

Human Resource Executive Online

Telecommuting, by the Numbers

While public sentiment about telecommuting tends to be largely positive, the science based on its ultimate outcomes shows a more complex picture of the policy as a tool that requires the right strategy for each organization.

By Kecia Bal

Appeared October 26, 2015

While many talent experts agree that allowing employees to work remotely can boost recruitment and retention efforts -- as well as contribute to greater work/life balance for workers -- a new academic article seeks to move past popularly held ideals to discover what scientific research says about the real impact of implementing telecommuting.

The results of research analyzed in a [new article](#) in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* are mixed, showing that telecommuting can provide some of its purported workspace benefits -- though the magnitude of the effect, in many cases, such as its capacity to mitigate work-family conflict, was relatively small.

The extent of telecommuting plays an important role, the article indicates, with [some studies](#) suggesting that job satisfaction is highest among those who telecommute moderately.

In [other research](#) reviewed, though, more extensive telecommuting was connected to greater commitment to an organization and lower turnover intentions. Researchers also reviewed how the extent of telecommuting affects relationships between telecommuters and supervisors, coworkers and family -- and a resulting effect on job satisfaction. The article highlights [research](#) that suggests more extensive telecommuting has been associated with improved relationships with leaders but poorer relationships with coworkers.

Study author Tammy D. Allen, psychology professor and area director for University of South Florida's industrial-organizational psychology doctoral program, says she sought to rein in the scientific findings on a broad expanse of telecommuting effects, from organizational concerns to environmental issues.



While public sentiment about telecommuting tends to be positive, Allen says the science around its outcomes shows a more complete picture of the policy as a tool that requires the right strategies.

"I think back to the situation when Yahoo disbanded telecommuting," Allen says. "Marissa Mayer caught a lot of flak for that. I've been doing research on flex-work arrangements and work family issues for many years and knew it was not a panacea for individuals to better manage work and family lives."

Other tech giants, such as Google, have moved away from work-from-home policies in favor of creating sometimes quirky but amenity-rich [campuses](#) where employees are likely to strike up conversations, Allen says.

"They really value those spontaneous interactions that occur amongst employees," she says. "They think that's where innovation happens. If you read his book (*The New Digital Age: Transforming Nations, Businesses, and our Lives*), Eric



Schmidt talks about how [Google] does everything possible to keep employees there -- from feeding them to offering on-site laundry."

Allen's research also considered similar questions about telecommuting's role in professional isolation and its relationship to job performance, again revealing that a balanced approach often is most productive.

According to one [study](#) Allen reviewed, employees who spent more time telecommuting showed lower job performance as a result of professional isolation than those who spent little time telecommuting. In another [study](#) included in the article, extensive telecommuters with "high-quality" supervisory relationships exhibited the most commitment, job satisfaction and job performance.

For HR executives, Allen says, finding the right fit involves tailoring to suit organizational needs and individuals' roles and personalities.

"We still think that, by and large, telecommuting can be a strategic business practice and there are a lot of benefits to telecommuting," she says. "Our message is that there needs to be sound management practices implemented. That goes along with the idea of making sure employees are carefully selected, trained and provided proper equipment and that there are processes to make sure they still stay connected to the workplace to improve career development."

Carol Sladek, a partner and work/life consulting leader at Aon Hewitt, says the journal article shines a light on one of telecommuting's most difficult aspects: the difficulty in measuring outcomes.

"We see the benefits of workplace flexibility and telecommuting as the ability to attract talent and to keep talent engaged when they're in the workforce," she says. "It's not a magic answer for everyone. The right level of telecommuting really does depend on the individual's job and responsibilities. Some lend themselves better to working offsite, and it greatly depends on the individual themselves."

The tactic won't change unrelated, existing problems, she adds.

"If you take a below average performer and put them in the telecommuting situation, it rarely gets better," Sladek says. "But if you take a high performer, who is equipped and trained to telecommute, you may see better performance and increased productivity."

Some companies set a minimum productivity criteria, Sladek says, but those standards should not be multiplied for employees working remotely.

"However you're measuring performance at your organization, it should be the same," she says. "The only change is, sometimes, you have to work a little bit harder to communicate with each other."

Telecommuting, when properly implemented and balanced to meet the needs of a company, remains a worthwhile talent strategy, says David Lewis, president and CEO of Norwalk, Connecticut-based OperationsInc.

"The missing link we see in this area consistently is that companies are not training managers," he says. "The problem we see in this space is that managers establish a higher benchmark and standard of behavior. You turn good macro managers into micromanagers if you're not careful."

Employee isolation, especially in cases where an employee might be working several states away and never comes to an office, poses another challenge, he says.

"'Out of sight out of mind' is a big problem," he says. "You have to get managers in tune with how to go out of their way to include those individuals. If there's an impromptu meeting, it should include a webcam."

Aligning with some of the newly compiled research, Lewis says striking the right balance must be part of any telecommuting strategy, Lewis says.

"The knock on telecommuting is not on the strategy associated with telecommuting," he says. "It's purely and succinctly tied to poor execution because of lack of training and poor pre-thought."

