

**MANAGING FROM AFAR: Strategies for Supervising a
Telecommuting Workforce**
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The changing needs of an expanding, global workplace have placed new stresses and requirements on the way "work" is perceived. They have also created a focus on providing alternative strategies for ensuring that workers and customers alike are successful in addressing their individual needs. No longer can organizations live by the philosophy of "we've always done it that way" and survive intact. Competitiveness, technology, traffic congestion, a shift in worker values, increased mobility in the society and numerous other factors are forcing an examination of the way companies and individuals do business.

Many approaches are being developed and implemented to address the perpetual evolution of the workplace. One major shift, and a primary tool for many organizations, is to have workers telecommute or work from home. Telecommuting is a term that broadly defined means "working from a distance." Typically a person who telecommutes performs similar duties to their counterparts in an office at an organizational location, but they do it from a home office. This makes it possible for a firm like McGraw-Hill to have an office in New York while an editor lives and works in New Jersey. The quality of work doesn't suffer. On the contrary, numerous studies indicate that the quality actually goes up due to increased employee satisfaction and reduced stress.

The results of one survey released at the International Telework Association Conference in 1997 indicated that between 1990 and 1997, the number of people working as telecommuters rose from four to 11 million. Projections are that by the year 2000, that number will be more than 14 million. One reason for this trend is a strong economy, driven by low unemployment rates. To compensate, many organizations are taking advantage of alternative work patterns to lure talented employees away from competitors. Coupled with the fast pace of technology development and improvement and easy access to the Internet, the environment is ripe for further expansion of telecommuting.

Why are so many organizations exploring this radical departure from the centralized management and work concept? Quite simply, it makes a lot of sense under the right circumstances. After all, prior to industrialization, much of the work in a society was performed in the home -- farming, laundry, clothing production, medical care and so on. With the new technologies, employees can now do the work typically performed in the office at home. We now have the best of both worlds at our disposal!

From a management standpoint, this shift to a less visible workforce has added another dimension to the need for effectively utilizing human resources. A primary challenge for many supervisors will be to decide how to best maintain contact with employees and to ensure performance levels are maintained. And, while this may initially be awkward, it need not be inhibiting or intimidating. Many of the skills that supervisors have garnered and enhanced over the years are still applicable; however, new ones will be needed. Now more than ever, supervisors will have to sharpen their coaching and mentoring skills in order to help train their employees to function successfully in a different environment. They will also need to strengthen their own skills in the areas of planning, organization, time management, goal setting, delegation, performance management and interpersonal communication.

For maximum effectiveness in managing a mobile workforce supervisors must approach their new role with a plan. They can do this by applying a variety of strategies.

1. Selecting employees who exhibit the following characteristics:

- Ability to work alone or without regular peer and supervisor contact since this will typically be at a minimum.
- Dependability and trustworthiness since they will be working independently.
- Strong organization and time management skills in order to meet project deadlines without continual reinforcement or supervision.
- Self-motivation to develop and maintain productive routines and set their own deadlines.
- Technical proficiency with hardware and software selected by the organization since there is no on-site technical department to assist them when something goes wrong or breaks down.
- Maturity and an ability to accept responsibility for their own workload, schedule and actions.
- Performance-oriented since they will be expected to maintain a high level of productivity and meet standards just as their office situated counterparts.

2. Working with employees to determine the most efficient and effective means for communicating and maintaining contact.

3. Setting and monitor realistic performance goals with their telecommuters.

4. Reviewing the status of work at intermediate points to avoid having something go off track and not finding out about it for an extended period of time.
5. Managing performance, rather than people, since day to day contact is lost to some extent.
6. Providing regular feedback via voicemail, telephone, e-mail, fax, memo, or whenever together with an employee. Out of sight does not necessarily mean out of mind. Employees still need to know in a timely, regular fashion when they are doing well and when they need to improve.
7. Including telecommuters in office activities whenever possible (i.e. picnics, regional meetings, presentations/training, celebrations -- they can sing happy birthday via telephone).

Telecommuting may not be the answer to all of an organization's staffing and productivity problems, but it is certainly an option worth exploring as we move toward a new millennium.

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