Telecommuting – A Key Driver to Work-Life Balance and Productivity

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Abstract: *The Global Workforce characteristics are changing worldwide. It is showing the growing diversity across sectors with heightened multicultural environment. The last decade had seen a remarkable change in the trend of approach of the organizations through various innovative practices. One of the growing practice is Employee- friendly policy, Work-from- Home (Telecommuting). Telecommuting has evolved and grown rapidly between 2000 and 2008. In the post- industrial economy, a growing number of jobs can be performed with few tools, basically a telephone and a computer with internet access.The popularity of Work-from-home (Telecommuting) has gained attention in the last decade with more and more employers and employees willingness to telecommute.Work – from- Home (Telecommuting) owes much of ongoing rise in popularity to the continuing improvements in Technology. Increasingly mobile and capable technology keeps at home workers connected with the main office, colleagues, customers, and the world. A 2008 IDC survey showed that 81percent of Asia Pacific executives believe that telecommuting improves productivity, up from 61 percent in 2005. The US and UK aren't the only countries that have jumped into telework.China, India, France, Brazil and Germany have all joined the global trend.The increase in a positive attitude towards telecommuting was also evident in Hong Kong, Australia and India. In this article, the effort is to understand the telecommuting with a special emphasis on productivity and work-life balance of employees and its implications on the organizations.*

I. Introduction

The last decade has seen a drastic change in the traditional style of work arrangement in terms of personal presence in office to work from home or working virtually. With the advent of technology and globalisation, the talent need from various parts of the globe for the efficient delivery of projects has been an instrumental factor for bringing in the perspective of telecommuting or virtual presence as convenient option for the talent. The new non-traditional work arrangement now includes work from home, virtual office, through laptop, computers and other technology and all of these indicate nothing but Telecommuting. Work- from -home (Telecommuting), hereinafter referred as "Telecommuting" is a work arrangement in which employees do not commute to a central place of work but are allowed to use mobile telecommunications and other technological interventions to complete the task in hand. This provides the employees the convenience of working from wherever they are.

According to Tammy D. Allen, Timothy D. Golden & Kristen M. Schokley (2015), Telecommuting is referred as telework, remote work, distributed work, virtual work, and flexible work, flex place and distance work. It is a work practice that involves members of an organization substituting a portion of their typical work hours (ranging from a few hours per week to nearly full-time) to work away from a central place – typically principally from home – using technology to interact with others as needed to conduct work tasks. The term " Telecommuting" is used to describe when an employee uses a stationary or a portable device to do their office work from a location outside of their office – either from home or another location- either regularly or from time to time. These employees are referred to as "telecommuters". It allows the flexibility of using telecommunications to connect with colleagues in real time or do their work online from a remote location any time they wish- usually when they log on to their worksite – including evenings and weekends.The work flexibility i.e., to complete the tasks from home and the work schedule may vary from day – to- day or are partially carried out during non-standard work-hours in the work organization (e.g., in the evening).

The modern organisations have been using various practices such as flexible work hours e.g., flexitime, which permits workers to vary their start and finish times. Such kind of employees meet in the office once in a while as convenient, and ensure that a certain number of hours are completed in the stipulated period of time on or beyond work. These work arrangements may look at sharing a full-time job between two employees (job sharing), family leave programs (e.g., parental leave, adoption leave, and compassionate leave), onsite childcare, and financial and informational assistance with childcare and eldercare services. According to Paul C Byod (1996), Telecommuting has been embraced in hundreds of organizations across wide range of industries. Telecommuting trade-offs include improved employee efficiency, schedule flexibility, increased time available for work, overhead reductions, improved employee retention and attraction, and program continuity etc. to name a few. It is undoubtedly a valuable management strategy for improving the effectiveness of any organization by

improving employee productivity, which is an after effect of great flexibilities and experienced work life balance in the era of ever increasing work demands. As the saying goes "Happy employees are the productive employees", the researchers attempt to explore a perspective if the work-from-home (telecommuting) is a driver for productivity of employees Vis -a -Vis organization, thereby promoting a healthy work-life balance for employees.

II. Objective
To examine Telecommuting and its impact on work life balance, Job satisfaction & employee productivity
To explore best practices of telecommuting and trade-offs for organization & employees

III. Research Design & Methodology
The research study is descriptive in nature. The information is derived from secondary data collected through literature review. This gives the researcher a scope to find out importance of Telecommuting initiatives for contemporary organizations. The research aims to understand the trade-offs that telecommuting offers to its organizations and stake holders and its impact on work-life balance, Job-satisfaction, and productivity.

IV. Review of Literature
According to Mamaghani, Farrokh (2012), Telecommuting has attracted a lot of attention over the past decade due to its impact on its workers, businesses, and society. Telecommuting can be defined as the practice of working from remote locations using the information and telecommunications technology (ICT). The terms telecommuting and telework can be used interchangeably. The structure of telecommuting varies across companies and offers employees to work from convenient locations of their choice (Hunton &Norman, 2010). Despite being present for so many years the concept of telecommuting was redefined in the year 2008 again. The various reasons for the emergence of telecommuting were rising fuel costs, high speed internet access, the threat of terrorism on business community, and the increased desire to accommodate and help employees balance between work and family life. The same was reinforced by Beauregard (2009) through his work where it was stated that the employees are better able to balance competing demands if they are given the flexibility to schedule their time. According to Hudson (2005), the work life balance can be achieved by a person when there is a satisfactory level of involvement or fit between multiple roles in a person's life. The similar view was strengthened in the article authored by Estes & Michael (2005) where they have pointed out that there is no one accepted definition of what constitutes work-life balance practice. The term usually refers to the balance between work and life for the various demanding responsibilities from the personal front of the employees. The organizations extend support to the needy employees in the form of telecommuting and flexible work options, as this may lead to work life balance. Some work-life practices may not help to reduce role- conflict between work and family due to the mismatch of the employee's preferences for managing both roles. As revealed by Boundary theory and role transition, the employee's preferences may vary due to segmentation and integration of work and family roles. For example on one hand work from home arrangements benefit some employees but on other hand they interfere with employee role if he/she has greater family responsibility. Beauregard, (2009) highlights that a 'virtual Office' study indicates if employees are given choice in the location and time of their work they exhibit greater job satisfaction. Along with increased job satisfaction, teleworkers also demonstrate less turnover and lower level of work life conflict and experience greater work life balance.

At the end of the day, it needs to be mentioned that a happy and productive employee is the one who enjoys a healthy work-life balance. It has also been noted that such employees are also more likely to be far more productive for the organization. Some of the biggest companies in the world have realized the fact that it is absolutely vital for employees to feel at ease with their jobs so that they can function to the best of their abilities at all times. The same can be done by allowing them to maintain a healthy work-life balance that would encourage them to give their best every day at work. Various studies done by the researchers Crossan and Burtan, (1993), Dubrin (1991), Fritz, Narasimhan adn Rhee (1998) reported that job satisfaction is highest among individuals who telecommute a moderate amount compared to those who telecommute to a small amount or more extensively. When the employees enjoy the flexibility through telecommuting, it may lead to higher organisational commitment and may also diminish the intentions of the employees to leave the job or organisations. The positive association for telecommuting and organizational commitment and lower turnover intentions is also reported in the study by Golden, 2006b; Golden and Veiga, 2005; Virick et al., 2010). Therefore, it can be inferred upon that Telecommuting brings multifold benefits to the organisation in terms of better employee performance, productivity, lower absenteeism and turnover.

Telecommuting – A glance at Best Practices & the Allied Benefits:
Working from home or Telecommuting has gained rapid growth in India and overseas. Most of the modern organisations allows employees to work from home. The employees in functional areas like Human

resources, Finance, Marketing and Information Technology are all encouraged to telecommute in majority of the technology driven organisations. Even in traditional set ups, the concept of telecommuting is slowly gaining momentum.

However, the challenges for the employers in telecommuting is to ensure work quality and on-time completion. Traditional direct interaction is generally absent in such work arrangements and therefore the organisations need to develop the means to monitor and control the work. The organisations also need to look at certain basic prerequisites and issues as suggested by Kayla Dineen (2013) before implementing telecommuting for their employees as discussed further. What makes for a successful telecommuting program is the technological help in the support of the employees. The facilities such as e-mail, web-meetings, smartphone meetings and inner web sites or networks that may be accessed from a remote vicinity become the contributions to a thriving telecommuting preposition. The organisations need to have a check on their IT Infrastructure that would help carry out the job-related activity when employees are away from work. As stated by Robbins et al (2010), three catagories have been identified as most appropriate for telecommuting such as routine information handling task, mobile acitivities and professional and other knowledge related tasks. It is also critical to understand that when an employee is asking for the facility to telecommute the organisations need to access the requirements of his/her role. The need is to review the job description and recollect the important requirements of the job. If the employee wants to telecommute full time, the organizations need to access if he will be able to correctly meet the needs of the position from a far-off location. Where as if the employee is wishing to telecommute for a portion of his/her work, will he/she have sufficient work to hold productiveness and efficiency while working remotely. It's also important to consider contractual and customer requirements, if applicable and be sure to obtain all necessary approvals before allowing employees to take customer or contract work to an outside location.

If the organization resolute that a position is suitable for a telecommuting arrangement, it's important to understand if the employee will be successful at executing the arrangement. The need is to consider past performance of the employees and if an employee has a poor performance record while working on site then it is indicative of his performance from a remote location. Another factor to keep in mind is the manager's ability to manage a remote employee and organizations may consider providing managers training on how to effectively manage remote staff. Telecommuting arrangements are most successfully executed when all parties are aware and are in agreement of what the arrangement entails.   It is recommended that employees sign a Telecommuting Agreement that outlines various aspects of the telecommuting arrangement.   Items to be included in the Agreement could be telecommuting schedule, approved remote work-space, expectations of availability during core business hours, maintaining proprietary and confidential information, worker's Compensation while working remotely to name a few. The organization should have all the right to reconsider Telecommuting agreement with an employee and location. It is imperative to understand that in the ever-changing dynamics of the external environment has a lot of impact of the nature and functioning of the business. This also calls for a revision in the job and profile requirements from time to time and therefore will have a cascading effecting on the Telecommuting option offered earlier to an employee. The organisation must take the elements deliberated above into consideration when deciding on a telecommuting, which in turn will ensure the effectiveness program that remains in tune with the organisation.

Melany Gallant (2011) suggested 7 best practices, which says that organizations can make use of Technology, use Video-Conferencing, Plan & Organize Ahead Of Time, trust employees, Manage by Objectives, interact with employees, use 360 degree feedback, understand the kind of Personality thrives in a Virtual Workspace before deciding on telecommuting, while Jennifer Parris (2016) focused on strategies which employees can adopt to boost their productivity. The employees who are telecommuting should Stick to a schedule, remember to take breaks, Stay social, Invest in work related equipment and facilities, make an effort to be social with their colleagues, communicate often, and must have a to-do list.Managing remote assignment and employees has its challenges but with digital access to information more and more organizations are considering telecommuting. The basic premise of the initiative is that the remote work will increase corporate productivity and competitiveness. Managers of telecommuting employees just need to adjust their management practices to overcome the distance and effectively support their telecommuting employees' performance working from a place other than or away from workplace

The advantages of Telecommuting for employees is decrease in time and stress of commuting in congested areas and increase in flexibility in coping with family demands. But the potential drawbacks may be absence of social contact what the normal office provides. As suggested by Robbins (2012), employees with high social needs, telecommuting can increase feeling of isolation and reduce job satisfaction. Most of the telecommuters potentially suffer from the "out of sight out of mind effect". This will also take away the elements of team work & influence to a great extent. The other areas of concern will be the rational for promotions and pay raises. Also the non-work related distractions' such as children, neighbours, and the proximity of house chores may significantly reduce productivity for those who are not self-directed and need

supervision, power and discipline to remain focussed at work.Telecommuting is often hailed as "green" because it cuts down the fossil fuels associated with long, auto-centric commutes. However, some companies are slow to offer their employees the opportunity to work from home because they believe that it creates disconnected and unproductive workers. If all the employees who telecommute once per month started to do so once per week, it would cut oil demand and transportation costs. Similarly, leading organisations across the world encourage employees to work from home as a policy as they have realised that this saves a lot of their time spent in traveling to work, reduces number of car trips and leads to energy savings. This will also have a lot of environmental benefit as it also prevents unnecessary carbon dioxide, which a major pollutant entering the atmosphere each year. Telecommuting thus brings Multifold benefits in the form of reduced gas and automobile use, fewer parking fees, lower food costs and reduced clothing needs. Further to this the organisations also see savings in administration, electricity and transportation costs.

V. Conclusion

Telecommuting is one such practice that human resource managers can explore with benefits extending beyond simply work–life balance, into attracting and retaining high quality employees. Not all problems are within the control of the organizations, but nonetheless there are experiences of other organizations that can guide the planning process of telecommuting and bring maximum benefit for organisation and employees both. As stated by Robbins et al (2010), telecommuting comes as a very viable option if the organisations want to positively influence the employee's internal motivation, the quality of work performance, job satisfaction and reduce both absenteeism and turnover. Even the expectancy theory propagated by Vroom, indirectly addresses flexibility in the importance placed on linking rewards to personal goals. With today's employees increasingly concerned about conflicting demand from work and personal responsibilities, a flexible work schedule is likely to be perceived as a desirable reward that can help achieve a better and work- life balance. Even if the concept of telecommuting is modern and some organisations are trying to experiment around the concept but it is not completely accepted for the various reasons cited and deliberated above. Further research may be conducted by taking a sample of organisations, where the perception of various stakeholders can be captured and analysed

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