

Assessing whether telecommuting is a fit for your organization

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Telecommuting is an arrangement that allows employees to work away from the office, usually at home, for all or part of a workweek. It is often touted in articles for the benefits that it provides for employers and employees. However, as with other programs and concepts that appear to offer advantages when examined initially, employers should spend time reviewing telecommuting's pluses and minuses prior to deciding whether it is a fit for their organizations. A comprehensive assessment followed by additional preparation will play a key role in successful implementation.

For employers, there are potential benefits associated with telecommuting, such as decreases in expenditures for office space and increases in the productivity, morale and retention of those who have this privilege. Implementing this alternative also can aid recruitment efforts. For employees, there can be benefits, such as savings in fuel costs and time spent commuting, a more flexible and relaxed work environment, and greater work-life balance.

While these and other benefits readily can be identified, there are potential downsides that should not be overlooked. These include a negative impact on the morale of employees who are not eligible for this option, feelings of isolation that stem from working in a home environment, and communication issues for telecommuters that result from limited interaction with co-workers and supervisors.

The following provide considerations for employers in making decisions related to telecommuting:

1. How will the organization decide if jobs are suitable for telecommuting? Decisions should be based on the impact that these arrangements will have on organizational needs, including the ability of employees to provide customer service and perform duties at off-site locations.
2. Which employees will be eligible for telecommuting? Eligibility should be limited to employees who meet work-related criteria established by management in areas such as performance and length of employment. Employers also may want to consider whether employees' work styles and preferences are conducive to positive outcomes.
3. Has the organization examined applicable federal, state and local employment-related laws prior to making telecommuting decisions and assignments? For example, overtime and recordkeeping requirements of the Fair Labor Standards Act apply to non-exempt employees who telecommute. Depending on state law, such as in Tennessee, workers' compensation may

apply if an employee is injured while working at home, provided that the injury arises out of and in the course of employment. As with other employees, provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act extend to telecommuters.

4. How will management involve telecommuters in the day-to-day communication process? Since telecommuters are located away from the office, they can miss out on information that is shared during the normal course of everyday communications and on the ability to influence outcomes. Consequently, plans need to be developed to ensure that employees receive performance feedback and other relevant information on an ongoing basis. Regular contact, including opportunities for face-to-face communications, is necessary to promote understanding and build trust among all involved parties.

5. Have guidelines that establish organizational expectations for telecommuting assignments been developed and communicated? A policy and guidelines should be implemented and provided to employees. Acknowledgement forms (confirming receipt, understanding and agreement) should accompany this information and be signed prior to initiating these arrangements.

6. How will the organization prepare management and employees for telecommuting assignments? Training and other means of preparation should be in place to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each party and establish expectations for achieving successful results. For example, managers need guidance in assessing performance, including productivity, and adapting their leadership strategies to supervise employees who they will be unable to observe.

7. Has the employer determined how telecommuting assignments will be initiated and terminated? Consideration should be given to factors such as the selection process, whether employees will be given discretion to opt out of these arrangements, and how performance or other issues may trigger termination of participation.

8. Will the organization or employee provide and maintain equipment and other work-related items in the home? The employer should establish responsibilities for both parties related to the purchase and installation of equipment, technical support and the replacement or repair of lost or damaged items.

9. How will employers address confidentiality and security issues associated with organizational data and other information handled in the course of work? Expectations for protecting information and data should be communicated, such as those related to e-mail and Internet use, trade secrets and access of non-employees to confidential information.

10. Has telecommuting been included in the organization's contingency planning process for natural disasters, pandemics and other emergencies? Employers should consider the need to institute a policy and guidelines for emergencies, regardless of whether telecommuting is adopted on a regular basis.

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