

Chapter 1

Examining Tensions in Telework Policies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines workplace policies related to virtual work, with a specific focus on telework policies. Such policies are important to successful telework in communicating rules and expectations and providing a basis for negotiation between individual teleworkers and their employers. A content analysis of 35 state government telework policies revealed that such policies are characterized by two major tensions between autonomy and control and between flexibility and rigidity. The first tension relates to issues such as individual versus organizational responsibility for monitoring performance, providing equipment, and ensuring physical and data security, while the second tension relates to the standardization of working hours and eligibility criteria, whether rules are clear or left ambiguous, and the degree of work/family balance. Although explicit contradictions between stated benefits and realities of telework implementation may be problematic, most of the policies used tension productively by providing enough ambiguity to allow for competing individual and organizational interests to co-exist. Practical implications for teleworkers and their managers are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

There is little debate about the growing importance of virtual work (e.g., telework, virtual teams) in

organizations. In some cases these virtual forms represent a type of alternative work arrangement driven predominantly by employee needs and in other instances they reflect management efforts to leverage global expertise in dealing with organi-

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zational challenges—but in all situations, virtual forms present several key communication challenges for organizations and their members. From a communication perspective, there has been an interest in issues such as communication technology use (Scott & Timmerman, 1999; Timmerman & Scott, 2006), cross-cultural communication (Cramton & Hinds, 2004; Gibson & Gibbs, 2006; Grosse, 2002), distanced leadership (Connaughton & Daly, 2004; 2005), fostering identification and shared identity (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005; Sivunen, 2006; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 1999), and creating trust (Jarvenpaa, Shaw, & Staples, 2004; Walther & Bunz, 2005) among virtual workers and teams (for a review, see Gibbs, Nekrassova, Grushina, & Abdul Wahab, 2008).

One additional communication topic that has not yet received adequate attention concerns the policies and guidelines surrounding virtual work. Organizations have historically developed policies surrounding issues such as operating procedures, governance, member rights and duties. One function of socialization efforts in most organizations (see Jablin, 2001) is to introduce new members to the formal policies and guidelines of the organization. Even though important informal communication may not always align with these formal policies—which sometimes go unread or are even unknown to organizational members—one should not underestimate the importance of these policies. They do communicate official guidelines and rules relevant to rewards/sanctions so that members know how to act; thus, they represent a type of directive in Speech Act Theory (see Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001). Even when unknown or unfamiliar, they are legally forceful. They are often produced in response to organizational practices and may in turn shape various practices. A wide range of organizational members are involved in the creation of such documents—and an even greater percentage are impacted by them. They may also serve as a starting point for ongoing

dialogue about issues or even as something to be communicatively resisted.

Although the growth in information and communication technologies (ICTs) has led to increased development of policies governing communication—occurring in various types of organizations, with policies developed by multiple stakeholders, and producing online policies that are discussed and updated with greater regularity than ever before—it is not clear how extensive or adequate those policies addressing virtual work are. Regardless, such policies may matter greatly. The success of teleworking, for example, largely depends on whether organizations effectively communicate its necessity and benefits to their employees, which can be done partially by “the provision of carefully crafted organizational policies” (Perez, Sanchez, & Carnicer, 2003, p. 68). However, when policies do not communicate effectively, are not carefully crafted, or otherwise suggest inconsistencies, virtual work practices are almost certainly influenced. As we attempt to illustrate in this chapter through the use of a dialectical framework applied to virtual work (Gibbs, 2009), these policies regularly reveal contradictions and tensions that challenge virtual workers and the organizations for which they work.

Thus, one objective of this chapter is to establish the importance of workplace policies related to virtual work, focusing most specifically on telework policies. We then describe the methods used to analyze a set of telework policies from U.S. state governments—which allows us to meet our second objective of describing policies and articulating tensions that exist within and across them. Finally, we seek to offer some scholarly and practical implications from this work. Better understanding of the nature of virtual work policies as a form of communication is essential for describing virtual work behaviors, organizational rewards, and several other workplace dynamics.

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