

Chapter 1

The Way We Work: Past, Present, and Future

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ABSTRACT

Information technology provides unprecedented opportunities to work virtually. Despite a handful of perceived drawbacks, telecommuting offers society, organizations, and individuals numerous benefits. However, the embrace of telecommuting has been lukewarm at best. One possible explanation is that the traditional idea of a commuter workforce is so strongly ingrained that it will take more time before people begin to regard the office as superfluous. This chapter examines what the idea of “work” looked like in the past, looks like in the present, and what it may look like in the future. By examining the factors that contributed to how we worked both before and after the industrial revolution, and questioning whether these factors are still valid today, this chapter prompts us to reevaluate our assumption about the way we work, and prepare for the changes that are presently taking place. Lastly, this chapter will explore the practical and research implications of virtual work.

INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to overestimate the impact of information technology on every aspect of our lives. What was unthinkable in the past has become a routine convenience: we can play tennis with an avatar in front of a TV set, customize a dream car

online, shop at online stores that stay open 24/7, and catch up on what our friends were up to last night on Facebook. In so many areas, we have responded enthusiastically to the opportunities and possibilities that information technology has offered us. However, in terms of where we work, we are reluctant to take full advantage of the flexibility it brings.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0963-1.ch001

Information technology has made telecommuting possible: instead of being physically present at workplace, employees are able to work from home, a café, the library, or any place with internet connection. Nonetheless, in spite of the convenience and flexibility, many of us still consider the *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Wilson & Franzen, 2002) the archetype of the working man; going to work implies proper dress and a daily commute.

Telecommuting provides numerous benefits, however, such as saved time from eliminated commutes, fewer cars on the roads, cleaner air, less dependence on gasoline, lower operational costs for businesses, widening talent pools, greater appeal to prospective employees, and an easier time balancing work and family responsibilities. Despite the benefits, telecommuting has not yet received widespread acceptance. We seem to welcome the idea of telecommuting, yet we are either not ready or not willing to commit to it in practice. In 2008, 52 million people could have done their jobs virtually, and yet just over 2 percent of non-self-employed workers were telecommuters, and the number of full-time telecommuters is significantly smaller than the number of occasional telecommuters (Center for Democracy and Technology & Earnest and Young, 2008). Companies such as IBM had offer telecommuting opportunities, and yet only a few employees showed interest; it appears most still prefer to be road warriors (Telework Research Network, 2011).

There are many possible explanations for telecommuting's lack of popularity. One of them is our natural resistance to change and our reluctance to experiment with the unfamiliar. We have been commuting to workplaces for so long, it may seem like that is how we have always worked and always will work. Both employees and employers are accustomed to this arrangement: employees understand what is expected of them in order to function effectively in the workplace, and employers have well-established guidelines for employee management. It is hard for both parties to think

differently. Given these attitudes, telecommuting can cause uneasy feelings for both employees and employers. Employees fear the loss of benefits that “face time” at an office can bring, including being up to date with the latest news in the organization, maintaining visibility that could lead to a promotion, or satisfying the need for social contact by interacting with colleagues. Employers, on the other hand, are concerned about issues such as telecommuters' organizational commitment, evaluation, and management of virtual workers, remote IT security, and other similar concerns.

The purpose of this chapter is to motivate us to evaluate assumptions behind the resistance to telecommuting. First, we will take a look at the historical record to see how we used to work, and then we will examine how and why work is done today. In the end, we will consider how we may work in the future. We will also discuss the challenges that wider embrace of telecommunication may bring, and how we might better prepare ourselves.

Telecommuting is commonly defined as employees doing their job from home or another location besides the employer's site, using information and telecommunication technologies. However, there remains some ambiguity regarding the actual amount of time spent working remotely; does telecommuting one hour per week, five hours per week, or ten hours per month really constitute true telecommuting? Since telecommuting 100 percent of the time does the most to save on office costs, alleviate congestion problems on highways, and reduce air pollution, in this chapter, we define the concept as employees telecommuting full time during regular work hours.

AGRICULTURAL PERIOD

Work from Home

Looking back through history, it becomes clear that going to the office every day is a very new

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