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So near, and yet so far away: The trend of telecommuting is here to stay

March 21, 2013 - Spotlights

You may have heard the recent buzz about Marissa Mayer, CEO at Yahoo who decided that employees must curtail the current trend of working outside the office, and come back inside. Now, that is like stopping a big train that has already left the station. At least 10% American workers spend a few days a week working at home, and the percentage of people working exclusively from home has grown to 6.6%.

The trend of telecommuting has grown because of: its enormous benefits derived from the flexibility employees get to manage other parts of life; expansion of the eight hour day as people work into the night; lower sick leave from workers and also less sickness brought to the office; happier workers who quit less frequently; and of course, the impact on real estate, that is, less but more efficient office use. Large companies support the idea. For example, Aetna reports that its home/work policy has saved \$78 million in real estate costs. Cisco Systems believes that it saved \$195 million in productivity gains in just one year. The evidence is out there that less space is being used.

Despite the new Yahoo choice, which is based upon some of the down side factors of distractions at home, lack of synergy among workers, lower promotion of at-home workers, most evidence indicates the telecommuting trend will continue.

Telecommuting was born out of social needs combined with the advent of the technology to implement the change. As we all know, people can do a lot with laptops, note books and smart phones. Recently, there has been a spate of other new inventions that use the technology to push at-home phenomenon. The one that impresses me the most is "telepresence." We have all used Skype to bring video of people into the conference room. But telepresence is the ability to create an actual hologram, fully 3-dimensional, of a person who appears in the room, but who may be far away. The hologram replicates exactly what the person is actually doing, somewhere else. To understate it, the effect is eerie, but convincing.

An example of another tool is an application called "Seesaw". It creates an ad hoc process for a person to poll its entire social network to reach consensus on ideas, products, presentations, etc. According to its promoters, a person can determine the probability of acceptance of his or her ideas, with the risk of rejection minimized. Put these two ideas together, and a telecommuting person can make a presentation of ideas, already judged and critiqued by perhaps thousands more people than would be in the meeting audience, while making the presentation from the comfort of a spot outside the conference room.

It doesn't stop there, and the market for innovation seems limitless. There are thousands of computer and smart phone applications that facilitate work outside the office. To briefly touch on a few others, Google Glass is creating glasses and contact lenses that are always photographing environments, occurrences, and other realities, which can be edited, transmitted, and teleprojected

to conference room. Others include Salesforce Mobile, Dropbox, Toggle to name a few good ones. Check them out.

All that said, I, like you, would probably say that seeing is believing, and pressing the flesh is always best. However, it's difficult to buck the trend, and there are many reasons to choose not to. Regarding Yahoo's attempt to bring people back into the office, actually commuting in slow traffic through rain, snow and fog, all I can say is that "the trend is not that idea's friend."

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