

Telecommuting can be hazardous to your career

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Working from home has many advantages. By cutting out the commute, employees can save money, boost productivity and reduce their carbon footprint.

But there is one significant drawback, University of California, Davis, Professors Kimberly Elsbach and Jeffrey Sherman have discovered: Telecommuting can be hazardous to your career.

In a pair of studies — one involving in-depth interviews with office workers and another using a behavioral experiment — the researchers found that being present in a workplace gives an employee an important edge. When bosses and co-workers see an employee at work, they tend to think more highly of that person. And their evaluation is even more favorable if the sighting is after normal business hours.

"Merely being seen — often from a distance and without any interaction or real understanding of what a person is doing — that in itself has value," Elsbach says. "People notice."

Elsbach, of the UC Davis Graduate School of Management, and Sherman, of the UC Davis Department of Psychology, teamed with University of North Carolina management professor Dan Cable on the first-ever academic study of "passive" face time — when workers are simply seen in the office without any interpersonal interaction.

Their findings were published in the June issue of the journal *Human*

Relations.

To understand the implications for at-home workers and their employers, the research team conducted hour-long, open-ended interviews with 39 managers, inquiring about their understanding of face time and how it functions in their workplaces.

The managers tended to ascribe positive attributes to people who were seen at work.

"If you were there in normal hours, you were viewed as dependable and reliable," Elsbach says. "If you were seen outside of normal working hours, you were viewed as committed and dedicated."

The researchers then presented 60 working professionals with a written description of a scenario in which an office worker was present and observed by others. Later, participants in the experiment were asked to identify traits of the person in the scenario. The respondents tended to ascribe positive attributes to the person getting the face time.

Sometimes people are aware they use face time to evaluate employees, but most often the process is probably unconscious.

"Our study showed that inferences are likely to be made spontaneously, without deliberate thinking or awareness," Elsbach says.

In light of these findings, Elsbach offers advice for managers: Be aware of face-time dynamics when conducting performance appraisals. She also recommends eliminating the widely-used "trait-based" reviews in which employees are gauged on whether they are a "team player," "good leader" or other vague characteristic. Workers who have recorded a lot of face time will tend to score better in this type of evaluation, according to Elsbach.

“And not being at the workplace will lead to attributions that are the opposite of those positive traits,” she says.

Many flex-time workers are aware of their disadvantage and use various strategies to compensate, the researchers found. Some stay glued to their computers and respond immediately to e-mails to give the impression that they are always present at work. Others send e-mails late at night to appear to be working after business hours.

Meanwhile, anxieties over job security are driving a curious trend: many employees feel there is more pressure than usual to be in the office, according to recent media reports. Although companies are offering employees more chances than ever to work outside the office, fewer workers are accepting the offers for a more convenient schedule. Blame it on the recession, work-life experts say.

Elsbach advises telecommuters to document their tangible accomplishments, and to capitalize on days when they do come into the office.

"When you're there, make sure you spend your time interacting with people," she says. "Be sure to get face time when you can."

Provided by UC Davis

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