Does “Out of Sight” Mean “Out of Mind”?
An Empirical Investigation of the Career Advancement Prospects of Telecommuters

Donna Weaver McCloskey, Widener University, USA
Magid Igbaria, Claremont Graduate School, USA

ABSTRACT

The fear that telecommuting will have a negative impact on career advancement prospects has been a barrier to telecommuting acceptance. This study sought to examine whether professionals who telecommute on a part-time basis did indeed experience less advancement prospects than their non-telecommuting peers did. The results indicate that this fear is unfounded. Telecommuting did not have a direct effect on career advancement prospects or an indirect effect through job performance evaluations. Additionally, the level of telecommuting participation did not have an impact on career advancement. Employees who telecommuted more frequently did not experience significantly different job performance evaluations or career advancement prospects than those who telecommuted less. The paper concludes with the limitations of this study and directions for future research.

Keywords: telecommuting, telework, distributed work arrangements, career advancement, job performance evaluations

INTRODUCTION

Telecommuting has been hailed as a work arrangement that can offer innumerable benefits to society, organizations and individuals. Societal benefits include reduced air pollution from the reduction in people traveling to work (DiMartino and Wirth, 1990) and employment for those people who are unable to leave their homes (Mahfood, 1992). Organizations realize a number of benefits from telecommuting programs. In addition to increasing productivity (Hartman, Stoner and Arora, 1992; Pratt, 1984; Weiss, 1994) and increasing retention and recruiting (DiMartino and Wirth, 1990), telecommuting has also been found to contribute to cost savings from the reduction in office space and related overhead expenses (Jacobs and
VanSell, 1996). Employees who telecommute have reported many benefits of telecommuting, including eliminating long commutes (DiMartino and Wirth, 1990; Mahfood, 1992), decreasing personal costs such as transportation and parking (Fuss, 1995) and increasing flexibility to balance work and family commitments (DuBrin, 1991). But despite these many potential benefits, there is pervasive fear that limits telecommuting participation. Many employees have said they will not telecommute, despite the many benefits to themselves, society and the organization, because they fear that the work arrangement will have an adverse effect on their career advancement prospects (Connelly, 1995).

The impact of telecommuting on career advancement has been the subject of a great deal of speculation, yet it remains one of the least understood aspects of this work arrangement. Generally, managers and employees believe telecommuting will limit visibility and consequently, restrict career advancement opportunities (Bailey and Foley, 1990; Hamilton, 1987; Hooks, 1990). Employees believe limited career advancement opportunities to be one of the greatest disadvantages of telecommuting (DuBrin and Barnard, 1993; Khalifa and Davison, 2000). However, anecdotal evidence suggests that telecommuting may contribute to higher productivity and, consequently, greater advancement opportunities (Olson, 1989; Riley and McCloskey, 1997; Solomon and Templer, 1993). In a pilot study with 100 telecommuting managers, Bell Atlantic found 27% had higher work ratings and several were promoted at a time when promotions were not common (Weiss, 1994). Other research has suggested telecommuting will have no impact on career advancement prospects (Olson, 1989; Pratt, 1984). Pilot study results have provided mixed information on the promotability of telecommuters. For example, in a small study of nine remote employees, it was reported that four employees felt their promotability was not affected, two felt their promotability was increased because their work was recognized and rewarded, and three believed their promotability was hindered due to less visibility (Olson, 1983).

It is very important for both researchers and practitioners to understand how telecommuting impacts work outcomes, specifically career advancement prospects. The many potential advantages of telecommuting will only be realized if employees choose to participate in this work arrangement. Despite the promises of cleaner air, reduced stress, increased productivity, and a better balance between work and family, employees are fearful to accept a work arrangement that may have a negative impact on their career. It has even been suggested that should employees choose to telecommute and then experience limited career advancement opportunities that they may sue because they have been discriminated against due to perceived inequities of treatment (Fitzgerald, 1994). In addition to avoiding litigious threats, it is important to understand the impact of telecommuting on career advancement so that programs and training can be designed to reduce the potential negative outcomes of telecommuting and therefore encourage employee participation.

For almost as long as telecommuting has existed, researchers have called for the examination of how telecommuting affects career development (DeSanctis, 1983; Olson, 1983). Empirical research has not yet adequately addressed this issue for professional employees. Telecommuting participation is rapidly growing, particularly for professionals who work at home on a part-time basis. It has been reported that nine
Related Content

Quality Management and Control
www.irma-international.org/chapter/quality-management-control/21636/

Efficient Data Management in e-Business Transactions
www.irma-international.org/article/efficient-data-management-business-transactions/44555/

Web Caching
www.irma-international.org/chapter/web-caching/14185/

Effect of Self-Directed Learning Readiness by Learner’s Interaction on Social Network Games
Hyungsung Park (2013). Teaching Cases Collection (pp. 47-60).
www.irma-international.org/article/effect-of-self-directed-learning-readiness-by-learners-interaction-on-social-network-games/100809/

Hybrid Offshoring: Composite Personae and Evolving Collaboration Technologies
www.irma-international.org/article/hybrid-offshoring-composite-personae-evolving/1335/