

Study Says Telecommuting May Harm Workers Left Behind in the Office

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As telecommuting and other forms of virtual work become increasingly popular, what happens to the workers who are left behind in the office? A new study by a management professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute suggests that the prevalence of telecommuters in an office can adversely impact coworkers who do not telecommute in terms of their job satisfaction and likelihood that they will leave the company.

Telework, also known as telecommuting, is a form of virtual work that entails working some portion of the week away from the conventional workplace — typically from home — and communicating via computer-based technology. Today, about 37 percent of U.S.-based and foreign companies offer flexible work arrangements such as telework and telecommuting, and the programs are growing at 11 percent per year, according to a report by the Society of Human Resource Management.

“The complex interplay between work and family life has been a topic of immense research, both in the private and academic communities,” said Timothy Golden, associate professor in the Lally School of Management & Technology at Rensselaer. “As a result, interest and research in telework as a work modality to ease conflicts between work and family domains has grown tremendously. Studies to date however, have investigated telework’s impacts on the teleworker’s themselves, rather than on those who work with teleworkers but remain in the office. This study shifts the research lens to investigate the impacts of telework on non-teleworkers in the office.”

Golden studied a sample of 240 professional employees from a medium size company. He found that the greater the prevalence of teleworkers in an office, the less others in the office are apt to be satisfied with their jobs, with a corresponding decrease in the probability that they will remain with the company.

Golden cautions, however, that while these results are scientifically measurable, they may be influenced by a variety of other important factors. For instance, Golden's study indicates that other influential factors may come into play to increase or decrease the impact on job satisfaction and intentions to leave the company, such as the amount of time co-workers telework, the extent of face-to-face interactions, and the amount of job autonomy given to employees. The findings were published in a recent issue of the journal *Human Relations*.

So why does this happen? The research suggests several reasons. Non-teleworkers who are less satisfied with co-workers may tend to find the workplace less enjoyable, have fewer and weaker emotional ties to co-workers, and generally feel less obligated to the organization.

“While reasons for the adverse impact on non-teleworker's satisfaction are varied, it potentially could be due to coworker's perceptions that they have decreased flexibility and a higher workload, and the ensuing greater frustration that comes with coordinating in an environment with more extensive co-worker telework,” suggests Golden.

“In addition, it may be that with a greater prevalence of teleworkers in a work unit, non-teleworkers may find it less personally fulfilling to conduct their work due to the increased obstacles to building and maintaining effective and rewarding co-worker relationships,” added Golden.

The results of the study suggest that managers may be able to help

mitigate some of the adverse impact by ensuring greater face-to-face contact between co-workers when employees are in the office, and granting greater job autonomy to accomplish work activities as employees see fit.

“In terms of managing the human resources within an organization, there is little doubt that one’s role in work life impacts one’s role in the family. However, organizational decision makers need to take into account the broader impact of telework on others in the office, particularly within team-based work environments, and exercise caution when implementing or expanding this work mode based purely on individual desires to telework,” Golden said.

Golden has been researching the impacts of flexible work arrangements for nearly a decade. His research examines the implications of the rapidly expanding availability and use of technology within business organizations. Golden also investigates the behavioral, relational, and attitudinal implications of technology-driven organizational innovations in the way individuals work. He teaches courses in the areas of talent management, team life-cycle dynamics, organizational change, and employee motivation.

Source: Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

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