IT support services for telecommuting workforce

Tuncay Bayrak *

Western New England University, Department of Business Information Systems, 1215 Wilbraham Rd., Springfield, MA 01119, USA

A B S T R A C T

Organizations are in the process of moving to a network-based operating structure. Telecommuting is just a corollary of this push. While new information technologies allow for a highly mobile work force that can work from remote locations across the world, this begs the question how does supporting this new telecommuting workforce differ from supporting employees in a regular office. The purpose of this study is to describe how telecommuting and a telecommuter differ from in situ working and the desk-bound worker and how this difference dictates different approaches to providing various services such as IT support services for telecommuters. Our goal is to provide a framework to assist IT managers in addressing issues of how to support telecommuting employees to maximize their potential benefits.

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1. Introduction

Information Technology (IT) has had a huge impact on society as a whole, but its effect on the workplace has been truly unprecedented. Not only has IT increased our ability to store, retrieve, and transmit information, it is also affecting virtually every aspect of our lives. It is no wonder then that the traditional "work-place" is undergoing radical changes. New information and communication technologies have radically increased the ability of organizations to actually distribute work to an alternative location (Venkatesh and Vitalari, 1992), and notebook sized computers, easy-to-use software, access to information, and electronic mail capabilities available worldwide have made telecommuting possible (Prystash, 1995). No longer are workers reliant on being in the office to accomplish work. For example, the number of individuals in the US who telecommute at any frequency whether once a month or everyday reached 17.2 million in 2009 (Wolfe, 2010). With the IT costs of supporting a telecommuter estimated to be some 30% more than supporting a regular in-office worker (Tartaro, 2003), one has to ask if this practice is feasible. Many businesses think so, and the ranks of the telecommuters continue to grow.

Organizations are in the process of moving to a network-based operating structure where an employee is no longer tied to geographic locations. Telecommuting is just a corollary of this push. Although information networks allow for a highly mobile work force that can work from home and remote locations across the world, this begs the question how does supporting this new telecommuting workforce differ from supporting employees in a regular office. Providing support for telecommuters poses significant challenges to the organization in several key areas. Thus, the purpose of this study is to describe how various support services for a "telecommuting" worker can be provided and how these support services, although largely with an IT focus, needed for telecommuters differ from the supports services needed for desktop computing. As pointed out by Govindarajulu (2002), IT desktop support services face many challenges in today's business environment, not the least of which is a prevailing attitude that helpdesk support is not as useful as it should be. Our goal is to provide a framework to assist IT managers in addressing issues of how to support telecommuting employees to maximize their potential benefits.

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* Tel.: +1 413 796 2304.
E-mail address: tbayrak@wne.edu

2. Literature review

According to published literature some work has been done to study telecommuting (Duxbury et al., 1992; Venkatesh and Vitalari, 1992; Belanger, 1999a; Watad and DiSanzo, 2000; Khalifa and Davison, 2000; Westfall, 2004), and the telecommuting literature includes references to corporate attitudes toward telecommuting, motivation, productivity, supervision and employee satisfaction (Prystash 1995), the various tasks performed by telecommuters and the major supporting information technologies (Tung and Turban 1996), influence of certain organizational factors such as job characteristics, IT support, and coordination methods on satisfaction with office communication in telecommuting work environments (Fritz et al., 1998), individual factors, such as gender (Lind, 1999), age, skills, and job category and their influence on individuals' decisions to telecommute (Belanger, 1999b), how corporate information managers support their remote clients (McInerney, 1999), models for the opportunity, preference, and practice of telecommuting to analyze employee telecommuting adoption (Peters et al., 2004), and individual, social and situational determinants of telecommuter productivity (Neufeld and Fang, 2005).

Telecommuting also called Telework can be defined as the ability to do work at a location other than an "official duty station" (OPM, 2007), was virtually non existent prior to 1990. The few individuals who worked as telecommuters prior to 1990 were forced to do so as a result of a physical disability, the need to support young children at home or for an otherwise non-technological reason (Varma et al., 1998). But changing worker attitudes for the desire of a better work and life balance has created the need for alternative work arrangements (Charron and Lowe, 2005). Thus, within a short period of time, telecommuting became not just a forced alternative to a desk job it became a necessity for companies.

Telecommuting offers a combination of benefits and challenges to the individual employee, as well as the company (Ho and Chan, 2003). There are numerous benefits of telecommuting such as meeting workforce needs, improving morale, retaining employees, and improving productivity (Potter, 2003) but many employers face numerous setbacks when utilizing telecommuting. For example, employers report a perceived loss of control (Harrington and Ruppel, 1999), decreased communication capabilities with employees, opportunities for supervision, and corresponding "fear of isolation" that many employees harbor as they utilize the freedom of their home office (Gibson et al., 2002).

3. Research method

We employed a couple of bases for this study. First, a literature (meta) analysis of the key issues and challenges of supporting telecommuters is presented using academic research and journalistic commentary. The method was mainly based on a review of the scientific literature. Hence, it is organized to provide a comprehensive coverage of the topic based on academic studies and industrial reports.

Secondly, various key challenges associated with providing a range of support services for remote workers were identified by having discussion with 19 MBA students taking a graduate MIS course, some of whom were telecommuting. The subjects were informed that participation in this study was voluntary and the confidentiality of their identity in the survey would be maintained. The mean age of the respondents was 29 years, with males making up 63% of the sample and females 37%.

4. Providing information services support for telecommuting workers

The protection of sensitive information and the decreased ability to maintain common goals of employees surrounded by differing physical environments are realities that a telecommuting company must face. Furthermore, many companies will find that the increased cost of high speed secure internet access, support personnel and hardware can at times outweigh the benefits of having a telecommuter on staff (Tartaro, 2003). Although companies using desktop computing for employees face issues of security and maintenance of morale, they are able to fully utilize face-to-face meetings and increased supervision capabilities as a result of the employees being in one physical location. Providing support for desktop computing is also simplified by the fact that employees are equipped with hardware that can be controlled by a central host within a local area network. But telecommuters are not in one physical location and cannot be confined by one local area network. Hence, realizing how various support services such as the information technology supports needed for telecommuters differ from the information technology supports needed for desktop computing is vital to the successful integration of telecommuting into a company's organizational architecture. However, it is difficult to find the best model for information services support of remote workers. The search for best practices is further complicated by the widely divergent technological needs of remote workers.

Overall, the task of supporting telecommuters is more complex due to the need to deliver information to remote workers, but the challenge can be mitigated through use of information and communication technologies.

In a networked organization, continuous access to data and information may be crucial to make decisions on time and execute tasks that may be interest to many participants. Thus, information sharing among telecommuters and the support staff is critical. Employees cite the need to share information with co-workers as one of the main reasons why they prefer to utilize desktop computing for work (Belanger, 1999b). Hence, telecommuters should be able to have access to timely company information to stay informed and connected with the day to day operations of the company. As pointed out by Laudon and Laudon (2004), more efficient information system supports for telecommuters is needed.