

Motivation issues for teleworkers

Teleworking involves work that is conducted away from an office, utilising information and communication technologies (ICTs) including computers, the internet, company intranets, and mobile telephones. In 2000, 7% of organizations in the United Kingdom were using teleworkers, and it has been predicted that that this percentage is likely to soar over the next 25 years.

There are problems in precisely defining what being a teleworker means, but there is some consensus that to qualify as a teleworker, the individual carries out his or her work at a location that is remote from a central office or from production facilities; has little or no personal contact with co-workers, but is able to communicate with them through ICTs. These forms of working and of interaction will clearly have implications for the motivation of teleworkers.

Many motivation theories, for example, emphasise the importance of the social aspects of work for either meeting individual motivational needs (e.g. Maslow, 1943) or for providing extrinsic reinforcers that render work satisfying (e.g. Herzberg, 1959).

Mann, Varey & Button (2000) carried out a study of teleworkers that aimed to examine the emotional impact of teleworking on those undertaking it. Two organizations participated in the research: a telecommunications company and a bank. Each organization had been operating a teleworking scheme for over 5 years. Fourteen individuals were interviewed for the study, and were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of home working. These were some of the findings:

Advantages of teleworking:

- Less travel (57%) – Participants reported less stress due to the reduction in travelling and more time to spend on non-work activities.
- More freedom/flexibility (57%) – Participants enjoyed being free to organize their working day without being monitored and also the chance to carry out their work at times that suited them. These might not necessarily be conventional working hours.
- Better working environment (50%) – Some participants described their working environments as more peaceful and relaxed.
- Fewer distractions (43%) – Participants reported that it was easier to concentrate on tasks for reasonable periods of time without experiencing interruptions from colleagues.
- Reduced costs (29%) – mainly from reduced travelling.
- Freedom to wear comfortable clothes (14%)
- Freedom from office politics (7%) – participants reported that it was pleasant not to be involved in “back-biting” and “bickering”.
- Domestic chores (7%) – Some participants enjoyed the opportunity to combine household chores with their daily work. For example, putting a load of washing in and getting it dried.

Disadvantages of teleworking

- Isolation (57%) – Two aspects of isolation were significant. The first was concerned with social comparison and the inability to compare one’s own work rate, output, and performance quality with colleagues.

Second, was the loss of social interaction with colleagues and the opportunity to make and develop friendships and networks.

- Longer hours (50%) – For half the participants the advantages of teleworking were undermined somewhat by the tendency for work and home to blur. The consequence was that individuals actually spent more time working than they had when working in a more conventional setting.
- Lack of support (28%) – Participants cited a lack of technical support as frustrating and upsetting, as well as a reduction in socio-emotional support from bosses and colleagues.
- Less sick leave (21%) Participants reported taking fewer days sick, tending to work through their illnesses.
- Career progression (14%) – Some participants reported feeling marginalised, and hence disadvantaged with regards to career prospects. They felt that the lack of visibility was a problem in this respect.
- Cost (7%) – A small number of participants pointed out that while they might save money on travel, they actually spent more on costs such as heating and electricity.

Questions

1. Outline the implications of these findings for:

- Maslow's theory
- Herzberg's theory
- Vroom's theory

- Equity theory
2. As a manager, how would you monitor the performance of remote workers in terms of both output and quality?
 3. What can organizations do to counteract some of the more obviously demotivating aspects of remote working?

Adapted from: Mann, S., Varey, R. & Button, W. (2000) An exploration of the emotional impact of tele-working via computer mediated communication.

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References

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Maslow, A.H. (1943) *A Theory of Human Motivation*. *Psychological Review*, 50, 370-396