December 1998

Technology and the Home-based Worker

Sharon Lydon
George Washington University

Follow this and additional works at: http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis1998

Recommended Citation
http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis1998/31

This material is brought to you by the Americas Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS) at AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). It has been accepted for inclusion in AMCIS 1998 Proceedings by an authorized administrator of AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). For more information, please contact elibrary@aisnet.org.
Technology and the Home-based Worker

Sharon Ryan Lydon
The George Washington University

Abstract

Companies are engaging in different strategies to remain competitive in today’s market. Productive workers are essential to a company’s stability and growth. In an effort to maximize productivity and worker satisfaction, many companies have allowed employees to work at home. In fact, home-based employees have reported an increase in productivity and job satisfaction due to the elimination of lost time and the frustrations of traditional commuting. The future offices of an organization may become scarce because fewer people will be present in the office and more people will work at home. Current analysis suggests that the number of home-based workers will continue to grow steadily. However, a study by Heck et al stated that very few job titles were computer related (Heck et al, 1995). Many have assumed that an understanding of computers would afford a greater number of people to work at home. This does not seem to be the case. Continued research needs to investigate this growth.

The workforce, as we know it, is changing rapidly and will continue to do so into the next century. Many of the articles and books that we read today focus on the evolution of the workforce with the changing work environment. Organizations are under a tremendous amount of pressure to stay competitive in their industry. To remain competitive, organizations are restructuring, reengineering, forming alliances, merging, globalizing, and employing new, more sophisticated technologies. These moves have created unprecedented change. The people in these competitive organizations must learn how to adapt and feel comfortable operating in new and unique ways in order to survive in the 21st century (Schermernhorn, Jr. et al, 1994).

Companies have started to examine the “quality of work life” (QWL) within the organization. “QWL establishes a clear objective that high productivity should be achieved along with job satisfaction by the people who do the required work.” (Schermernhorn, Jr. et al, 1994). A socially responsible organization makes employee satisfaction a top priority in an attempt to retain key people by keeping them engaged and productive. Productive workers are essential to a company’s stability and growth to remain competitive in today’s market. In order to retain productive employees, management will have to strive to create conditions where people achieve their highest potential and are engaged in satisfactory work.

In an effort to maximize productivity and worker satisfaction, many companies have allowed employees to work at home. These initiatives have created positive results. Home-based employees have reported an increase in productivity and job satisfaction due to the elimination of lost time and the frustrations of traditional commuting (Goodrich, 1990). Many businesses have started to experiment with the home-based employment concept. More and more people are either working from home on a permanent basis or have been given the flexibility to work at home occasionally. The new phenomenon of America’s contemporary workforce is the opportunity for home-based employment (Heck et al, 1995). The future offices of an organization may become scarce because fewer people will be present in the office and more people will work at home. Current analysis suggests that the number of home-based workers will continue to grow steadily (Heck et al, 1995).

The home-based work trend has steadily increased since the 1980’s. Past attempts to record the number of people that work at home have been difficult because home workers are defined in many ways. The U.S. Census, various articles, and books have used different names to define the home worker. Home workers have been labeled telecommuters, teleworkers, home-based employees, and location independent workers. The home office, itself has often been called “the electronic cottage” and the flexiplace. Generally, teleworking or telecommuting can be broadly defined as working at home or at a satellite office and communicating with the main office by phone, mobile telephone, and/or computer (Goodrich, 1990). Technology has allowed more employees to work at home because they can utilize many forms of communication such as telephones, electronic mail, and fax machines. Modern home-based workers are usually dependent on one of these forms of technology to keep in touch with their managers, co-workers and clients. Technology makes it possible for people to work in their homes.

As the home-worker is defined as one who communicates via technology with their company and clients, many aspects of the home-worker’s life in terms of the application of technology is unknown. The life of a home based worker has not been researched in detail. A nine-state survey conducted by Heck et al obtained general information on the characteristics of the home worker and the type of work that the typical home worker performed. According to the study, the average home worker is a middle-aged male who is considered fairly educated and has been working in the workforce for a number of years. Many of the home-based professionals work in fields such as sales, marketing, contracting, transportation, and mechanical type positions. In the nine-state study conducted by Heck et al., 24% of those interviewed who worked at home were in sales and marketing, 14% considered themselves contractors, and 13% were in mechanical and transportation fields (Goodrich, 1990). The study also
stated that very few job titles were computer related. These results were a surprise to the researchers because many experts have imagined that the growth of computer technology would afford more people the opportunity to work at home.

The survey and interviews conducted did not study the amount of technology used in home-based work. What type of technology does the home worker need to perform his/her work? Does the average home worker have the tools to perform his/her job? How often does the home-based worker use technology? Does a company provide these medians of communication or does the worker provide them for himself/herself? How does the home-worker afford to have all of the latest technologies if the employer doesn’t pay for it? What type of relationship exits between management and the telecommuter?

In conclusion, changes in society, the economy, and technology have altered the workforce considerably. Since the 1980’s, people have begun to migrate back to their homes to work. The number of home-workers has continuously increased and the trend does not seem to be slowing down. The study by Heck et al also stated that very few job titles were computer related. Future research needs to be conducted on how technology has affected the dynamics of the workforce.

References