

Telecommuting works best in moderation, science shows

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Organizations are increasingly offering employees a variety of work-from-home options despite sometimes conflicting evidence about the effectiveness of telecommuting. A comprehensive new report reveals that telecommuting *can* boost employee job satisfaction and productivity, but only when it's carefully implemented with specific individual and organizational factors in mind.

A key factor in determining the success of a telework plan, for example, is the proportion of time that an employee works remotely versus in the office.

The report, published in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, is authored by leading researchers in workplace psychology Tammy D. Allen (University of South Florida), Timothy D. Golden (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute), and Kristen M. Shockley (City University of New York).

The report is accompanied by a commentary from Kenneth Matos (Senior Director of Research) and Ellen Galinsky (President and Co-Founder) of the Families and Work Institute.

Despite the popularity of [telecommuting](#), public opinion about its merits tends to be one-sided:

"Our intent is to provide a balanced picture of what we know and do not know based on the scientific findings," Allen, Golden, and Shockley say. "This sort of comprehensive view is essential to aiding individuals, organizations, and public policy-makers in shaping telecommuting practices."

According to Matos and Galinsky, the report "provides a powerful blueprint for practitioners to maximize the positive impacts of telecommuting while minimizing its drawbacks and understanding the nuances of what makes their telecommuting programs succeed or fail."

In their systematic review of available scientific research, Allen and colleagues find evidence that telecommuting is indeed associated with various positive outcomes for employees, including greater job satisfaction, lower work stress, and even improved job performance.

But they also find that these positive outcomes don't hold for all workers in all situations.

"Telecommuting may be most beneficial when it's practiced to a moderate degree," the researchers explain. "Face-to-face time may be particularly important at the start of new projects."

Other important factors include whether employees get to choose if they telework, how much control they have over their schedules, the quality of their relationships with supervisors and coworkers, and the extent to which their work depends on others in the organization.

Exploring these moderating factors is "an essential contribution to the practical discussions of telecommuting," Matos and Galinsky write in their commentary. "In other words, the impact of telecommuting *depends* on how and where it's implemented."

The research also makes clear that some benefits may come with specific tradeoffs. While telecommuting may allow employees to be more productive, it could also lead to longer work days; it may increase employees' sense of autonomy in their own jobs but could reduce knowledge sharing with colleagues; and it may allow for more flexibility in juggling professional and personal responsibilities but could also blur the boundaries between work and family roles.

Ultimately, the success of a telecommuting arrangement will depend on individual fit, supportive management, and clear communication. When these factors align, telecommuting can be a

boon not only to individual employees but also to the organization as a whole:

"Implementing an effective telecommuting plan can help organizations recruit top talent and create a more diverse work force," Allen, Golden, and Shockley note. "And it can also give organizations an advantage in emergency situations, allowing employees to work when public transportation or power outages would otherwise prevent commuting."

With a comprehensive plan in place, the practice is not an incidental employee benefit but rather a reflection of an organization's core values and mission:

"Telecommuting can be part of an organization's strategic way of doing business," Allen, Golden, and Shockley conclude.

More information: The text of the full report and commentary are available, free to the public, online at www.psychologicalscience.org/issues/telecommuting.html

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