



NATHAN ZELDES

Thinker, Speaker, Problem Solver.

The Makings of a Good Corporate Telecommuting Program

Insight from Nathan Zeldes, Jan. 30, 2013

When I first started driving telecommuting policy at Intel, the field was so new I had to explain what the term meant. Today, with ubiquitous mobility and connectivity, you'd think I wouldn't; but actually I see much confusion. People think they Telecommute when in fact they merely Work from Home; companies think they have a Telecommuting Program when in fact they have but a shadow of one. Having deployed a successful program in a global Fortune 500, I figure it may be of use to share the insights I've gained, and help you implement telecommuting to its full, exciting promise.

What telecommuting is, and what it isn't

So you work from home: does that make you a Telecommuter? It depends.

Working from home is just half the story – the “Tele” part. You also need the “Commuting” half – your working at home has to be in a commuter scenario, which means that you have a day job at some company with physical offices, and instead of commuting to the office to integrate with the rest of your group there, you work at home, from where you still integrate with the rest of your team.

This definition excludes home-based small businesses, whose home is their office. It's a fine work mode – I enjoy it myself – but it isn't Telecommuting. Strictly speaking, telecommuting doesn't even have to involve one's home; Michael Dziak, then general manager of the Metro Atlanta Telecommuting Advisory Council, once said that Telecommuting simply means allowing employees to do their work wherever it makes sense – which at different times can mean at home, at a customer location, at a remote work center, or in the regular company office.

That said, when I speak of telecommuting here I mean letting corporate employees work from their home part of the week, usually one day, in addition to working from their regular office on other days.

Why telecommuting is very, very good for your company

The advantages of telecommuting should be obvious, but often aren't; I still get worried inquiries from managers about it that echo those you'd hear 20 years ago. So let me go on the record and state emphatically:

A carefully designed, professionally applied telecommuting program can do wonders for your company in terms of productivity, quality of work, employee well-being and customer satisfaction.

The benefits from allowing suitable employees to telecommute part of the week are many, and include:

- Higher productivity and better quality: the relative lack of distractions allows the person at home to focus on tasks requiring concentration, to generate better output and to do it faster (see my previous articles for the impact of distractions on [output](#) and on [quality](#)).
- Improved employee job satisfaction and Work/Life balance.
- Hiring advantage (because employees like the flexibility) and reduced absenteeism (because a telecommuter can respond to minor emergencies – like caring for a sick child – without taking an entire day off).
- Improved flexibility and resilience of the company during adversity (natural disaster, war, etc.)
- Reduced environmental harm: less fuel consumption, greenhouse emissions, and air pollution.

No question about it: Telecommuting is good for a company. I know: I've studied this in depth, piloted it and made it happen across a 100,000 employee company. This was in the later nineties, when I've initiated and led a telecommuting program across Intel corporation. As part of this we've done a thorough pilot evaluation of a one home day per week model and we've observed that the adoption of this model in a structured manner had resulted in significant enhancement of productivity, quality, and quality of life for the telecommuters, and in equal or better service to their customers. The most impressive fact, to my mind, was that managers, who usually oppose the practice, became staunch supporters of their teams' engagement in it.

But success – or failure – is in the details, as described in the next sections.

Why a telecommuting *program* is much better than just telecommuting

Just allowing people to work from home ad hoc may be better than nothing, but it hardly counts in my eyes (I particularly love it when someone tells me “sure, we have telecommuting in my company... we all work from home evenings and weekends”. Big deal...) No, to really get the full benefits, telecommuting should be practiced in the framework of a **telecommuting program**, i.e. a company-wide, formal, regulated program that includes well-crafted policies, support systems and management practices.

In fact, the *unstructured* practice of work-from-home could create more problems than it solves; notably it might decimate Work/Life balance while providing erratic productivity benefits, so much so that it can lead to a backlash reaction against it.

To see the difference, consider that no employee is an island; we work in a complex web of interactions with our peers, subordinates, managers and customers, and the organization as a whole. When you decide to work from home, all of them are stakeholders in your decision; your not being in the office can hamper their work, change their trust in you, weaken or reinforce your mutual interaction – all depending on whether they bought into it, on how well you know to serve them from home and how well they know to let you do so, and so on. You yourself need to gain the skills and discipline of effective work from home, and your managers need to know how to manage you by results rather than by sight and micro-control. All this needs to be considered and systematically integrated into the corporate culture and work practices, which vary from company to company.

Hence, a *program* is needed.

Critical success factors for an effective telecommuting program

Here are some critical factors to keep in mind:

- An optimal telecommuting implementation requires organization-wide scope and support, including top-down management commitment and the involvement of all members of the affected groups (including specifically the office-bound peers of the telecommuters).
- The processes and expectations involved (including peer and manager interaction) need to be optimized for the specific organization's culture, then incorporated in clear policies.
- Someone needs to own the program's definition, validation, deployment and implementation; that person will need a cross-functional steering team to help them with all this.
- Adoption of the policies is a serious cultural change and needs to be managed and monitored as such; a key success factor is involving employees in fine-tuning the methodology to their own department's circumstances before they start telecommuting.
- It is essential to conduct Pilots in operational teams prior to deployment. These help improve the methodology, and also help overcome the opposition caused by doubt, fear and NIH.
- Telecommuters need to be trained in how to be effective in the work-at-home mode; it is not enough that they have experience in sporadic home work (e.g. during evenings and holidays).

Barriers and mistakes to avoid

Of course, there are risks. Here are some issues you should address:

- **Senior management opposition.** Of course if this is strong, then there is no telecommuting; but if top management allows the program to begin without a real conviction in its value, watch out!
- **Middle management fears.** The immediate reaction of many managers is "if they work at home when I'm not there, why am I needed?" Of course this is totally wrong: the true role of managers is to empower, inspire, lead and develop their subordinates, not to micro-manage them; a good manager is just as necessary to you if you work from home. But the fear has to be allayed, by careful education and change management.
- **Employee fears.** The telecommuters have their own fears to overcome – e.g., the fear to be left "out of the loop", away from the office with its politics and water cooler. They need to feel secure that their managers are totally on board, and will not penalize them for being out of sight.
- **Omission of critical program components.** As with much else, the temptation is there to launch the program without addressing the CSF's listed above. Skipping the pilot, for example, or the training, or the monitoring, is all too easy. It doesn't pay though – I've seen a telecommuting program destroyed by this kind of shortcuts.
- **Trying to overdo it.** Personally I believe enterprise telecommuting works best at 1–2 days per week. You may find that more works well in your group, but never be tempted to go there without careful study; you'll risk serious harm to core processes. Also, you should never force anyone to work at home unless they want to (and their manager thinks they're up to it). Not everyone has the personality, or the conditions at home, that lead to success. Tread carefully.

Note that the barriers I've listed above don't include inadequate equipment, or poor connectivity. Technology is easy; it's the human side that is tricky. It is no surprise to me that a [2011 report](#) by the Telework Research Network has concluded that "The biggest barrier to telecommuting, by a wide margin, is management fear and mistrust".

Putting it all together successfully

Here's how you should proceed if you want to establish a successful telecommuting program:

- Secure senior management support. You will need to pull together the data to make the case for the benefits, present it one on one and in staff meetings, and get buy in from the very top. If you're the person at the top, you still need to convert your staff, which may be harder than you think – they need to be convinced it's a good idea (it is!).
- Appoint a capable owner, with enough seniority to get respect but not too senior to be able to devote the time and effort. This person will need to pull together a steering team with reps of all stakeholders: Core business groups, IT, HR, Legal, Training, Administration... And don't forget to include a knowledgeable outsider, an academic or a consultant able to bring in an outside point of view. I always did this when driving a major change at Intel, and it always paid.
- Have the steering team study the options, needs, opportunities and possible difficulties for deploying telecommuting in your company; and define a draft policy for management approval. Have the policy address all aspects: who may telecommute, who should approve them, how many days a week, what kind of work, what KPIs will be used, and what the local HR/legal requirements and limitations are.
- Develop the required training materials for telecommuters, their managers and peers. At Intel, we gave each group where telecommuting was to begin a facilitated day of learning, training and group brainstorming where they'd iron out group "contracts" defining how home and office people will interact, cover for each other, and keep informed. By the end of the day they'd view telecommuting proudly as a good thing they were all mutually committed to make succeed.
- Run a carefully monitored pilot of at least six months on a few organic groups, and refine the policy based on what you see. Then Secure final approval and implement the optimized policy.

For an informal description of how I launched telecommuting at Intel, see this [Campfire Story](#). If you wish to deploy telecommuting in your group, don't hesitate to [reach out](#) for more advice.

Nathan Zeldes has been leading improvement of knowledge worker effectiveness for 18 years, at Intel and for other companies. He's exchanged knowledge with scores of organizations worldwide, and has founded the Information Overload Research Group, which he chairs. He now [advises managers](#) on improving their groups' results through improved tools and work processes.

For more insight articles on Knowledge Worker Productivity, see [here](#). You may also want to check out Nathan's blog at www.nathanzeldes.com and consider subscribing to his RSS feed and to his Newsletter on that site.