

How Telework is Changing the Traditional Corporate Office

For most of the past century we have traveled to our place of work. Office workers have established a common pattern of working 8 to 5, Monday to Friday. These same workers have also experienced increasing congestion which has significantly lengthened their time away from home.

Our North American society seems to have become accustomed to this mode of work. However, the world is dramatically changing all around us and the office paradigm is being broken by a few innovative organizations. We are on the edge of a significant paradigm shift towards a new definition of work time and place.

Telework, the concept of regular employees performing their regular job from a remote location, is starting this shift to the new office paradigm. Telework, also known as telecommuting, allows employees to work from their own home, a telework centre in their neighbourhood, a vehicle, a client's office, or wherever. In essence, the telework concept uses information technology to bring the work to the worker instead of requiring the worker to travel to the work.

Teleworkers typically work from 1-3 days per week from their remote location. They use basic technology such as a personal computer, modem and telephone to stay connected to their regular work location. Employees who have a job which can be performed remotely a few days a week, have the personal discipline to work at home and have managers who are comfortable with managing by results are generally successful at teleworking. However, organizations need to recognize that telework is not suitable for every employee, job or manager.

Rationale for Telework

Employers are considering telework as a work option for many reasons. Recent economic conditions have forced organizations to consider new and creative ways to reduce costs, increase productivity, improve competitiveness and become more global while maintaining a satisfied and motivated workforce. A very tall task! However, employers who have tried telework have found they can reduce costs by having teleworkers share space on the days they are in the central office, increase productivity by 15-25% on telework days and have used the work "anytime-anywhere" paradigm to improve customer service. These same companies have seen the morale of employees increase dramatically as they achieve a better balance between work and family responsibilities.

Transition to the Virtual Office

The office workplace is in a state of transition from the traditional office to the new virtual office. The traditional office has been designed to house the majority of the office workers with workspaces designed for "heads-down" work along with spaces for team interactions. The traditional facility is typically in defined business districts to which employees must commute. The space and furniture in the office is more related to status than to actual need. Though we have attempted to make these traditional facilities more flexible, they still exist within the paradigm of assigning an employee to a workstation to use every work day.

The virtual office concept is starting to become a reality. The virtual office does not mean the elimination of the traditional office structure but rather a change in how and where we work. The virtual office now includes the employee's home office, neighborhood telework centers, vehicles for mobile workers and the traditional central office. Employees in the virtual office environment tend to do their "heads down" work in their telework location and utilize shared office space on the days they work in the central office. The space and furniture in the central office will, therefore, be based on the specific needs of the employees on a specific day.

The virtual office concept will mean changes to your corporate real estate holdings and how you design your facilities. The real estate changes will include the use of telework centres and the possible down-scaling of your central facility. Telework centers are small office facilities which are located within or in close proximity to the employee's neighborhood. Employees can walk, bike, bus or take a short vehicle trip to the neighborhood telework centre to work 1-3 days per week. The telework centre will be a quiet workplace designed for "heads-down" work. These telework centers could be located in non-traditional office locations such as shopping malls, commercial strip malls, part of local recreational facilities, etc.

The central office structure will still be a vital aspect of the virtual office concept. The central office must, however, change internally. Some portion of the facilities will have to be changed to accommodate space sharing by the teleworkers. This space sharing can be a significant challenge for many organizations, so careful planning and analysis is critical. Many organizations are developing a "hoteling" type approach to space sharing where employees book a workspace for the specific days they will be in the office. This approach allows employees to select the workspace which is most appropriate for the work they will be performing at the central office.

Another significant change to the central office will be in the number of meeting rooms required. Most teleworkers perform the majority of their "heads-down" work on telework days and do their personal interactions on central office days. This will require more meeting rooms than most organizations have today. In fact, many teleworkers may only need a very small workspace in the central office as they will spend the majority of the central office time in meetings.

The most tangible financial benefit of teleworking comes in the form of reduced real estate costs. In order to achieve this however, an organization must have teleworkers share space. The organization must also have enough employees teleworking to accommodate the space reduction goals. For example, an organization with 1% employees teleworking will be unlikely to realize the benefit of reduced space costs. However, an organization with 20% of its employees teleworking will be able to realize significant benefits.

Future

Today a few organizations are taking a leading role in establishing telework in Canada. These organizations have demonstrated the benefits of teleworking. These actual case studies are now being used by other organizations to implement their own telework programs with the goal of achieving the same or even greater benefits.

The future is bright for the telework concept. The cost of new technologies such as desktop video conferencing, broad bandwidth communication to the home and imaging dropping and will soon be an integral part of the growth of teleworking. In addition, the business benefits being derived by organizations using telework will continue to fuel the growth of this work option.

The key to success is to recognize the business opportunities telework brings to your organization. Your implementation of telework should be designed to achieve the desired business benefits. You must also invest in planning and managing the change from the traditional office to the virtual office. This formal approach will assist your organization in successfully achieving and maintaining the business benefits.

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Need More Information?

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