

Chapter IX

Telecommuting and the Management of the Human Moment

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ABSTRACT

Telecommuting is a tool that is becoming more and more a way a life for organizations as they strive to recruit and retain employees and assist them in improving their quality of life. The recurring themes tended to be the need to select the proper employee, training managers to manage remote employees, strong communication (formal/informal) strategies, clear expectations and proactive stance in deterring isolation. Telecommuting is not for everyone or every organization. Extreme care must be taken in preparation; development, implementation and ongoing evaluation must take place to ensure that it is not only a good fit for the employee but also for the organization. Safeguards must be in place to promote the human moment at work that may be lost when there is lack of face-to-face contact with fellow workers. Efforts should be made by management to promote professional development via regularly scheduled meetings with fellow workers, management, and customers.

INTRODUCTION: NEED FOR DEVELOPING THE HUMAN MOMENT

Hallowell (1999), Smith (2005), and Smith and Manna (2005; 2006) discussed the strategically important concept of the human moment, which is the actual interface of two attentive people in physical proximity to each other. Admittedly an elementary idea, it has become a more rare display

in many work environments. The proliferation of computers in the ever expanding global commerce, especially in the U.S., almost everyone is within 15 minutes of a home/work PC (Kurland & Bailey, 1999; Kurland & Egan, 1999; Shugan, 2004). The advent of e-mail, cell phones, and more global companies have created more ways to reach co-workers and ways to quickly convey information, but at the same time has made those information transfers very impersonal. Those types of com-

munications are important and have benefited companies, especially as companies expand and coworkers are spread further apart. As far as the limited scope of this chapter, mobile commerce (m-commerce) shall be defined as the transaction of business and other activities resulting in the transfer of capital from one entity to another via the utilization of portable electronic devices including, but not limited to, cell phones (CPs), personal digital assistants (PDAs), and hand-held computers (HHCs). The emphasis of this chapter is on the more widespread and conventional use of wired communications typically found in the virtual workplace. However, these are not replacements for human interface. E-mail and phone calls leave a lot of room for misinterpretation and make clarification very difficult. Face-to-face conversation allows for clarification in real time. There is less chance for misinterpretation. Also mannerisms and physical reactions cannot be duplicated in an e-mail. There is also the human need for social activity that can only be fulfilled through human contact. It leads to more fulfillment and happier relationships. The human moment is essential to the psyche and cannot be forgotten regardless of how many other forms of communication are developed.

In proving his point about the importance of the human moment, Hallowell (1999) uses some real-life examples. One is of a man who mistook an innocent e-mail as threatening and responded in a confrontational manor, which was inappropriate. Incidents like that can burn bridges when neither party had any desire to do so, "An organization's culture turns unfriendly and unforgiving" (p. 60). Without the tone and context of human conversation, it is easy for things to get misunderstood like in this example. A simple situation turned ugly because of reading between the lines that were simply not there. At any point in time during this incident, a brief human moment could have easily solved the problem.

Another unfortunate result of a lack of direct communications is the loss of cohesiveness in

an organization. Employees feel less connected to each other as they see each other less. E-mail and phone conversations depersonalize the work relationship. It is easy for a company to lose its identity in this situation. As members feel less connected, they begin to lose an organizational focus and become more individually focused, which is detrimental to the firm. To be a team player, you must work as a team, which means sharing face-to-face conversation. Hallowell states that high tech and high touch must be combined and held in balance. E-mail, cell phones are here to stay. However, firms cannot forget the importance of human interaction. It is essential to the success of the firm that relationships between employees remain real and strong. The combination will provide the speed required in today's business world and the attention required by the human psyche. The balance is hard to maintain and must be a goal of the employees and the top management. It is a smart move to keep the human moment a part of the organization's culture. This chapter specifically addresses the need to maintain this delicate balance between technology and the human moment in a telecommuting business environment.

BACKGROUND

This chapter deals with the benefits, challenges and recommendations of telecommuting in today's world. While focusing on the need for developing the human moment at work, we will discuss how the human moment factor is affected within the world of telecommuting. Advances in technology have allowed telecommuting to become one of the fastest growing fields of employment throughout the world. Telecommuting, telework and teleworking are all used interchangeably and it can be defined in many similar ways. The term telecommuting was credited by Jack Nilles in 1973. He defines it as work conducted via telecommunication instead of in person (Nilles,

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