Chapter XII

The Telecommuting Life:
Managing Issues of Work, Home and Technology

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the 21ˢᵗ century approaches, the work environment is transforming, driven in large part by technology. For example, technology is challenging ideas about where and when work needs to take place. Technology allows employees to work from home. However, this new distributed work arrangement brings with it many new challenges for both the employee and employer. In this case, we introduce one company that has decided to experiment with the telecommuting arrangement. Through the eyes of one teleworker, many of the benefits and challenges of telecommuting are explored.

INTRODUCTION

One doesn't have to look vary hard at the business world to figure out that something significant seems to be happening with the current workplace. Look at the language we are using to describe our situation (emphases added): "A tidal wave of change is sweeping across the American workplace (Ehrlich, 1994, p. 491); "The last decade, perhaps more than any other time since the advent of mass production, has witnessed a profound redefinition of the way we work (*Business Week*, 1994, p. 76); and, the very notion of a job itself, is being questioned (Ancona, Kochan, Scully, Van Maanen, & Westney, 1996a). Whether one views the terms in which change is described as dramatic hyperbole or a reasonable representation of what is happening, it does seem that change, dramatic or evolutionary, is indeed taking place. Furthermore, the impetus to change is being felt across a wide variety of organizations, from Fortune 500 companies to government bureaucracies and even to the military.

One innovation in how work is accomplished is telecommuting, and it is increasingly being adopted by organizations. Telecommuting constitutes a fundamental change in where, how, and even when work is accomplished. After this brief introduction to telecommuting, we will present the case of Glenn Smith, an account of one individual's and organization's experience with creating this new work arrangement. We hope that the issues raised will offer insight into the implications of this new work arrangement both to individuals and organizations that might be thinking about the telecommuting option.

Telecommuting or teleworking, as defined by U.S. General Service Administration (1995), "refers to a means of performing work away from the principal office-typically at home or at a nearby telecenter." Telecommuting increases separation from the principal office while simultaneously increasing connection to the home. Telecommuting is not new; it has existed for several decades. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, businesses projected that the physical location of the worker would shift from the central business building to the home. Although there were organizations that pioneered this movement, it was not until the 1990s that telecommuting became a viable, acceptable, and, occasionally, a preferred work option.

A survey conducted by Telecommute America reported 11 million U.S. teleworkers in early 1997, an increase from 4 million in 1990 (Murphy, 1998). Furthermore, conservative estimates for the number of teleworkers in the year 2000 range from 11 to 15 million (Piskurich, 1997) with other estimates indicating growth rates of 18% a year resulting in 20 million U.S. telecommuters by the year 2000 (Nilles, 1997). The GartnerGroup predicts even more involvement of U.S. workers in teleworking situation — by the year 2000, 30 million with more that 137 million involved in some form of teleworking by the year 2003 (Langhoff, 1998). These estimates suggest a growing recognition that telecommuting is a viable work option that organizations must acknowledge. Indeed, as the case will present, the forces driving telecommuting clearly express the interests not only of individuals seeking increased flexibility to reconfigure home and work but also of organizations focusing on economics, environmental regulatory pressures, and technological advancements. With this alignment of organizational and individual interests, the increasing growth in the population of teleworkers is not surprising. Nevertheless, it remains a "new work arrangement," very much in its initial adoption phase.

Let's now turn to Glenn's experience to help us better understand what might happen when an individual completes his work at home, electronically connected to but geographically distant from his principal office. This case portrays the real-life experiences and reflections of one teleworker. It is worth noting that this case tells a telecommuting story from one demographic perspective — a manager-level teleworker who belongs to a dual career family with children. Although some issues raised in this case are unique to this particular situation, many of the issues are faced by the mass of teleworkers.

BACKGROUND:
AMERICAN BANK CORPORATION

Kelly Watson is the vice-president for information systems (IS) at American Bank Corporation (ABC) in Chicago. ABC is a large financial institution that has typically been characterized by its conservative culture. However, over the past decade mergers and

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