

Understanding the importance of a Telecommuting Policy

With the rise of the Internet, and the increase in affordable bandwidth came a new type of worker, the telecommuter. Available technologies, in certain cases, have allowed some companies to offer the ability for certain employees to work from home instead of the office. This can be not only a benefit for the employee, but also for the company itself. As more and more employees clamor for the ability to telecommute, it is imperative for companies to have an in place a viable telecommuting policy. We will look below at why this is so important.

A better work environment

The benefit of telecommuting for the employee comes from having a much more relaxed workplace. The need to not show up at the office can be a huge motivating factor. Not fighting traffic, not needing a dress code, or fighting restrictive policy's can make the doing of the actual work you hired to do (and probably like) a much more enjoyable process.

You can create a workspace in your home that is totally free of distractions. Unlike the office where the current cubicle culture dictates that constant interruptions from the phone, conversations, and "Camping Carls" can seep precious hours away from your productivity, at home you are free to spend your time solely on the tasks you need to perform. This is beneficial to both the employee and the employer, in that the employer receives more productivity from the employee, while the employee has the freedom to create a work environment that suits their specific needs.

Also, employers can save significant costs by using telecommuting to limit the office space needed. It can be much more affordable to provide someone with the tools they need to do their job, than to provide them with the physical floor space to do the same job. This can also lead to reductions in power usage for the company, which is another cost saving.

Unfortunately, with the good must also come the bad. Employees are forced into isolation. While this can be good for the completion of tasks, it also can also lead to loneliness. Employees who are used to being a constant stream of people can soon fall victim to this, as the newness of telecommuting wears off. Also, this can lead to an "Out of Site, Out of Mind" mentality when it comes to promotions and inter-office happenings.

Things to think about

When looking to create your telecommuting policy, there are many concerns you need to look to cover. These concerns generally fall into these categories: Work Concerns, Location Concerns, and Policy Concerns. The vast majority of the concerns you will come across can be categorized into these three.

The first major we will look at is work concerns. You must have plans clearly in place to be able to deal with work being done by the telecommuter. The amount of work expected should be clearly identified before the telecommuting process begins. There should be very clear expiations for the employee and employer in this case. Also, the verifiability of the work must in some way be managed. There needs to be a similar number of controls on the quality of work done by a telecommuter as there is an in office employee. Lastly, the times may need to be agreed upon. Depending on the position, you may still need to be available to others via phone, email, or I.M. during certain periods. Just because someone is telecommuting does not necessarily mean they get to set their own hours.

Another concern comes from the aspect of just not being in the office. What type of equipment must the telecommuter possess? Will the company provide the equipment, or is the employee expected to furnish it? If internet access is required will the company reimburse? Will there be need for the employee to have a static IP address or business class broadband service? Security is also an issue. If an employee access sensitive data how will be accessed? If a user is not using a company provided P.C., what steps are in place to prevent the moving of company data to a local P.C.? What about virus and spyware protection? Also, a plan must be in place for the physical security of all company provided equipment and documents. Safety is another issue. O.S.H.A has always long held the belief that the employer's responsibility for the workplace is broadly defined and does not end at the four walls of the office or factory. Many types of employees are covered by this, truck drivers, sales reps, and telecommuters. While a full home inspection would be overkill, verifying that the employee is working in an environment that will be safe them to do their job must be taken into consideration.

Concerns over the telecommuting policy itself must be taken into consideration. If you allow one employee to telecommute, others will soon be asking for the same privilege. You must have in place a plan to determine what employees can and what employees cannot telecommute. You also must take into account what percentage of time each employee can telecommute. While some may only need to come into the office on occasion, some may only be telecommute one day a month.

When working on your telecommuting policy you must also decide on the rigidity of the policy. Will the plan be a set in stone in plan for everyone, or will there be

multiple policies to handle multiple types of employees? Who will be in charge of determining policy requirements? Will the individual department heads be able to determine their employees telecommuting needs, or will the single corporate policy determine for all?

Think before you implement

As you can see there is much thought and planning that must go into a telecommuting policy. Many different departmental boundaries are likely to be crossed when you write your policy. You will need to get the buy in of all of them for the policy to be effective. While there is much hard work to this, the benefits to the company and the employees are great and well worth the effort.