

Not sure where to start or what to think when it comes to telecommuting? You're not alone. Spherion explores why so many employers are both enthusiastic and doubtful when it comes to telecommuting. Learn why so many companies do it wrong, and what it takes to do it right.

Telecommuting is extremely popular ... on paper. Businesses large and small relish the promise of reduced costs, improved productivity and increased retention, but when it comes to cutting the corporate cord and sending workers home, many begin to lose their nerve. If we can't see him, how do we know he's really working? How can she contribute to the team when she's not here to be a part of it? While employers are theoretically supportive of telecommuting, the practical results they seek are often elusive. As quickly as they are devised, telecommuting programs are dissolved. Employers point to a number of reasons:

- Communication difficulties
- Resentment among office-bound colleagues
- Distance-related complications for telecommuters & office-bound employees

While legitimate reasons for concern, these problems are not evidence that telecommuting is fundamentally flawed. As it happens, it is most often the programs—the design, rationale and parameters—that are at the root of telecommuting troubles. Experimental programs thrown together by various managers in various departments are built to fail. To reap the benefits—retention of high performers, reduced turnover, more efficient work processes—businesses must first recognize and avoid the main causes of telecommuting failure and, second, invest time, tools and training into their telecommuting efforts.

Why Telecommuting Often Fails

While poor planning or a lack of resources can make any project fall short, businesses are consistently disappointed by telecommuting results because of two critical program flaws:

- Telecommuters are chosen by employee skill or job function rather than by tasks
- Telecommuting is positioned as a benefit/privilege

Task Versus Talent

When it comes to selecting telecommuters, the first question should always be “what?” rather than “who?” Companies often decide who is best suited for telecommuting based on performance or skills. Or, they look at job titles to categorize off-site versus on-site positions.

Unfortunately, these common approaches do not analyze day-to-day employee activities. A public relations specialist may be a stellar employee, but his daily tasks may be heavily dependent on office interactions or accessibility to management. On the surface, phonebased tech support personnel may seem like ideal telecommuting candidates. But if constant training and product upgrades are part of the daily and weekly routine, placing these employees in a telecommuting role can position them to fail.

Instead, employers should be asking, “What tasks will this employee perform?” Start with major responsibilities and examine every task, right down to minute daily functions. Every task must be categorized as either remote (can be telecommuted) or site-specific (cannot be telecommuted). With a clear picture of the tasks at hand, employers can make better decisions about whether a job is telecommuting compatible. Only after this detailed task analysis can the exploration of “who?” be answered. Begin by matching individual qualities and skills to the tasks that make up telecommuting-friendly positions.



The Benefit Blunder

The other common mistake employers make is positioning telecommuting as a benefit or privilege. Flip through a recruiting brochure and you'll often see telecommuting listed with 401(k)s and tuition reimbursement. The fact is, telecommuting is not a benefit. It is simply another way to work and should be treated as such.

The danger with positioning telecommuting as a privilege is that employees will view it as an entitlement and sometimes even a retreat from work. Seeing only the advantages of telework without understanding the responsibilities and demands it carries, employees will assume that telecommuters have an easier time of it. It's not unheard of for telecommuters to complain that "people give me work on my telecommuting days," a serious indicator of program flaws.

When telecommuting becomes a benefit, its business purpose is quickly lost. Employees will assume that everyone is entitled to a telework position, not understanding that only certain tasks, functions and individuals can work remotely. Employees may even see it as a way to reduce childcare or eldercare costs or manage personal obligations during work hours. No longer about working and producing, the telecommuting program flounders. To avoid entitlement misconceptions, always position telecommuting as a means of operating at higher efficiency. Create rigid, measurable programs that quantify the value and productivity of telecommuting.

Program Essentials

Telecommuting programs are a substantial endeavor. Businesses must take a methodical and cautious approach when building remote work functions into their organizations. Here are some of the components Spherion® considers essential to a successful telecommuting program.

Clear Communication - Unambiguous communication is crucial to the success of a telecommuting program. Management must explicitly define telecommuting goals and parameters to ensure misconceptions and distortions do not undermine the program. And it is just as important to communicate with non-telecommuting employees and managers as with telecommuting workers and their supervisors.

Job/Task Analysis - All jobs must be analyzed down to the tasks that compose them in order to determine telecommuting compatibility. This crucial step can lead to significant job re-engineering, but without it, companies are gambling on telecommuting success rather than investing in a tool for increasing productivity and retention.

Training - Thorough training of both telecommuting employees and their managers is essential to ensure participants clearly understand their roles and responsibilities and have the tools they need to succeed. Companies should never assume training is unnecessary because an employee has telecommuted before.

Telecommuter's Agreement - The conditions of participation in a telecommuting program should be detailed in a contract that both employees and their managers must sign. This document is the best and final tool for eliminating remaining misconceptions about what the program is or the value the company expects it to produce.

Pilot Program - Every telecommuting program must be customized to fit the company's culture and its unique approach to business. Testing and fine-tuning can best be done through a controlled pilot program, which will catch defects and refine problem areas.

Discard Telework at Your Own Risk

As the workforce continues to shrink, businesses must find creative ways to leverage the skills of talented, productive employees wherever they may be. It's not in any company's best interest to rule out telecommuting options, especially when it means losing valuable contributors and weakening competitive advantage. In fact, telecommuting can bring value to most any company when planned, analyzed and implemented correctly. It's just a matter of taking the time and precautions needed to do it right.