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Flexibility or ethical dilemma: an overview of the work from home policies in modern organizations around the world

Ahmad Timsal and Mustabsar Awais

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The ability to hire, develop and then retain talent is regarded as a competitive advantage for any company. Organizations are coming up with diversified compensation packages, benefits and incentives to induce loyalty and commitment amongst their workforce.

Given this dynamic environment, more and more professionals today look for a better work–life balance. Therefore, they are attracted to employers who adopt flexible policies and accept that this is now becoming a priority for employment. This is beneficial for employees because they get a chance to remain in the workforce and continue to be employed by an established company, yet also enjoy all the advantages of being at home. Because of economic conditions, environmental factors and availability of smarter technology, “work from home” options are quickly gaining popularity. According to International Data Corporation (IDC), the mobile worker population in USA will grow at a steady rate over the next five years, increasing from 96.2 million in 2015 to 105.4 million in 2020. It is expected that by 2020, the mobile workforce will constitute 72.3 per cent of the total workforce ([International Data Center, 2015](#)). In another study, IDC found that in 2015 at USA, there are two million home-based businesses and more than three million corporate home office households ([Gretchen, 2011](#)). As this option becomes more popular, we discuss the potential pitfalls associated with the “work-from home policy” and why it is easier to implement in some countries compared to others.

Work from home policy: a catalyst for increasing worker’s productivity

Companies which advocate in its favor state that the productivity level of their employees increases once, they are given the option to work from home. As far as employees are concerned, they do not have to worry about the morning traffic jams, they can spend more time with their families, they are away from the stressful office environment and above all they are at their creative best. For organizations, this policy has enabled them to hire the top talent without geographic limits (including companies “stealing” talent from their competitors), save on operational expenses relating to office-based workers, and, most importantly, provide the much needed “work-life balance” to their employees. The general benefits for employees are:

- a flexible environment in which you get to decide your own working hours (in agreement with your employer);
- fewer distractions and stress;
- proximity to home and family members, reduced travelling time;

- better health and better work life balance; and
- greater productivity and creativity.

Work from home policy: a compromise between speed and quality of work

On the other hand, the critics of this policy also have some valid arguments as they claim that employees, who work remotely, are “actually not working” (Bloom, 2014). Primarily, this argument stems from the traditional managerial mindset which fears “the loss of control”, i.e. the productivity of employees cannot be measured, if they are not in direct sight. A key example in this regard was the change of policy at Yahoo!, when CEO Marissa Mayer decided to relocate employees working from home to different Yahoo! facilities. The following points were raised in her memo sent to the employees (Smith, 2013):

- For a good workplace, communication and collaboration are important, which means the employees should be working side-by-side.
- The best decisions come from the discussions in the hallway and cafeterias of the office and by meeting new people.
- Speed and quality of work are “compromised” when working from home.
- Being in the company does not relate only to your day to day job but to your interactions and experiences which can only be possible once people work from offices.

Here are some of the disadvantages for employees associated with working from home, as cited by many managers and working professionals (Nytimescom, 2013; Baytcom, 2015):

- the difficulty in separating home from work;
- self-imposed pressure of working endlessly; and
- the feeling of being alienated from company’s major decisions and sometimes promotions.

The decision of Yahoo! was met with severe criticism not only internally but also externally, from other companies and organizations. Even two years after this announcement, Yahoo! still struggles to fully implement it. The Virgin Group founder Richard Branson in an interview to Bloomberg said that “[. . .]. Marissa Mayer’s Yahoo work policy is on the wrong side of history” (Otani, 2015) and that “[. . .]. Companies should be flexible so employees can spend time with their kids” (Otani, 2015). Similarly, Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s Chief Operating Officer has also said that most companies can become more flexible than they really are by implementing a few changes, for example, being more result focused rather than time focused. You need to measure the results rather than watching people “try”. There’s a difference between seeming productive and being productive. Sandberg said “[. . .]. Of course we care that people tried, but when you do that you build this culture of being seen in the office trying, which is different than results” (Otani, 2015).

Effect of national culture on flexible work arrangements: examples from Pakistan

Another major factor for companies considering implementing home working is the national culture. This suggests a universal work from home policy may not be possible for all organizations around the world. The organizations need to revise and review their flexible work arrangement policies based upon their geographic locations. For example, in Pakistan, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority became the first public-sector organization to announce work from home policy for “female workers” only on a trial basis. According to the current policy, selected female workers will be allowed to work from home on just one day of the week. The results of the policy will be assessed and then a decision to continue with it or withdraw it shall be taken.

Likewise, there were certain non-governmental organizations who offered flexible work arrangements but withdrew their offer within six months. Some multinational organizations operating in Pakistan offer a work from home policy but make it compulsory for the employees to be present in office at least once a week. Employees who were offered home working struggled to differentiate between “working from home” and “extended vacations”, instead trying to fit their office work in between their normal home lives. These organizations witnessed a sharp decline in their productivity levels and withdrew all such perks given to their employees. The typical mindset of top-level management in Pakistani organizations believes employees can only be managed and controlled if they are in sight, which means working from home will not be popular with managers. These examples show how cultural dimensions can have a significant impact on the implementation of a work from home policy because Pakistan ranks high on Hofstede’s dimension of Power Distance (Hofstede, 2016).

In western cultures or in more developed states, there are people who advocate that work from home policies should become standard operating procedure. It is suggested that people in those cultures realize the benefits associated with working from home or the organizations operating there are more result-oriented rather than control-oriented.

Moving forward with work from home policies

Working from home is not for everyone: it requires a lot of dedication, self-control and discipline. It requires effort not to get distracted and lose momentum. Organizations that offer working from home tend to do so without providing any training on how to be effective working from home.

Although many companies endorse some degree of flexibility for employees, working from home is still contested in some countries. However, the current trend indicates that in future, working from home would eventually become commonplace. It is important that as we move forward, companies realize to both compete and retain the best possible talent; they need to come up with flexible work options. But, as suggested earlier, the employees should be properly trained on how to do this effectively for companies and employees to make working from home work.

Keywords:

Work life balance,
Flexible work arrangement,
Result oriented

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