of the flexibility parents need in the never-ending quest to balance their personal and professional lives. The move bespeaks a detachment from the reality of everyday life for her employees — especially the moms — who struggle to earn an income and nurture their children all at the same time. For Mayer, that challenge probably doesn't seem all that difficult. After all, with a compensation package that's estimated to be as high as \$129 million, and the wherewithal to hire nannies and housekeepers and all the other help she could possibly need, the idea of a flexible work schedule that includes a telecommuting option no doubt seems entirely unnecessary. It's probably very difficult to empathize with a mom who sees that option as a godsend.

MomsRising.org, an organization that promotes the fair treatment of mothers and other women, has issued a statement in response to Mayer's directive. It should be required reading for Mayer and any other executive who might be inclined to follow her lead:

Yahoo's announcement that it is ending its policy of allowing employees to work remotely is being met with shocked disbelief. The fact that an Internet company, which has contributed to the ability for people to work from home, is



ending this long-standing practice is troubling, especially given the immense success of companies who regularly use remote work options. Flexible work environments can be highly effective in many jobs, not just for parents or others with family obligations, but for anyone. Removing this option cuts a company off from the talented and innovative workers they need to remain competitive.

The modern workforce needs modern workplace policies and practices. As technology has made possible these advances, the composition of our labor force has also changed: Women now comprise half the paid labor force for the first time in history and three-quarters of moms are now in the labor force. Most families now need two parents working for pay to make ends meet.

From the highly paid to those making minimum wage, far too few women in America have flexible work options — almost three-fourths of working adults say they don't control their work schedules. In fact, the top reason identified by highly educated and trained women for leaving the "fast track" is the lack of family time.

Companies like Yahoo, which need highly creative and talented people for their work forces must understand the important benefits of allowing employees to work remotely on their overall productivity and the well-being of our nation's families.

In other words, Ms. Mayer, if you truly believe that family comes before company, have the decency to ensure that it's not just your own family that's able to live that way. You're not the only mom at Yahoo, just the most powerful one. Have the good sense to use that power wisely.

# Telecommunicating Proponents Should Push the Conversation Marissa Mayer Started

Carl Weinschenk, Data and Telecom

It was either Joseph Stalin or Rahm Emanuel, or both, who said that it is a shame to let a good crisis go to waste.

Last week's media attention to the new rules at Yahoo regarding telecommuting of course is not a crisis, except possibly for President and CEO Marissa Mayer. However, the attention Mayer brought to the topic by shutting down the company's telecommuting program certainly was noteworthy and got people's attention.

These opportunities are rare. I suggested that the pro-telecommuting community – a mix of environmental advocates, hardware and software vendors, promoters of a positive work/life balance and others – should use the attention to further their cause.

It is imperative that this community follow up while the rhetorical iron is hot. People move on quickly. The first step is doing some research to be effective. The Mother Nature Network offers links to eight relevant articles, while the Australian site Smart Company lays out reasons supporting Mayer's decision. The latter is particularly important. If proponents want to get the most out of the opportunity Mayer has provided, they must be able to deal with the negatives of telecommuting. She almost certainly overreacted and handled the situation poorly. But to assume that she didn't raise relevant issues is a mistake.

CIO Insight posted a slideshow describing nine best practices for telecommuting. At least two of the suggestions – that telecommuting be discontinued with one week's warning and that workers be required to attend meetings in person if requested – suggest a vision of telecommuting in which the worker lives relatively near the office. That would neutralize one of the big advantages of telecommuting: Attracting talented employees regardless of his or her locale.

Many of the questions that should be raised in the media and, when possible, in boardrooms focus on telecommuting policy. Some sample issues:

- What level of working should be allowed to work from home? Are there employees whose work simply is too sensitive to be let out of the office? Are there others whose work inherently must be done on site?

- Is telecommuting a recruitment tool and perk for people who live nearby, such as the situation implied by the CIO Insight slideshow? Or is telecommuting a tool for finding talent far away from the corporate locales?
- What types of security and other equipment management issues need to be tackled? The minutia of telecommuters' equipment is vital – and is closely tied to the evolution of bring-your-own-device (BYOD) approaches.

In addition to those questions, telecommuting proponents need to take tangible steps toward pushing their agenda. For instance, it is important to recruit champions as high in the C-level suite as possible. Demonstrating the benefits of telecommuting – in worker productivity, skills brought to an organization and savings in real estate and other overhead costs – is vital.

The point is that Marissa Mayer opened the conversation. It is up to telecommuting proponents to keep it going – and in the right direction. The opportunity to educate the public and corporate executives won't come around again soon.

# Yahoo Controversy: What Counts Is How Your Telecommuting Affects Your Colleagues, Researcher Says

Don Tennant, From Under the Rug

The uproar surrounding Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer's decision to end the option for employees to work from home is starting to blow over, just as Mayer predicted it would. So now that the dust has settled, it makes sense to consider the extent to which people like me, who have vocally opposed the decision, might have overreacted.

First of all, my understanding is nobody really knows exactly how Yahoo employees currently working from home will be affected, or exactly how the policy will be implemented. The statement that was made in the memo that went out to all Yahoo employees wasn't all that explicit:

Beginning in June, we're asking all employees with work-from-home arrangements to work in Yahoo! offices. If this impacts you, your management has already been in touch with next steps. And, for the rest of us who occasionally have to stay home for the cable guy, please use your best judgment in the spirit of collaboration.

That was it, and to my knowledge, Mayer hasn't publicly clarified what constitutes "work-from-home arrangements." Are we talking strictly about employees who work from home full-time? One day a week? Two days a week? Is it still OK to work from home two or three days a month simply because stuff happens and that flexibility makes life easier? Nobody really seems to know.

I had the opportunity to talk about all of this with Ben Waber, president and CEO of Sociometric Solutions, a visiting scientist at the MIT Media Lab, and author of the forthcoming book, "People Analytics: How Social Sensing Technology Will Transform Business and What It Tells Us about the Future of Work." According to Waber, Mayer got it right.

For starters, Waber said, what needs to be considered is not only the impact of telecommuting on the individual working from home, but the impact on the individual's colleagues:

If you look at the data, there's been a lot of research on how much people telecommute and how that relates to their individual performance and job satisfaction—and also, importantly, the satisfaction and performance of the people

they work with. Essentially, once you start getting beyond one day a week working from home, there starts to be a real impact on the people that you work with, particularly in fields that are dealing with more complex stuff. ... It's one thing if you always work from home and you may be less productive, but it doesn't affect the people you work with—it may not be such a big deal. But the issue is that this sets a cultural precedent—I know that at Yahoo it was pretty endemic that, for example, on Fridays no one would be in the office, so you would have that cultural effect. But also, when you think about these dependencies and about how your communication with other people impacts them, that's really what the story's about—it's about a social story.

I fully agreed that it's a social story. That being the case, I asked Waber what he would say to a mom who really needs the flexibility of working from home at least a couple of days a week in order to juggle everything she needs to juggle, if she could now no longer do that. Waber said a lot of it comes down to lifestyle choices:

For people who joined Yahoo thinking it was a certain kind of company, they got a raw deal. There's no way around it—if they joined Yahoo and it was the kind of company where you could work from home all the time, it really stinks for them. You would hope that Yahoo would phase this in slowly. That being said, there are certain lifestyle choices that people have to make. For certain types of careers, they are very collaborative, and despite advances in communications technology, we're still not at the point where we're replicating face-to-face.

One of the reasons this has become a larger issue is because people are couching it as a women's issue. But I think that's actually being unfair to women, because first of all, there's lots of data showing that if you're not in the workplace meeting with your colleagues, you're less productive. So if you're offering this as a program explicitly for women, you're essentially making them less productive, and they're going to advance more slowly in their careers. If you have women who need to have more flexible schedules because they need to take care of their kids, my question is, what are the fathers doing? For example, my wife is in Switzerland this week, so I have to drive four hours a day to get my son to daycare and back—but it's something that I just have to do. So it's an egalitarian issue, and more of a societal thing and a lifestyle choice that people have to think about.



I wanted to get Waber's thoughts on the Yahoo decision being made and conveyed as a blanket edict coming down from the CEO, and whether that was a decision that's better made at a managerial level closer to the employees who are affected. He said it depends on how the policy is implemented:

There's certainly a cultural decision in saying, "We want to have a culture where people are expected to be in the office." That being said, if this were applied blindly, it definitely would be a bad decision. Think about it this way: If you have something really stressful happening at home, like your kid is sick, if you're not allowed to deal with that, you're not going to be very effective at work, and you're probably not going to like work as much. So the idea that a couple times a month, you should be able to work from home for whatever reason, that's a very sensible thing. The data shows you're still very effective—you don't lose anything doing that. So if Yahoo applies it in such a way where there's some sanity and some trust in the way people are using it, then it would work out fine. On the other hand, if you have a deadline, and the cable guy is coming, you know what? You can probably reschedule the cable guy. But again, if it's something where there's something serious going on at home, it really makes sense to stay home. I have no idea how it's going to be implemented at Yahoo. But I think that's really going to be the metric that they have to be evaluated on.

Waber had some intriguing insights about how co-location is especially important in the IT profession. I'll share those insights in a subsequent post.