

Core Practices for Managing Virtual Employees in Public Organizations

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Abstract: The objective of this qualitative study is to explore and diagnose in depth the core practices for managing virtual employees in public organizations. The significance of the study lies in the growing trend for virtual jobs as a non-traditional means for creating jobs for youth with the spread of the unemployment problem in almost all the world countries, adding to the growing pressures on governments to cut their expenditures. Therefore, this study focuses on filling the gap in the current literature to come up with an integrated approach regarding the core practices for managing virtual employees in public organizations, opportunities, challenges, trends and direction for future studies. Data was collected from some primary sources by interviewing some government and business executives and also from secondary sources from the literature.

Key words: remote employees; public administration; virtual work; telework; telecommuting

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1. Introduction

The fast advances in technology in the more global and diverse world at the beginning of the 21st century has shifted the work pattern from the traditional office to the non-traditional work environment in home offices or remote centers. The terms virtual work, telework or telecommuting are used interchangeably. All these terms imply working at one's home or another location where employees use computers and communication technology to communicate with the main office, supervisors, co-workers, and customers. Telecommuting occurs whenever an employee is paid for work done at an alternative worksite and the total commuting time is thereby reduced. The growing trend in remote working and virtual teams represented a significant change in the relation between managers and employees, a relation that is based on effective leadership. Kowalski (2006) came up with three main components that are essential success factors for managing remote employees which are support, communication, and trust that should be applied at the organizational, managerial and employee level. Leaders should build a culture of trust through sharing their visions with remote employees, using different empowerment techniques, delegation, and results-based performance management (Kowalski, 2006).

In the past few years, in developed countries, there has been a growing trend for both private and public

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organizations to shift to remote employment instead of the traditional office employment due to the growing technological advances that helped some employees do their work from home on a part time basis, the need for achieving an employee's work balance in the middle of unbalanced complicated life and top management focus on employee's productivity rather their time spent at work (Martino D. et al., 1990).

As the workforce continues to change, organizations need to provide employees with a greater amount of flexibility as they should realize the cost benefits for flexible work arrangements. The virtual work opportunities allow these organizations to retain strong talent while fostering a culture that values work/life balance. Technological advances have provided different mediums of communication which assist the virtual employee in engaging in both social and professional interactions to network with others in the organization. However, there remains a need to identify ways for virtual employees to form the trusting relationships that have been built in face-to-face work environments. Moreover, manager has to ensure that virtual employees have the support and resources necessary to succeed and build a skill set that allows them to balance the needs of both the virtual and non-virtual employee (Gibson J. et al., 2002). Many organizations have continued to develop training programs and online resources to better serve the virtual community for supporting this community of employees (Busch, 2011). Although there were minor differences in how these organizations classifies virtual workers, for the purpose of this study, we define a virtual worker as an employee who spends at least part of their time working away from their home office (telecommuting).

2. Benefits of Virtual Work

According to (P. Judkins et al., 1986), many organizations started to realize that virtual work can provide lots of benefits to the employers, the employees and the community. These benefits can be classified as follows:

2.1 Benefits to the Employers

- **Supporting Decentralization:** Both Chamberlains and Rank Xerox in UK are using virtual work to support their organization's decentralization.
- **Flexibility and Efficiency:** It was said that virtual work reflected positively on the flexibility and efficiency of some companies that were using it like US West, Pacific Bell and FI in UK.
- **Reducing Overhead Costs:** Many organizations, especially in the current economic climate, are actively seeking ways to reduce operating costs. Distributed work programs are one of the most effective ways of achieving badly needed operational savings. Virtual work helped in reducing the organization overhead costs for some expensive cities like Tokyo and London. Xerox for example estimated that they could achieve 31% cut in total costs from using the telework system.
- **Recruitment and Retention of Staff:** Virtual work can help the employers' recruitment of skilled labor and retention of staff, especially for women after maternity and senior managers near retirement. Telework has also proven to be a good work source for the disabled; its success was proved in the pilot telework by American Express companies. Companies in urban areas with long, difficult commutes have found that offering part-time work from home can tip the scales in their favor, particularly in a competitive hiring environment.
- **Geographic Diversification and Globalization:** It's not a new phenomenon, but as an organization opens new facilities in remote locations, it has a distributed workforce even if everyone is in a corporate facility every day.
- **Continuity of Planning:** In recent years most large organizations have beefed up their business continuity plans in light of external risks such as natural disasters (hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards, and earthquakes), terrorist attacks, or pandemics like swine flu. A formal distributed work program dramatically lowers the risk of operational disruption. For example, in Egypt during the times of governmental strikes after the 25th January

Revolution, some employees were allowed to do their work from home to abide by the deadlines or to maintain their plans (Nahas, Safwat, Darwish, & Ahmed, 2013).

- Environmental impact: Flexible work programs can also have a powerful and very positive effect on an organization's carbon output as well as its economic, environmental, and social contributions to its local communities. When employees are not traveling to a central office they are not burning gasoline, and they're not clogging the highways as taking up space on the local commuter train (Ware, 2010).

2.2 Benefits to the Employees

- Employee's work life balance and productivity: Most researchers found that virtual working helps employees achieve a better work life balance, benefit from the time and money savings as well as the flexible time and autonomy (Gindi, 2013). Many employers reported also that employees show an increase in productivity which affected positively their motivation and job satisfaction. For example, a two year pilot project on virtual work at New York telephone showed an average of 43% productivity increase per participant (Bureau of National Affairs, 1989).

2.3 Benefits to the Community

- Creating employment opportunities in rural and isolated areas: Some developing countries have established tele-cottages where information technology is available to the public for education, business and leisure. Some countries like India, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania use virtual employment for the economic development of their countries. Virtual employment has been widely known in the US and Europe to help with the unemployment problem. In Egypt, some business sectors in Cairo managed to employ low cost labor from Upper Egypt at their travel agencies or telemarketing (Kaid, 2013).

- Solving traffic problem: In Los Angeles, virtual work is used to relieve traffic congestion, save gas consumption and improve air quality (Felstead et al., 2003).

3. Remedies for the Professional and Personal Isolation of the Virtual Worker

It is crucial to support the value of providing a full-time virtual employee with opportunities to engage in face-to-face interaction with colleagues and managers. As companies continue to increase the number of employees with virtual work arrangements, the employees may begin to feel lonely and socially isolated due to the absence of face-to-face interactions and less frequent opportunities for personal and professional relationship building. Accordingly, managers should have informal check-ins with their virtual worker to support and to encourage their virtual employee to join company activities which foster relationship building with colleagues. Promoting socialization and relationship building for individuals in a telework arrangement with other colleagues is a common strategy used to prevent feelings of isolation. Technological advancement has increased the ability for employees to interact with colleagues around the world during real work time and many companies have incorporated strategies to overcome isolation in their training programs for virtual employees such as developing websites and with extensive resources for the virtual employee, adding to creating online forums to facilitate discussions among the virtual community, providing videoconferencing capabilities to more closely enhance face-to-face communication to keep them informed of changes in the work environment and also to ensure the employee feels a sense of socialization with others. Moreover, a majority of companies have set internal messaging systems and corporate social media sites to provide other paths of communication. For instance, weekly staff meetings can be conducted virtually so virtual employees can join the teleconference whether they

are working from home or in a remote location, which can have a significant impact on socialization. Another concern is that employees in virtual arrangements may be excluded from developmental opportunities. However, due to the growing amount of online training, most companies suggested that the development opportunities are the same for all employees regardless of their work arrangement. Accordingly, there is a greater need for a continuous communication with team members and managers to ensure their awareness of the virtual employee's developmental needs and interests (Busch, 2011). Moreover, several companies require that the employee work in the office for at least one year before being able to pursue a virtual work arrangement, which provide the employee with time to build relationships with others, learn about the organizational culture, and develop mentoring relationships. In addition, most companies are requiring that their virtual employees come into the office a few times per year to network with co-workers and business leaders, which provides opportunities for the manager and employee to have face-to-face discussions regarding the employee's performance and the virtual work arrangement (Davenport & Pearlson, 1998).

4. Basic Requirements for Virtual Work

4.1 Competencies and Selection of Successful Virtual Workers

The key competencies identified as most critical for a successful virtual worker were consistent across research literature as including being self-motivated, self-efficacy, self-disciplined, having effective communication and time management skills, being technologically competent and results-oriented (Wang & Haggerty, 2009). Some employers do not allow an employee to work remotely upon hiring and may require the employee to work with team members to demonstrate strong performance. Other companies have implemented an informal request process which begins as a discussion between the manager and employee to approve or deny the employee's request depending on the circumstances. However, some companies have implemented a formal request process so the employees must go through if they are interested in entering a remote work arrangement. The manager and HR department then evaluate the employee on a set of criteria including how the arrangement is mutually beneficial for the individual, team, and company and to what extent that employee has displayed the competencies required to be a successful remote employee. After an employee is selected for a virtual arrangement, companies use various processes to prepare the individual for their virtual assignment. The first step in the employee preparation stage is providing technological equipment to all virtual employees and also ensuring they had a space in their remote work environment to work productively. Companies have also websites with best practices for working remotely, online training programs, rules and guidelines that a virtual employee must adhere to. However, although there are many virtual training resources available online for these employees, most companies do not require their employees to complete the training available. In general, companies require the employee to read through the rules and guidelines and just rely on the manager to provide a sufficient level of support to the virtual employee as needed. Actually, the most common virtual employee training focuses on how to utilize and leverage technological tools, time management, and how to effectively build relationships in the virtual environment (Busch, 2011).

4.2 Specific Skills and Competencies of Virtual Managers

Concerning the management of remote workers, to evaluate whether companies have any unique practices when selecting, assessing and developing remote managers, research suggests that managers should have informal check-ins with their virtual workers, encourage their virtual employee to join mentoring programs, and provide a

supportive environment for new virtual employees (Mulki, 2009). Currently, these companies prioritize communication skills for these virtual managers as well as relationship building skills. The organizations look to these managers to provide employees with clear goals for their work and also focus on how to help employees overcome feelings of isolation, and to build the competencies necessary to be an effective virtual worker. Additionally, the E-learning programs fasten in discussion forums to continue the conversations regarding managing virtual workers and to keep these managers networked. As for the psychological distance between a manager and a virtual worker, employees' feelings of job satisfaction are directly related to the perceived degree of psychological distance between them and their manager. In fact, trust in one's supervisor is not less important for virtual workers, as it is reciprocal relations. Moreover, the feelings of empowerment may have a greater impact on the success and satisfaction of the virtual worker. Nothing can completely replace the value of face-to-face collaboration for build trusting relationships. That's why companies have encouraged managers to schedule off-site activities and other networking events that virtual employees can attend in person to engage in informal discussions with their peers, co-workers, and supervisors in order to build a greater level of trust (Busch, 2011). According to Ware (2010), there are primary attributes for an effective remote manager. First is to establish clear expectations and goals. Second is to know the employees in order to get the right person for the right job at the right time in the right place. Third attribute is to establish explicit "Big Rules" in defining acceptable expectations of team members, norms, and values. However, trust is essential between managers and their virtual staff as the most critical skill in a distributed work environment is the ability to establish trust because without it, the distributed work programs simply don't work (Ware, 2010).

5. Current Trends for Managing Virtual Work Successfully

Regardless of how or why organizations develop formal distributed work programs; there are basic principles for managing virtual work successfully:

- The organization should do it strategically as the program is formal and explicit in terms of the specific business outcomes.
- The organization and its members learn to work differently over time as it requires some fundamental changes in how they get that work done, including redesigning core business processes, employing different technologies, and adjusting the way managers operate and communicate.
- Training is a central part of the program including both managers of virtual workers and the virtual workers.
- The effective use of collaborative technologies is central to making distributed work as the successful organizations today make a wide variety of collaboration tools available to their distributed workforce.
- Plan the work, and work the plan as success depends on planning thoughtfully and implementing aggressively.
- Learn to work differently as distributed work programs aren't just about redesigning facilities but it should also include significant organizational and cultural change (Ware, 2010). When face-to-face interaction is restricted, not only do personal relationships undergo major change, but also core business processes must be redesigned to reflect the new working environment.

6. Critical Practices for a Successful Work Shift Program

There are basic principles for managing successful work shifting program:

- Going paperless to be committed to digital information flow and storage as the most important thing to enable efficient distributed work. People can be much more mobile when they don't have to access paper documents as the centrally stored digital information can be accessed and processed from almost anywhere.
- Carrying the tools to be portable that makes it really simple for staff to "pick up and go". This degree of technology mobility increases the likelihood that people will work wherever they are as they can.
- Making time to practice new tools such as job-specific software applications. Give employees time to learn how to use new collaborative technologies well before they are expected to integrate them into their work style.
- Being contactable as to set open-door hours and to set aside specific of time for calls and other real-time collaborative activities.
- Develop personal discipline, including knowing when to "unplug" or getting offline. To separate work from the rest of their lives as burnout can become common among remote workers unless they learn how to disconnect.
- Train for technology as there are many readily available software-based collaborative tools that help make distributed work productive, and effective such as instant messaging and online "chat" packages; project management software; event scheduling tools; social networking applications and document sharing and collaborative writing tools (Ware, 2010).

Moreover, according to Ware (2010), the "Test-Drive" is recommended to give people the freedom to try out and master new knowledge and skills without the pressure of producing real work. This approach removes most of the stress of learning to use the new tools. It is very important to show people how the technologies can be used to enable and even promote social interaction. Adding to recognize that there isn't one IT solution for everyone. Employees with different job responsibilities and mobility patterns typically require different kinds of technology support. It is also recommended to use the technology to make individual and team performance transparent through for example posting key performance statistics online daily so that superior performance can be instantly seen and recognized (Ware, 2010).

7. Discussion

It was obvious from the different literature discussed and analyzed in this study, that the recent trends and issues regarding virtual employment, reveal the core managerial requirements for managers in general to be able to change the traditional organizational cultural from management by walking around to management by results and objectives. There was no clear distinction in the literature between the private and public organizations in their core best practices for managing virtual employees, although the environment surrounding public organizations is different. Public organizations usually face more public and legislative pressures to cut on their budget and render satisfactory services to their citizens with no profit mentioned. An analysis of the literature also reveals that the success of the virtual work requires well experienced managers and influential leaders to be able to plan, organize, motivate, build employees' commitment and etc. It also reveals that the effectiveness of virtual work depends to a large extent on an experienced human resource staff to be able to recruit the right candidate with specific qualification like self discipline, responsible, dedicated, self motivator and organized. The HR staff should also play a good part in supporting managers with their virtual employees' evaluation process, training, career development, building commitment and protecting their rights. Technology is a major success factor in virtual work, the availability of IT support team is crucial to solve any of the daily technological problems for the flow of communication between the virtual worker and his organization. Both managers and employees should be trained

on the different technological tools for virtual work. Daily communication via emails, video conferences and others plays a central role in shaping the virtual employee's and leader's relation. Moreover, virtual leaders should be of unique qualities to be able to manage their virtual employees' feeling of isolation and low motivation. Among these qualities are emotional intelligence, perseverance, patience, energy, goal and employee oriented and problem solver. Generally speaking, a virtual leader should possess the skills that are used by the transformational, situational, servant and charismatic leaders (Silverthorne C., 2001). Despite the fact that the study discusses the recent emerging trends and the best core practices for managing virtual employees, yet the gap still remains in the area that deals with the different challenges of managing virtual employee (Maher, 2014). Some of these challenges are related to several aspects related to the organization, its management system, the human resources, its technical and legislative issues, an area which needs further investigations and more of future researches to come up with the possible remedies and solutions to counteract the effect of these challenges for ensuring a proper management of virtual work. Future research should also be directed to assess the feasibility of the virtual work in comparison to the traditional work in public organization, with regards to the benefits it achieves as in rendering job offers, cost reduction and fuel saving in comparison to cost of technology involved and required training for technology.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study focuses on the core practices for managing remote employees. The study reveals the different benefits from remote work on all levels. Employees' feeling of isolation was one of the major concerns for many scholars who came up with different remedies to deal with the remote employees' disadvantages. The study reveals also the required competencies for remote employees and managers. It also discusses the core best practices for managing remote employees. A deep analysis to the literature review reveals that the success of remote work depends to a large extent on the organization's management system, an effective HR team, protection for remote employees' rights, skilled leaders, and a reliable technology. However, more studies should still focus on the leaders' management for the different challenges facing virtual employees in public organizations. Recommendations from the study can be summarized in the following main points:

- (1) Leaders of public organizations should give more attention to manage employees by results and not just by physical presence in order to be able for managing employees remotely.
- (2) Leaders of public organizations should build a skilled team of HR experts to be able for managing the HR practices of virtual employees.
- (3) Leaders of public organizations should be well trained to be able for managing the different challenges of virtual employees.

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