Telecommuting: Creating a Resentful On-Site Workforce

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Telecommuting is a growing trend among the American workplace (Gallup, 2017, Kopf, 2018, Kossek et al., 2006, Lucas, 2018). While telecommuting has been shown to have numerous benefits, lack of formal policies regarding telecommuting and uniform treatment of on-site and off-site workers, can lead to unintended consequences for organizations, such as jealousy and resentment of remote workers by those who do not telecommute (Allen et al., 2015, Crandall et al., 2005, Golden, 2007, Lucas, 2018). Two potential sources of this discontent are companies' sick leave and vacation time policies. This article discusses issues that can originate because of these policies and potential solutions to reduce the perceived disparity in fairness between remote and on-site workers with regard to sick leave and vacation time.

Keywords: telecommuting, sick leave, remote working

INTRODUCTION

Telecommuting can be defined as a flexible workweek schedule that allows an employee to work from remote alternative sites, instead of driving to a central workplace location. An increase in telecommunications technology has revolutionized the corporate work environment, allowing workers to eliminate the dreaded commute and work from home. Telecommuting appears to be a growing trend among the American workforce (Kossek et al., 2006). In a perpetually changing business world, it is difficult to determine exactly how many companies employ telecommuters, however, some analysts estimate "5.2% of workers in the US worked at home in 2017—or 8 million people" (Kopf 2018). According to a Gallup poll, 43% of employees worked remotely in some capacity in 2016 (Gallup 2017). Additionally, Upwork, a freelancing website, approximates that nearly two-thirds of companies have remote workers (Lucas, 2018).

Numerous studies and research abound on the benefits of telecommuting, both for the company and the employee. Proponents of these flexible work arrangements tout the organization's rewards in increased productivity from stay-at-home workers, reduced absenteeism, lower employee turnover, and lower overhead costs with less office space required, to name a few. The incentives cited for the remote worker are higher job satisfaction, reduced or nonexistent commuting time, a more balanced work and home life with less pressure, reduced office politics, and better time management with the ability to create one's own schedule (Crandall et al., 2005).

This increased flexibility for telecommuters and reduction of commuting time often generates demand for these positions within a company. Some organizations require employees to prove themselves "worthy" before they are granted the option to work from home (Mills, et. al., 2001, Crandall et al., 2005). Management may look for essential traits in a potential telecommuting employee such as self-motivation and self-discipline, an independent self-starter, and a goal-setter who can prioritize successfully (Goodman, 2013). Even the federal government has joined the telecommuter trend, passing the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, where "eligible" employees are allowed to work from home. However, each individual federal agency has the discretion to "determine eligibility standards" (Allen et al., 2015), which can lead to large discrepancies throughout the federal system regarding who is qualified to telecommute. Consequently, "using working at home as a reward system fuels resentment and negativity" among colleagues who desire this opportunity and are denied the work-at-home option (Bharadwaj, Harvard Business Review, 2015). The question becomes "were the telecommuting qualifications and requirements clearly defined? Were those not chosen to telecommute apprised individually and clearly of the specifics of managerial concerns (if any) that caused the rejection?" (Brown, 2010). Not being chosen for a telecommuting opportunity may lead to jealousy among on-site workers. In fact, an increased number of teleworkers in a company was associated with less job satisfaction toward coworkers within the non-telecommuter group (Golden, 2007, Allen et al., 2015). For a telecommuting program to be perceived as fair, it must be transparent, with a policy communicated regarding who is eligible, how they qualify, and why (Bharadwaj, 2015).

Despite this growing number of telecommuters, it is uncommon for companies to have a formal telecommuting policy in place. Some reports suggest that "fewer than half [of companies with telecommuters] have a telecommuting policy" at all (Lucas, 2018). For those that do, it is unclear if these policies address differences between off-site versus on-site workers, particularly in reference to employee benefits such as sick leave and vacation time accruals. Uniform treatment in leave policies for telecommuters and non-telecommuters within the same company may cause office bound employees to feel cheated. Unintended consequences may result such as reducing morale for the on-site office worker and ultimately, the company as a whole.

SICK LEAVE

With the proliferation of corporations using off-site workers, consideration of employee benefit costs occur, specifically sick time. It is estimated that the majority of telecommuters actually use less sick time and return to work faster than their on-site counterparts. According to U.S. News and World Report, "Telecommuters log five to seven more hours per week than non-telecommuters, often working even when they're sick or on vacation". This fact is supported by recent statistics from Global Workplace Analytics, which indicate that "teleworkers typically return to work faster following medical issues or surgery" (Wright, 2015). Absenteeism among workers cost companies millions in lost productivity and efficiency. Solutions to reduce this problem may be as simple as converting on-site jobs to remote positions, in order to take advantage of the fact that "employees who telecommute take two to four fewer sick days each year than other employees" (www.admin.sc.gov).

Elimination or reduction of commuting time, along with a diminished use of sick time, leads to the conclusion that utilizing a remote workforce increases company productivity. Besides taking time off when they are ill, employees often use this company benefit to meet personal or family needs. "Telecommuters report that they are less likely to take a sick day in order to be home for deliveries or repairs, or to take children to important appointments" (Boyd, 1996). These time-consuming errands can be integrated into a remote worker's normal workday routine without disrupting their regular job duties. With this built-in flexibility in their work schedule, telecommuters are also "less likely to use sick days for their own minor illnesses" (Boyd, 1996). Employees working from home are already in relatively comfortable surroundings, therefore, they are more likely to continue working when they are sick (Harpaz, 2002). This fact leads to the assumption that "'Sick leave' is almost non-existent among e-workers" (Harpaz, 2002, p. 78).

In searching through various corporate telecommuting policies, it appears as though organizations are treating remote off-site workers and on-site workers in the same manner, specifically in the amount of sick

leave available to them and the instances in which sick leave must be used. There is no distinction separating the two different classes of workers, or the amount of sick time allocated to each employee. Requirements for using this paid time are often the same for both types of workers (ThinkHR). Specific examples include an across the board requirement in many policies which require e-workers and regular on-site employees to obtain supervisory approval before using sick leave. Another policy states that "if participants in the [telecommuting] program are sick and unable to work in their telecommuting location, they are required to report those absences when they are unable to work as they would in a normal office setting" (CSUN, UC Berkeley). This equal treatment of sick time use for all employees creates a disproportionate inconsistency for workers who must do their job at a company specific location. These employees cannot go to work in their pajamas nor labor at technology related jobs while curled up in bed. These policies raise concerns in that on-site workers may feel disadvantaged because they must use sick leave time for minor illnesses, home deliveries, etc. while their telecommuting counterparts can work through or around these disruptions without having to use up their sick leave balances.

Thus, the question arises: What can be done to address this disparity and reduce perceived disadvantages to on-site workers? One possible solution is to allow on-site workers to work remotely on a temporary basis in lieu of taking sick leave (CSUN, SHRM, Seibel 2018). Another alternative would be for employers to address the inequality by allocating different amounts of sick leave for remote workers versus on-site workers, increasing sick leave time for employees who must report to a specific work location, and decreasing time for telecommuters. These options, however, cannot resolve all inequalities in the utilization of sick time between off-site and on-site workers. Some work cannot be performed remotely (i.e., nursing, construction, peace officers, etc.). Therefore, it remains to be seen how companies with both telecommuters and on-site workers will address perceived unfairness in sick leave policies for these separate workforces.

VACATION TIME

Paid time off is a valuable employee benefit. The United States does not have a national requirement for paid time off, including vacation, sick time, etc., while the European Union countries require employers to provide four weeks of paid vacation per year to their workers (Klonoski, 2016). The old adage, "time is money" applies here, as corporations receive no productive work from employees when they are "on vacation". Due to this lack of domestic regulation, U. S. companies offer a wide range of vacation benefits.

Netflix employees have unlimited vacation time. This flexibility to schedule time off whenever it is desired, along with generous compensation packages, gives the media company a highly motivated workforce. If employees do not perform at the high standards set by management, they are terminated (Ouye, 2011). In a company where most of the work can be done remotely with high measurable standards for productivity, a uniform vacation policy such as the one Netflix offers can work for all employees.

However, most corporations who employ telecommuters also employ non-telecommuters. The United States Government Accountability Office states that all federal employees receive thirteen days of vacation time during their first three years of service, with increases for tenure. No differentiation in vacation time exists between the on-site worker and the remote worker (GAO Benefits). Awarding vacation time equally to both types of workers may seem unfair to the on-site worker, who has to use this time to travel, for example, to the beach. Whereas, the telecommuter could simply take their laptop computer to the same beach, perform job tasks while sitting under their beach umbrella, and not use any of their official vacation time.

Numerous polls have indicated that telecommuting is a growing trend in the U.S. (Gallup, 2017, Kopf, 2018, Kossek et al., 2006, Lucas, 2018). This trend is likely to only continue in growth as "more than half of employees say a role that allows them to have greater work-life balance is 'very important' to them when considering whether to take a new job" and a similar percentage of employees "say they would change jobs for one that offered them flextime" (Gallup, 2017, p. 149). Telecommuting can have various benefits for a company, including improved productivity, higher job satisfaction and reduced office politics (Crandall et al., 2015). However, there may be unintended consequences for organizational culture by implementing telecommuting programs. Specifically, non-telecommuters may become resentful of their telecommuting

coworkers because of perceived unfairness in sick leave and vacation time opportunities arising from differences in work locations. Formal policies regarding telecommuting assignments, as well as, flexibility in work arrangements or increases in sick time for non-telecommuters can reduce the potential negative effects of such programs.

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