

Chapter 36

Leadership in Higher Education in Adopting a Telecommuting Program

P. J. Snodgrass
University of Tennessee, USA

Ernest W. Brewer
University of Tennessee, USA

ABSTRACT

This study explored the perceived motivators and constraints that influence adoption of a telecommuting program at higher education institutions. Participants were 102 members of the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) from 11 southern states. Sixty-four participants completed a 4-part survey via the World Wide Web; 38 participants completed the survey by mail. Both adopters and non-adopters of telecommuting programs identified that the primary motivator for adopting a telecommuting program was improvement of overall benefits to employees. Whereas adopters reported that cost of implementation was the primary constraint to adopting a telecommuting program, non-adopters reported a variety of other factors as the primary constraint. Results of this study have implications for implementation of and research on telecommuting programs in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Nilles (1998) coined the term “telecommuting” while conducting research for energy conservation during the Arab oil embargo of the 1970s. Since the 1970s, the number of telecommuters as well

as interest in offering telecommuting as a viable management option has risen steadily. Thompson (1999) reported that a 1995 survey indicated that almost two thirds of all *Fortune 1000* companies had a telecommuting program in place, although only a small percentage of those programs were formal. The majority of companies offered telecommuting as an ad hoc option for selected

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employees. Companies offering formal telecommuting programs have included Apple Computer, Bell Atlantic, Boeing, CISCO Systems, Compaq, IBM, Intel, MCI Communications, Novell, Oracle, Pacific Bell, and many others (Langhoff, 1999).

As indicated by Langhoff's (1999) list, high-tech and information technology (IT) organizations have been the first to embrace telecommuting. Higher education institutions—with a history of being slow to adopt innovative programs—have fallen behind corporate America in adopting telecommuting programs. A search of the literature yielded just one study—Goldberg's 1993 research—that examined telecommuting program adoption in higher education. Because higher education institutions generally have structures and levels of complexity not found in business and industry, there might be differences in factors influencing adoption of new programs such as telecommuting as well. Therefore, research addressing telecommuting program adoption in higher education is needed. This study takes a step toward filling that void by exploring motivators and constraints to adopting a telecommuting program at higher education institutions.

BACKGROUND

Organizational Characteristics and Consideration

Factors Present in the Adoption Decision Process

Among the characteristics identified in the literature as being related to the adoption of telecommuting is the level of innovation in an organization (Bernardino, 1996; Tomaskovic-Devy & Risman, 1993). Furthermore, innovation is constrained by such characteristics as size and age of an organization and level of bureaucratic control. Larger organizations generally have been less innovative

and more bureaucratic than smaller organizations (Tomaskovic-Devy & Risman).

Rogers (1983) addressed the attributes of innovations and their adoption rate. He described five attributes of innovations: (a) relative advantage, (b) compatibility, (c) complexity, (d) trialability, and (e) observability (p. 211). The first attribute indicates the strength of reward or punishment as a result of adoption of an innovation. Compatibility is how closely the innovation matches the existing social and cultural beliefs and need for innovation. The attribute complexity addresses the difficulty of using and understanding the innovation, and trialability is the degree to which an innovation undergoes experimentation. According to Rogers, these attributes are part of the complex process of determining the rate of adoption of innovations.

Other organizational characteristics that might influence adoption of a new program like telecommuting include trust in an organization's culture (Brewer & Snodgrass, 2007; Harrington & Ruppel, 1999) and the decision-making process that is in place (Yen & Mahmassani, 1997). Harrington and Ruppel wrote about the importance of culture in an organization and how trust and group values affect the adoption level of telecommuting. Yen and Mahmassani reported that the complexity of an employer's decision to adopt telecommuting is obvious because of the various means of decision-making in an organization. For example, whereas some organizations have one decision-maker, others have teams or groups who make decisions about changes on the scale of telecommuting.

Ellison (1999) studied the state of the art of telework research. Kraut (as cited in Ellison) stated that resistance to change was firmly surrounded by a long history of bureaucratic organizational structures. These structures are easily threatened by change; therefore, adoption of new technology (e.g., telecommuting) is met with resistance. Along the same theme, Goldberg (1993) stated that academia has been slow to adopt telecommuting because of the diffusion of administration. Since bureaucracy and diffusion are found frequently in

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