

PhD Teleworking

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Background

Amongst some bosses there appears to be a mentality that if you are not in the office then you can't be working. I suspect that this attitude comes from how they themselves operate if they are not in the office. Maybe their attitude towards teleworking says more about their own working practices than anything else. Thankfully, attitudes appear to be changing. There has been steep rise in the number of people who engage in "teleworking" (i.e., people working from home). Teleworking is no longer the sole domain of the self-employed or low-paid outworkers. Many jobs do not lend themselves to working from home, however, academia is one profession that working from home can bring great dividends. Many people love the thought of a day at home working without gossiping colleagues, non-essential meetings, and constant interruptions. This may also be very attractive to those working on a PhD!

Surveys have shown that teleworkers are 60% more efficient when compared to their office-based counterparts (Lawrence, 1999). One in twenty people in the UK now work at least one day a week from home (Welch, 1999a; Lawrence, 1999) and save themselves an average of two hours commuting time (Welch, 1999b). According to the Henley Centre, more than 50% of the workforce will be working from home by 2010 (Cook, 1999).

What does it require to work from home?

Working from home cannot be done efficiently without some basic requirements. These are briefly outlined below :

- **Employer agreement** - Agreement from your bosses (or in the case of a PhD, your supervisor) at work is essential. They will want to know what benefits will arise from your desire to work from home. In academia this may be a little easier to do than in other professions. Whether it's writing up your latest research paper, analyzing the latest data set

or preparing for some tutorial teaching, it is quite likely that all of these tasks could be done more efficiently by working from home. In academia, improving your own productivity (in whatever sphere) will almost certainly reap benefits for you and your university.

- **Personal skills** – It almost goes without saying that to work from home, there are a range of personal skills that are needed for productive work to occur. These (very important) skills include self-discipline, self-motivation, self-confidence, self-determination, and self-sufficiency. Obviously having a severe dislike for daytime TV is a massive advantage too! Managers (and supervisors) may think that laziness might be a problem but efficient teleworkers are quite often very disciplined and their major problem is being able to switch off and separate their work and domestic lives.
- **Practical needs** - You need a room that is big enough to accommodate all the possible work-based equipment that you will need including a desk and comfortable working chair as well as all the essential peripherals (computer, networking facilities, telephone etc.). The room should have both good ventilation and heating. There is nothing worse than trying to work when the room you are in is either too hot or too cold. Your home working environment needs to be distraction-free since this is one of the main advantages of working from home. At work there are constant phone calls, constant e-mails, constant knocks at your door. In these situations you have very little control. At home, you can decide whether to answer the phone or screen incoming messages. You can also choose to ignore your doorbell.

Other issues

In addition to some basic requirements there are also other issues that may arise as a result of wanting to work from home. For instance :

- **Vetting** - Some organizations will vet individuals' suitability for teleworking through a process of interviews or psychometric tests (Cook, 1999). There appears to be some evidence that those who are slightly introverted have a better ability to concentrate and therefore make the best teleworkers. Thankfully, this is highly unlikely to happen in a university situation.
- **Probation periods** – Instead of vetting, some employers may test out new recruits work productivity in the office before allowing them to work from home. This should may done for practical reasons also (like getting them on board with the rest of the team). Supervisors

may also want to see some evidence that you can work without constant supervision before they trust you enough to work from home on a regular basis.

- **Compromises** - There are times when you will have to compromise, working at home every single day may seem like a very productive option but in the long run there will almost certainly be some disadvantages. It is not unfair of your boss or supervisor to insist on some kind of evaluation of your work performance from home. This could be measured on a time scale that suits both parties (weeks, months, half-year etc.). It is more profitable to think in terms of what can be achieved within these designated time periods rather than within the traditional nine-to-five period. Working from home every day is probably a bad idea as team spirit, day-to-day communication and meetings can bring other motivational benefits.
- **Work boundaries** - Although you have the option for flexibility, try to keep regular office hours. Always let your employer or supervisor know where you will be and where and when you can be contacted and how (phone, e-mail, voicemail). Home working works best when employees are empowered to think and act for themselves and where employers are concerned about results rather than attendance. To some extent, this is ideal for the academic or those doing a PhD.

Advantages of teleworking

There are a number of very clear advantages of working from home. The most obvious are :

- **Reduced commuting** – Working from home obviously cuts out commuting time to work. Less time is spent waiting in traffic jams, overcrowded buses or trains, and/or walking in the elements to get to work. You simply get up and get working. You don't start work in a bad mood to begin with.
- **Self-appearance** - It doesn't matter what you look like or whether you are even dressed. It's certainly not been unknown for me to still be in my dressing gown at 3pm in the afternoon having had a very productive day on my word-processor.
- **Distraction-free working environment** – working from home usually means a quieter, distraction-free environment. This means increased productivity as constant interruptions are eliminated.

- **Increased flexibility** – Home working means you can work when and where you want and it also gives you in-built flexibility to handle other demands such as doing the school run or just spending more quality time with your partner and/or children.
- **Reduced stress** - On the whole people are less stressed when they work from home, and a less stressful individual will lead to more productive work. Commuting to work can be very stressful for some people, so this is also eliminated.
- **Organizational savings** - There are also practical advantages for the organization itself because while you are working from home. They won't have to pay for the lighting and heating in your office leaving company overheads to a minimum.

Disadvantages of teleworking

In addition to the quite obvious benefits, there are a number of disadvantages that need to be borne in mind.

- **Colleague disapproval** - A major disadvantage is the difficult issue of how to deal with colleagues' attitudes to absence from your office. However, this is a management issue and is something with which they should have a policy on. University departments should also have a policy.
- **Others in the house** - Working from home can be tough for all sorts of reasons. Chances of successful homeworking are greatly increased if you are on your own rather than surrounded by your partner, children and or pet! If these potential distractions are around you must learn to shut the door and for your partner or whoever to know that your at work – even if you are physically at home.
- **Blurred work/leisure boundaries** - Teleworking will not work for everyone. Some people claim that their office at home can become a prison – particularly if the office is also a room where they spend a lot of leisure time (e.g. a bedroom or a living room). There is always the chance that the person will not be able to switch off if they try to relax in a room that has heavy associations with work. Some people report feeling guilty if they receive faxes, phonecalls and/or e-mails out of “working hours” and don't respond to them there and then. Work can become very focussed due to the inability to “shut the work door behind”. When people leave their work-offices, they may also find it much easier to leave work “psychologically” behind and enjoy their home life more. This may be hard to do for

teleworkers. This is a good reason to have a separate office within the home that you can physically shut the door behind you.

- **Asociality** – Some people simply need people around them to function effectively. Working from home can be a lonely and boring experience and many people miss the interaction in the workplace feeling left out if they are not in the thick of it at work.

As can be seen, there are clearly both advantages and disadvantages of working from home. Once the practical requirements have been sorted out, there are other issues that may need to be attended to, but if you are a self-disciplined person, working from home – at least some of the time – might prove highly productive for both person and organization

References

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