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Global Social and Ethical Issues in Computer Science

Term Paper

Telecommuting: Beneficial or Detrimental

Innovations over time have been driven by a variety of factors. One of those major factors revolves around the ability to do more in a in a shorter amount of time. Computers and technology related to delivering information to employees has dramatically innovated and changed the traditional working environment.

One of the major changes has been the ability for employees to work from remote locations. The ability to work from remote locations, without having to be physically present in the office is known as telecommuting. This practice has become increasing popular, and because it varies from historical working traditions, telecommuting has also received criticism. This paper will focus on the examining the potential benefits as well as potential detriments of telecommuting.

One of the obvious issues that should be discussed when dealing with employers and employees is the financial impacts of company decisions. Allowing employees to telecommute can certainly influence the finances. At first glance, it is easy to see that a company that allows a large portion of their workers to telecommute can save money by not needing to provide office space.

Another financial benefit manifests itself with the cost of employee turnover. In general, having employees out of the office reduces the turn over. When a company can hire and retain a higher number of its employees, the costs associated with recruiting, hiring and new hire training are reduced. Closely related to employee turnover is absenteeism, which is also reduced due to telecommuting.

The lowered turnover rate, and decreased absenteeism point to an increase in employee satisfaction. The increase in employee satisfaction not only benefits the employee but also continues to affect the company’s finances in a positive way due to higher productivity. Productivity increases because employees have fewer distractions. Employees who telecommute often work in a more isolated environment, thus they are not continually being bothered by other employees who want to talk about things that are not related to work.

Another element of increased productivity results from the flexibility of schedules. “Teleworking programmes almost invariably show greater productivity from the teleworkers” (Gray, Hodson, Gordon, 4). Employees that have the flexibility work when they want or when they can know that they have to be productive during that time. Thus, during those times, they can focus because of less distractions and produce at a steady rate.

The other demonstration of increased productivity is that an employee does not have to be in a specific location to do work. When an employer needs results or information from an employee they can get that regardless of where the employee is physically located. Consider how technology has allowed employees to be in a non working environment but still be able to contribute to work. A couple of examples could include a father who is at a child’s school program, but still able to send a quick text message; or a business executive who is on an airplane sending directions and instructions to managers in various locations. “Flexibility has many dimensions…it can serve either the needs of the employers, the needs of employees, and in our view the best case, both” (Long, 61). The next benefit of telecommuting, is the ability to recruit and higher employees from a global market place. It is often difficult for companies, especially large ones, to find enough qualified and skilled workers in their local area. When a company can stay in a rural area, the cost of doing business decreases. As a company grows it must consider if moving the location of the company to a more populated location is worth the increase in cost, or if telecommuting employees is a valid solution.

Obviously when a company recruits from a global market they must employ people from that market. This concept as a whole might weigh out to be a benefit for a company, but the benefits and detriments must be considered. One of the main benefits to consider when considering hiring outside of the country is the cost savings of wages. This, in most cases, is the primary motivator to hire workers outside of the United States, or offshore labor.

Another benefit to offshoring can be a decrease in government regulations. In the United States, many business and industries are highly regulated. The taxes to have employees can be expensive, and with new regulations regarding health care, those costs could continue to increase. An article in Businessweek Magazine says, “Incentives for offshoring by European companies are huge: Services costs can drop by 50% to 60%. And the scope for offshoring is vast” (D'Andrea Tyson ,1).

Until now this paper has largely discussed the positive aspects of telecommuting employees, and while there are a large number of benefits, there can be some very detrimental aspects too. These negatives will be considered first from the aspect of offshoring, and then as telecommuting employees in general.

While the costs offshoring are certainly attractive there are some things to be concerned about when offshoring employees. One issue that stands out is that most countries do not have native English speakers. When a language barrier occurs, training and other education issues can become a problem.

These language barriers can also be a big issue when a company has to rely on these employees to interface with customers. While a major portion of the offshored work force can be excellent, it only takes one bad experience to lose a valuable customer. While not all experiences lead to lost customers, offshoring is generally perceived as a negative practice by customers. Both the negative perception and loss of customers will end up costing a company revenue in the long run.

Another thing that can be detrimental when using offshored telecommuting employees is the lack of speed in making decisions. Recently, the CEO of Yahoo! Wrote in a memo, “Speed and quality are often sacrificed when we work from home. We need to be one Yahoo!, and that starts with physically being together,” (Clark, 1). Often times in the global market place, when a member of a team is working another can be sleeping. This can slow down the decision making process, as well as hurt the overall collaborative efforts of employees.

Employee interaction is another major area to consider while dealing with telecommuting employees. When employees are spread out all over the world it is difficult to learn and understand cultures because written communication can easily be misinterpreted. Even when the employees may be in close proximity or in the same nation, the interaction in limited and that can have effects.

The effects are generally pointed to lack of trust and loyalty. When one employee is unfamiliar with another it is difficult to build trust. This also leads to a lack of loyalty to the company because there is only a paycheck holding them to the business. When employees work together, they build a sense of comradery and loyalty to one another.

This comradery can also be a source of synergy. When employees know one another and what they are working on, they can help each other out. Most of this type of communication happens in informal settings. One example of this comes from *The Distance Manager*, a book written by Kimball and Mareen Fisher. They state than when ARC consulting, a company from Denver Colorado went to a purely telecommuting system, that the employees were “struck with a deeper, more profound loss… one of the consultants, called the building a place where he and his associates could find ‘community’ ” (18). In this setting one worker may ask another worker for help in the break room, or at lunch. These types of interactions that happen informally are much more difficult when employees are not in close proximity.

Another detrimental thing to consider is the perception of those who do work in the general office. Those who telecommute are often perceived as favored. They become their own group. This group can be affected without having a voice in the decision making process. Often decisions are made and because that group is not close, they get left out.

Finally, there could be some negative financial impact on the telecommuting employee. When a company provides a space for an employee to work, the company absorbs the cost. If that employee does not have an adequate work environment away from the main office, the financial burden typically falls on the employee. This could include things like space, internet connections, phone connections and supplies.

In conclusion there are many aspects to consider when dealing with telecommuting employees. Many of these aspects appear to be positive in the beginning because they are masked by financial gain. However, in the long run telecommuting employees can quickly turn into a liability if not considered and managed carefully. Thus, when deciding if telemarketing is the best option for employer and employee, take the time to consider it carefully.

Works Cited

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