

Telecommuting: using personality to select candidates for alternative work arrangements

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ABSTRACT

Technology has changed the way society lives and works. As it has permeated organizations it has enabled many employees to free their work from location and time constraints. The result has been the advent of telecommuting which allows employees to utilize technology to work away from the conventional workplace either all or part of their work week. While telecommuting has advantages for both the employee and the organization, one significant disadvantage for the employee is personal and professional isolation. Not all employees are suited to the demands of telecommuting. In order to maximize the benefits of telecommuting organizations must take special care when selecting employees for positions that will require them to work remotely. While technical skills must be the primary consideration, personality characteristics must also be carefully considered in the selection process. In order to minimize the impact of social isolation, this research suggests using the MBTI to identify candidates whose personalities align most closely with the ISTJ classification as they will be most likely to succeed in a telecommuting role. It is also expected that using the TAT to identify candidates with a low need for affiliation and a high need for achievement will likely lead to more successful staffing outcomes. Similarly not all managers display the characteristics necessary to manage telecommuters. This paper posits that those who lead telecommuters will be most effective if they adopt a relationship-oriented leadership approach. In particular, the servant-leadership style which emphasizes empowerment, encouragement, communication, and employee development may be best-suited to leading telecommuters.

Keywords: Telecommuting, MBTI, servant leadership, alternate work arrangements, leadership.

INTRODUCTION

There is no question that technology has changed the way society lives and works. Computers have altered the way we interact with each other in every aspect of our lives. While some may question whether these advantages are good or bad for society as a whole, technology is ubiquitous and thus must be embraced and managed to harness its benefits. As technology has permeated organizations it has enabled many employees to “unbind” (Kurland & Bailyn, 1999) their work from location and time constraints. However this is not the first time society has witnessed the impact of technology on the relationship between home and work (Ammons & Markham, 2004). Prior to the 20th century work was home-based with family units living and working together. With the advent of the industrial revolution factory-based work took workers out of their homes and into modern organizational structures usually located in cities where home and the workplace were geographically separated (Harpaz, 2002).

Nilles (1994) is credited with coining the term “telecommuting”. Clark, Karau, and Michalisin (2012) define telecommuting as “...working a significant portion of time away from the conventional workplace, working from home or another location, and communicating by way of computer-based or other technology” (p. 31). Today we see a reversal in the migration that occurred during the industrial revolution. Many workers are returning to home-based work and leaving the office behind them. The U.S. Census Bureau’s Survey of Income and Program Participation reports that in 2010 12.4 million people worked at home at least one day per week, which is a 35% increase over the last decade. The survey also states that 6.6% of the workforce is considered home workers (someone who works exclusively from home) while 2.8% is classified as mixed workers (a person who works at both home and at the job site).

ADVANTAGE AND DISADVANTAGES OF TELECOMMUTING

Advantages

Despite some high profile organizations such as Yahoo and Best Buy ending their telecommuting programs (Tkaczyk, 2013), the sustained popularity of this type of work structure indicates that it is a fixture in many organizations. However, such programs must be carefully managed to ensure that they are in fact generating positive outcomes for both the individual and the organization. The literature identifies many advantages to telecommuting. Manoocheheri and Pinkerton (2003, pp. 9-10) list schedule and location flexibility, enhanced job satisfaction, productivity improvement, the reduction of organizational costs (due to reduced clerical support, real estate costs, and absenteeism) as benefits to telecommuting. Golden and Veiga (2005, p. 302) also tout job satisfaction as a positive outcome of telecommuting along with decreased stress, more personal control over interactions due to the absence of unplanned interruptions, and they also indicate that telecommuters are better able to meet non-work, family responsibilities. Improved work-life balance, heightened morale, and increased productivity are all identified by Gajendran and Harrison (2007, p. 1524) as positive outcomes from telecommuting. Harpaz (2002, p. 75-78) indicates that individuals experience more autonomy and flexibility, more effective time management, savings in travel time and costs and more flexibility to deal with family responsibilities when they telecommute, while organizations benefit from increased productivity, an increased pool of available human resources (as employees no longer need to be co-located with the organization), reduced absenteeism, cost savings, increased motivation, and

an improved perception of the company as modern and progressive. Ammons and Markham (2004, p. 203) state that working at home can minimize distractions that can result from annoying co-workers and office politics. Lower absenteeism, better morale, reduced overhead, a broader pool of talent, flexibility and fewer distractions are all identified as positive aspects of telecommuting by Cooper and Kurland (2002, pp. 511-512). Another somewhat unexpected benefit of telecommuting is the ability for the disabled to access positions in the workforce that might have previously been unavailable to them due to difficulties associated with commuting and accommodation (Harpaz, 2002; Manoochehri & Pinkerton, 2003).

Disadvantages

However, telecommuting is not without its problems. Ammons and Markham (2004) indicate that working at home can actually lead to increased role conflict as cultural norms dictate that if one is at home, he or she should be responding to the demands of the family, not work. Home-based workers must erect boundaries and mental fences to separate work and home responsibilities which often results in social isolation. Harpaz (2002, 77-78) also identifies social isolation as a significant disadvantage to telecommuting along with a lack of separation between work and home, a lack of professional support (such as clerical and technical support), delayed career advancement (due to lack of visibility in the organization), and working excessive hours. Cooper and Kurland (2002) highlight isolation, both professional and personal, as a significant barrier to successful telecommuting. Dahlstrom (2013) also identifies isolation from the work culture resulting in concerns about fairness in actions such as reward and promotions as a disadvantage. He also states that isolation from informal work interactions can limit learning opportunities. Similarly, there are concerns that focusing on telecommuting for those with special needs (rather than integration into the workplace) could result in increased isolation (Harpaz, 2002). Gajendran and Harrision (2007, p. 1525) also confirm that social isolation, career stagnation, and family conflict can have negative consequences for individuals. Golden and Veiga (2005) also stress the potential negative impact of social isolation as a result of telecommuting, including a limited opportunity to engage in informal exchanges with co-workers and managers.

Therefore, while it appears that there are many positive outcomes associated with telecommuting, it is not without its challenges. Social isolation appears to be a significant concern among those engaged in telecommuting. It is equally clear that not every employee is a candidate for telecommuting (Harpaz, 2002; Manoochehri & Pinkerton, 2003). This paper will discuss some of the personality characteristics that should be considered when selecting candidates for positions that will entail telecommuting. It will also suggest leadership styles and behaviors that can contribute to successful telecommuting experiences for individuals and organizations.

SELECTING CANDIDATES TO TELECOMMUTE

When selecting employees for jobs organizations generally focus first and foremost on whether or not the candidate has the knowledge, skills, abilities and other qualifications (KSAOs) needed to successfully fulfill the requirements of the positions. Technical skills remain the primary consideration for telecommuting positions, but personality characteristics must also be carefully considered in the selection process. These factors will be of particular importance

when the position requires high intensity telecommuting (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007) where the employee spend most if not all of his or her work week away from the workplace. Clark, Karau, and Michalisin (2012, p. 32) state that an effective telecommuter is likely to be self-motivated, self-disciplined, flexible, innovative, organized, a strong communicator, task-oriented, trustworthy, and have a limited need for face-to-face contact. Ammons and Markham (2004) confirm that self-discipline and motivation are essential factors that help telecommuters to cope with interruptions and distractions. Harpaz (2002, p. 80) states that we must consider which features of an individual's personality will contribute to his or her suitability for telecommuting and ultimate likelihood of deriving satisfaction from this type of work arrangement. Therefore utilizing personality assessments may prove to be an essential tool when seeking the right candidate for a telecommuting position.¹

MYERS-BRIGGS TYPE INDICATOR

One of the most recognized and widely used personality preference instruments is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The descriptions and logic of the MBTI are nonthreatening and straightforward and it focuses on normal behavior, making it a test that has persisted in popularity over the years (Fox-Hines & Bowersock, 1995; Zemke, 1992). Using self-reporting, the MBTI determines an individual's dominant preferences on four opposing dimensions: extroversion-introversion (E-I), sensation-intuition (S-N), thinking-feeling (T-F), and judgment-perception (J-P). The MBTI uses these four pairs of contrasting traits to create 16 personality types (Abrams, 2011). Higher scores on each dimension indicate a stronger likelihood that the individual has developed the attributes associated with those preferences (Tan & Tiong, 1999; Varvel, Adams, Pridie, & Ruiz Ulloa, 2004).

Extraversion-introversion

The E-I index reflects where individuals prefer to focus their attention. Extraverts prefer the outer world of people, while introverts are oriented towards the inner world of concepts and ideas. Extraverts get their energy from people while introverts are energized through thoughts and ideas. Extraverts are people and action-oriented and favor oral communication unencumbered by the written word. They work quickly and are impatient with long slow jobs. Introverts like quiet concentration, are content to work alone and prefer to utilize written communication (Filbeck, Hatfield, & Horvath, 2005; Fox-Hines & Bowersock, 1995; McPherson, 1999; Myers & McCaulley, 1989; Opt & Loffredo, 2003; Tan & Tiong, 1999; Varvel et al., 2004).

It would seem likely therefore that those that indicate preference towards introversion rather than extroversion would be more suited to telecommuting. As previously discussed, telecommuting involves a considerable level of social isolation which appears to be a better fit for introverts. There is a heavy emphasis on written communication through email, online chats, and text messages which is an area in which introverts feel comfortable. It is likely that extroverts will become frustrated with the amount of time it will take to wait for answers rather than receiving immediate feedback through face-to-face contact. The social isolation inherent

¹ Fretwell, Lewis, and Hannay (2103, pp. 58-59) summarize the MBTI and its application and this discussion of the description of the MBTI itself draws from that work.

in home-based work is likely to further frustrate the extrovert and limit his or her creativity and energy.

Sensing-intuition

The S-N Index reflects how individuals acquire information about their surroundings and how they choose to perceive the world. Those with a sensing preference prefer concrete information and rely on the five senses to observe facts or activities. An intuitive thrives under change and unusual situations, relying on a *sixth* sense or personal hunches to assess the overall circumstances (Filbeck et al., 2005; Fox-Hines & Bowersock, 1995; McPherson, 1999; Myers & McCaulley, 1989; Opt & Loffredo, 2003; Tan & Tiong, 1999; Varvel et al., 2004).

The most effective telecommuters would appear to be those with a preference for the sensing dimension. Because those with an intuitive preference utilize personal hunches or “intuition”, they will likely be much more comfortable in face-to-face meetings where they can assess the whole person, including body language and tone, rather than relying strictly on the written word to interpret information. The sensor will be content to make decisions utilizing the facts presented without additional interpretation of the motives and moods of the sender.

Thinking-feeling

The T-F index reflects the preferences of individuals for making decisions and evaluating their perceptions. Those with a thinking preference use logic, facts, and fairness. They strive for objectivity and demonstrate discomfort dealing with the feelings of others. On the other hand, personal and social values are more likely to drive the decisions of those with a feeling preference. Their decisions are more subjective in nature, and because they enjoy pleasing others, they consider the impact that their decisions will have on those concerned. They are likely to offer sympathy and demonstrate appreciation to their co-workers (Filbeck et al., 2005; Fox-Hines & Bowersock, 1995; McPherson, 1999; Myers & McCaulley, 1989; Opt & Loffredo, 2003; Tan & Tiong, 1999; Varvel et al., 2004).

When considering those who would be best suited to perform effectively as telecommuters, those who favor the thinking dimension are likely the best fit. Thinkers are more concerned with facts and less concerned with the feelings of others. Their relationships are business-oriented and they do not feel the need to develop social attachments with their colleagues. This makes them much more suited to the relative isolation of the telecommuting environment.

Judging-perceiving

The J-P index addresses how people prefer to organize and orient themselves to the outer world. Individuals who utilize a judging preference focus on leading an organized and orderly life and utilize detailed planning in order to exercise control over their lives. Those with a perceiving preference are more flexible and relaxed and resent time constraints. These individuals do not seek to control situations but rather to adapt to them as they occur (Filbeck et al., 2005; Fox-Hines & Bowersock, 1995; McPherson, 1999; Myers & McCaulley, 1989; Varvel et al., 2004).

In order to be a successful telecommuter an individual must be organized, task-oriented, and self-disciplined. Those with an inclination towards the judging dimension are more likely to thrive in an environment in which they control their work day. Telecommuters must develop processes and routines to assist them in organizing and managing their home lives and their work lives in order to effectively integrate the two (Tietze & Musson, 2010). The judger would appear to be more comfortable in this realm. Therefore, this analysis would recommend that organizations utilize the MBTI to identify candidates whose preferences fall towards the introverted, sensing, thinking, judging (ISTJ) dimensions in order to select an individual with the personality traits who would be the best fit for a telecommuting position.

MCCLELLAND'S LEARNED NEEDS THEORY

In the 1960s David McClelland theorized that individual behavior was motivated by the desire to satisfy a predominant need. He speculated that needs are learned, and are thus a product of the society and culture in which individuals live (McClelland 1961, 1962). He identified three dominant drives he classified as the need for achievement, the need for affiliation and the need for power. These varying needs would ultimately drive different types of behaviors in order to satisfy the dominant need or drive. McClelland proposed the use of the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) developed by Murray (1943) in order to assess the relative dominance of these three drives. The TAT consists of a series of pictures of individuals in ambiguous situations. The individual completing the test is then asked to develop a story about what is occurring in each picture. The story is then evaluated by the test administrator to measure the relative differences among the need for achievement, need for affiliation and need for power (Gibson, Ivancevich, Donnelly, Konopaske, 2009; Yukl, 2002). The TAT utilizes a projective technique rather than relying on self-report questionnaires to evaluate the dominance of the underlying drives and thus requires some level of interpretation which may call its validity into question (Gibson et al., 2009). However Spangler (1992) indicates that the TAT may be as effective as more traditional questionnaire methods.

Need for achievement

An individual with a high need for achievement is characterized as someone with a strong drive to pursue and attain challenging goals. He or she experiences satisfaction from accomplishing difficult goals regardless of the rewards that follow. These individuals prefer tasks where achievement depends on their own efforts and abilities rather than those of a team. They prefer to receive specific, concrete and immediate feedback about their performance and personal credit for their successes. They are attracted to tasks where they can demonstrate individual initiative to solve problems and they will take personal responsibility for their actions and results. They will avoid both easy and difficult performance goals but rather strive for moderately challenging goals that they think they can achieve (Gibson et al., 2009; Newstrom, 2011; Yukl, 2002).

Need for affiliation

Individuals demonstrating a high need for affiliation are driven by the desire to relate to people socially with a specific desire to be liked and accepted by others. They seek social

interaction and prefer to work in a friendly, supportive team where they will be recognized for their favorable attitudes and cooperation. Most importantly, individuals with a strong desire for affiliation "...receive inner satisfaction from being with friends, and they want the job freedom to develop those relationships" (Newstrom, 2011, p. 112). Those with a low need for affiliation are characterized as loners who will actively strive to avoid social activities (Newstrom, 2011; Yukl, 2002).

Need for power

Finally, those with a strong desire for power derive satisfaction from influencing others, including their attitudes, behaviors and emotions. They strive to make an impact on their surroundings and are willing to take risks in order to do so. This individual enjoys "...winning an argument, defeating an opponent, eliminating a rival or enemy, and directing the activities of a group" (Yukl, 2002, p. 179). The need for power is manifested in two ways. With a socialized power orientation an individual will have the self-control to satisfy the need for power in socially acceptable ways that benefit the entire organization and achieve a worthy cause. On the other hand, an individual with a personalized power orientation seeks to fulfill this need by dominating others and satisfying selfish motives, looking out only for his or her own desires without regard for others (Newstrom, 2011; Yukl, 2002).

Therefore it would appear that there is a case to be made for considering McClelland's Learned Needs Theory and the TAT in the selection process for candidates for telecommuting positions. Based on the discussion above, a candidate with a strong need for achievement would make the best candidate for a telecommuting position while an individual with a strong need for affiliation would not be a good choice, particularly for a high intensity telecommuting position. Individuals with a high need for achievement prefer challenging tasks that are completed individually. They want to take the initiative to solve problems on their own and are also prepared to take personal responsibility for the results of their efforts (whether good or bad). Their satisfaction comes from accomplishing the goal itself. On the other hand, those with a high need for affiliation derive satisfaction from the social aspects of work. They see the workplace as an avenue for developing meaningful relationships and seek out team work where their social skills can be recognized and rewarded. Given that one of the significant features of telecommuting is social and even professional isolation, this work structure will not satisfy the needs and desires of the high need for affiliation employee. It seems likely that this individual will experience low levels of satisfaction and ultimately leave the telecommuting position or the organization as a whole.

On the contrary, if high achievement individuals are afforded clear goals with the freedom to achieve those goals however they see fit, they will likely find telecommuting to be a satisfying experience. It is also important that managers provide these individuals with detailed and frequent feedback so that they can monitor their likelihood of success and make adjustments to their behaviors where needed. Conversely, the need for power cannot be as clearly identified as a contributor or a detractor to telecommuting. This may in fact lie more with the nature of the job itself. If we accept that those with a high need for power are primarily driven by their ability to influence others, then their satisfaction with the position, whether in a traditional work environment or a home-based environment, would derive from whether or not they were in a position to sway the opinions, emotions, and behaviors of others. While this is likely easier to do in person, it is not impossible to do remotely. Thus the need for power will likely play a less

significant role in the selection process for candidates that are suitable for a telecommuting position.

Despite costs in terms of both time and money, utilizing the TAT to determine the primary needs and drives of individuals being considered for telecommuting positions appears to deliver valued results. Organizations should be mindful of the fact that individuals demonstrating a high need for affiliation are unlikely to have their needs met in this environment and will in all likelihood leave the position due to dissatisfaction with the job structure. But by targeting those with a high need for achievement and structuring the telecommuting position such that they have manageable goals to achieve with discretion on how to achieve those goals along with frequent feedback, the organization is much more likely to achieve a fit among the person, the job and the organization.

LEADERSHIP STYLE AND TELECOMMUTING

While there are many ways to describe leadership, House et al. (1999, p. 184) define organizational leadership as "...the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members". Those who lead employees who are primarily telecommuters will need to carefully examine their leadership style. While ideally organizations have selected employees who are particularly suited for telecommuting work, there are cases where work has evolved over time from traditional work-centered employment to home-based employment. These workers may not have chosen this environment and in fact their personalities may not be well-suited to telecommuting. They may be particularly vulnerable to feelings of personal and professional isolation. Similarly, those employees whose positions involve high intensity telecommuting (spending more time away from the office setting) may also be more susceptible to feelings of loneliness and distance from the organization.

Just as not every employee is suited to telecommuting, not every manager is suited to supervising employees who telecommute. Those managers who are more comfortable with a directive style that compels them to closely monitor the work of their employees, those who have difficulty trusting their employees, and those who generally subscribe to McGregor's Theory X (McGregor, 1960) view of employees (that employees dislike work, lack responsibility and must be coerced and controlled) are unlikely to have success with or be comfortable managing telecommuters. Managers who adopt McGregor's Theory Y assumptions about people (that they will exercise self-direction and self-control, they will seek responsibility, and that they are creative and imaginative) may be better disposed to manage employees with whom they will not have daily face-to-face contact.

Much of the historical research on leadership was determined to find the one best leadership style that would be successful in every circumstance and every condition. Over time it became evident that while leaders may be inherently more comfortable with one leadership style than another, in order to be effective they must be able to adapt their leadership style to the situation. Fieldler (1967) proposed that depending on the situation (as defined by the quality of the leader-member relations, the task structure and the leader's position power), either the task-oriented or the relationship-oriented leadership style would be most effective. Hersey and Blanchard (1988) similarly proposed that the leader must choose the most effective leadership style (telling, selling, participating, delegating) by determining the competence and commitment levels of employees. House (1971) developed the path-goal theory of leadership which similarly

indicates that the leader must choose among different leadership styles (directive, supportive, achievement-oriented, participative) after assessing characteristics of the work environment (level of task structure, degree of formal authority, cohesiveness of the work group) and characteristics of the employee (local of control, willingness to accept authority, self-perceived task ability). All of these theories support the proposition that some leadership styles will be more effective in certain situations than others. Therefore this suggests that there may be one style that is more effective for managing telecommuters (Dahlstrom, 2013).

The social isolation (both personal and professional) inherent in telecommuting presents a challenge for managers. Effective communication is one way to diminish its impact. Kowalski and Swanson (2005) indicate that three critical factors leading to success for telecommuters include support, communication and trust. Leaders will be unable to influence others without strong communication skills. In the case of telecommuters this will be even more challenging as much of that influencing process will need to take place electronically rather than face-to-face where there are likely more opportunities for formal and informal communication. Dahlstrom (2013) posits that a relationship-oriented leader will generally be a more effective communicator who is more capable of developing trusting relationships with telecommuters.

The relationship-oriented leader is perhaps most effectively characterized by those adopting the servant leadership style. Rather than focusing on satisfying his or her own needs, the servant-leader is motivated to meet the needs of his or her employees. The concept of servant leadership was introduced by Robert Greenleaf in 1977. Greenleaf hypothesized that servant leaders would be driven to serve first and lead second in order to meet the needs of others. Spears (1996) stated true leadership develops from a desire to help others to be all that they are capable of becoming. Russell and Stone (2002, p. 146) identify characteristics that researchers in this field have consistently identified as being associated with servant-leaders. The first list comprises what they termed functional attributes due to their repetitive prominence in the literature.

- | | |
|--------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Vision | 6. Modeling |
| 2. Honesty | 7. Pioneering |
| 3. Integrity | 8. Appreciation of others |
| 4. Trust | 9. Empowerment |
| 5. Service | |

The remaining characteristics are identified as accompanying attributes of servant leadership:

- | | |
|------------------|------------------|
| 1. Communication | 6. Influence |
| 2. Credibility | 7. Listening |
| 3. Competence | 8. Encouragement |
| 4. Stewardship | 9. Teaching |
| 5. Visibility | 10. Delegation |

These characteristics reflect many of the qualities managers need to effectively manage telecommuters. Honesty, trust, and appreciation of others are important elements in building a strong leader-follower relationship. Stewardship and teaching ensure that the leader takes time to build the skills of the telecommuter. Empowerment, encouragement, and delegation are needed to build the self-confidence and self-efficacy of telecommuters, all of which are essential for goal achievement. But perhaps most importantly, servant-leaders demonstrate strong communication and listening skills which are essential for telecommuters. Gajendran and

Harrison (2007) identify informational impoverishment as a significant fear of telecommuters. Telecommuters must generally rely on technology like email and teleconferences for information. Electronic communication is much lower in media richness and social presence than face-to-face interactions (Golden, 2007). A servant-leader who is characterized as an effective communicator and listener is much more likely to recognize the potential shortfalls of these communication methods and thus commit to utilizing video conferences, synchronous chats, web-based conferencing and other more sophisticated technologies as much and as effectively as possible. The servant-leader's commitment to communication will play a significant role in minimizing the impact of the personal and professional isolation of the telecommuter. Servant-leaders will focus on the needs of the employee and do what they can to provide the resources to ensure that the employee has development opportunities, understands the vision of the organization and his or her role in it, will listen to the employee and try to alleviate concerns, and do whatever is necessary to make sure that the employee's highest-priority needs are being served. They seek to transform their followers to "...grow healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants" (Greenleaf, 1977, pp. 13-14).

CONCLUSION

While the evidence points to the fact that telecommuting is on the rise, it also indicates that organizations and employees both must consider the implications of telecommuting carefully. Not all employees are suited to the demands of telecommuting, and not all managers display the characteristics necessary to manage telecommuters. When selecting employees for positions that will involve telecommuting, personality factors must be considered along with technical qualifications. Utilizing personality tests such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Thematic Apperception Test may prove invaluable in identifying employees who are more likely to experience success as telecommuters and should be particularly relevant tools for jobs that would be considered high intensity telecommuting positions. Identifying candidates who will be able to capitalize on the positive aspects of telecommuting while managing to minimize the negative consequences (particularly social isolation) is an essential first step in establishing an effective telecommuting program that will contribute to maximum returns for the organization. Moreover, those that lead telecommuters must also be prepared for the challenges that may emerge. A strong relationship orientation appears to be the best approach to minimize the impact of isolation. Ultimately a servant-leader whose focus is on effective communication and employee development may be the best choice to ensure that telecommuters are satisfied and effective in their jobs and that the organization is achieving its goals.

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