

Chapter 4

Telework: Not Business as Usual

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the technology, human resource management, and service quality issues that inhibit and/or support managers and employees in adopting sustainable telework programs using data from two Australian case studies. The Telework Conceptual Framework developed in this chapter provides guidance for government policymakers and managers in organisations (SMEs, not-for-profit, and large organisations) on the choice of technology, human resource management considerations, and service quality issues relating to the sustainable adoption of telework. A business case for telework should include the components of technology, human resource management, and service quality (customer service) that will contribute to an organisation's profitability. The contribution of telework to an organisation's competitiveness is an important prerequisite for management to embrace telework and other flexible work practices.

INTRODUCTION

Telework (other terms in the literature include telecommuting, remote work, anywhere working, e-work, home-based work, virtual work) has been the subject of both academic and practitioner literature since Nilles (1975) first coined the phrase 'telecommuting' in the 1970s. However, telework is not 'business as usual' for many organisations and has not disseminated through the workforce to the extent expected (Noonan, 2012).

There has been little investigation on how best to implement telework in organisations (Bailey &

Kurland, 2002) or how to utilise telework to improve service quality and competitive advantage. Previous research has focused on examining the benefits for individual workers.

Research has shown that there are significant benefits with telework. A key benefit is that employees (and often their managers) report that teleworkers are more productive (Bentley et al., 2013; Bloom, 2014). Other documented benefits include reduced absenteeism, significant savings in real estate costs, increased quality of work and better work/life balance (Bentley et al., 2013; Noonan, 2012; Whitehouse, 2002).

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Conversely, telework has a number of limitations and detractors. Employees can feel socially and professionally isolated, there may be a tendency to work longer hours (work intensification), and career development may be problematic (Michielsens, Bingham, & Clarke, 2013; Noonan, 2012). Other limitations reported in the literature include not all jobs or employees have access to telework (equity), resistance by managers due to communication and supervisory issues and challenges around employee engagement (Pearce II, 2009; Peters, 2007). Media attention in 2013 regarding the decision made by the CEO of Yahoo to ban flexible work arrangements including telework, reignited debate about the appropriateness (or not) of telework, particularly relating to productivity claims (Cairns, 2013). Aside from the productivity issue, another key issue canvassed by the CEO of Yahoo was how innovation and creativity occurs if employees are not engaging in a face-to-face environment.

Organisations need to develop a business case that promotes telework as a source of competitive advantage rather than just a cost saving mechanism (Offstein, 2010). The purpose of this chapter is to examine the technology, human resource and service quality issues for achieving a sustainable telework program that contributes to an organisation's competitiveness using data from two Australian case studies. The conceptual framework provides guidance for practitioners and researchers on the components of a business case for successful telework adoption.

BACKGROUND

Status of Telework

Telework refers to white collar employees who work (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Hunton, 2005) usually a number of days per week or month from home using information and communications

technology (ICT). The European Framework Agreement on Telework of 2002 defines telework as: "a form of organising and/or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/ relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employer's premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis" (Welz, 2010, p. 3). Some EU countries have adopted this definition while others have developed definitions of their own (Welz, 2010). Other terms used to describe the use of technology to work outside a traditional office include telecommuting, e-work, home worker and workshifting (Telework Research Network, 2011).

In the USA employees working from home one day a week was estimated to be 11 per cent, although more recent statistics suggest that employees accessing telework are declining (Moore, Rhodes, & Stanley, 2011). In the 2013 WorldatWork survey, emailed to 5,137 members around the globe with 566 usable responses, found that telework is offered by 88% of organisations in some form. The most common was ad-hoc telework (WorldatWork, 2013, p. 6). Telework options, with the exception of ad-hoc telework, decreased in availability by eight percentage points. The survey results showed that regular telework was slightly less common than the previous survey in 2010 (WorldatWork, 2013).

The most current assessment of telework in Australia is from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey (Wooden, 2013). The HILDA survey uses the term 'home worker' defined as "any worker who works the majority of their hours in the main job at home" (Wooden, 2013, p. 107). The survey found that in 2010, 23 percent of employees worked at least some of the time at home and only 5 percent worked the majority of their work hours at home. Sixty percent had a formal arrangement with their employer with most in managerial, professional and clerical occupation groups (Wooden, 2013).

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