

MOBILE WORKING

ADVERTISING FEATURE

Telework is a trend with benefits

Working remotely has gained momentum as more businesses seek greater efficiency and flexibility. And Australia is ahead of the curve, writes POLLY SIMONS

WHETHER you call it teleworking, telecommuting, anywhere working or simply working from home, there's no doubt the idea of working outside the office is gaining momentum.

"We've been talking about it for a very long time," says Dr Yvette Blount, research coordinator of Macquarie University's Australia Anywhere Working Research Network, which has been investigating the rise of teleworking since the network was established in 2012.

Up to 80 per cent of the global workforce will be working remotely by 2030, according to the recent report *How Work Will Work in 2030*, by software company Citrix.

Australia is already ahead of the curve, with the report finding half of Australian small-to-medium businesses already offer flexible working policies, compared with 44 per cent worldwide, and four in five employees saying they would work remotely if their employers gave them the option.

"A lot of organisations are very keen to understand how to make it work," Dr Blount says, naming Medibank, Cisco, IBM and Microsoft as companies that telework well.

Advocates argue employees working remotely are often more productive without the distractions of the office, are less stressed and have better work-life balance.

A University of Melbourne study published last year found people who worked from home one to five days a week were more productive, had higher job satisfaction levels and worked up to three hours more on average than those who didn't work from home at all.

"Employees often see teleworking as a privilege, they want to make sure that this arrangement isn't put at risk in any way, so often work longer hours," Dr Blount says.

For employers, the benefits of teleworking include reduced employee and real estate costs, as well as the opportunity to take advantage of the skills and capabilities of those otherwise excluded from the workforce, for example through disability, location or family responsibilities.

But as the controversy surrounding the ban last year by Yahoo chief executive Marissa Mayer on employees working from home suggests, not all businesses are comfortable with the idea.

The Citrix study found that despite increasing pressure from employees to work remotely, 39 per cent of businesses surveyed were concerned employees working from home would be distracted by using their phones for personal purposes during the working day.

"A lot of managers don't have the skills to manage people remotely," Dr Blount says.

"They ask: 'How do I know they're working?' But if people are meeting their KPIs and getting the work done, does it matter? In my experience, most employees want to do a good job."

In fact, she said often the opposite was true, with many employees working around the clock, creating new problems for managers faced with monitoring their employees' emotional and physical wellbeing from afar. For others, the social isolation of working alone can cause problems for those used to a noisy office environment. "From a management perspective, it can be very difficult to tell if employees are stressed or not coping," Dr Blount says.

Other concerns include that by not being in the office, employees miss out on the informal collaboration and brainstorming that often occurs at the water cooler or over lunch, and which can be so beneficial.

"You miss out on that passive knowledge from chance encounters with other employees, and forming those relationships," Dr Blount says.

Teleworking is not a black and white thing for employers, it needs to be on a case-by-case basis. But in order for organisations to make the most of people's skills and capabilities, they have to think about 'anywhere working' seriously

DR YVETTE BLOUNT
MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

Fortunately, technology is providing a solution. Advances in teleconferencing make it easier than ever for employees to communicate with each other, while telework, or smart, hubs in Sydney and Melbourne provide employees working remotely with the social interaction they are missing and the chance to meet other employees with similar or complementary skills.

Ultimately, Dr Blount says, the choice to work remotely should be an individual one.

"Teleworking is not a black and white thing for employers, it needs to be on a case-by-case basis," she says. "But in order for organisations to make the most of people's skills and capabilities, they have to think about 'anywhere working' seriously."



GREENER FUTURE: A recent report found up to 80 per cent of the world's workforce will work remotely by 2030.

Realities of managing remotes

Gihan Perera

MANY managers admit they don't know how to manage and lead virtual teams effectively, particularly when it comes to trust, communication, managing deadlines, and achieving consensus in decision-making.

Even worse, there are some common myths about virtual teams that can cause friction within the team, or even seriously damage its performance.

Myth one: It's more difficult to build trust
TYPICALLY, in-person teams build trust via physical interaction and sharing personal details. For example, team members share the same office, the same water cooler, the same parking lot, and the same canteen.

These factors, which help to build trust, generally don't apply with virtual teams.

Some leaders and managers attempt to bridge this gap

by seeking ways to create the same opportunities. This can help, but it isn't always practical or possible, can cause resentment, and will never be a full solution.

A far better solution is to recognise that trust can be built differently.

On a practical level, here are some things you can encourage your team to build in to their everyday operations:

- Set clear deadlines, and commit to meeting them;
- Clarify expectations about how people respond to requests (e.g. email responses within one working day); and
- Choose appropriate communication channels based on expectations (e.g. using the phone, not email, for urgent requests).

Explain to your team the importance of these factors, especially the natural consequences of not meeting them. Finally, because these issues are so important to building trust, monitor them closely and act quickly if they are not working.

Myth two: Interpersonal skills don't matter

THIS is a flawed and dangerous assumption. People are people, and just because they are comfortable using a computer at home to get their work done doesn't change that fact. In fact, if anything, interpersonal skills might be even more important in virtual teams.

As a leader or manager, place a high emphasis on interpersonal skills when selecting your virtual team members. And when the team is in operation, be aware of the emotional and interpersonal needs and desires of your virtual team members.

Myth three: You can't measure and reward performance

SOME managers and leaders despair because they can't manage virtual team members in the same way as in-person workers. After all, how can you see what people are doing when you can't, well, see what people are doing?

The reality, however, is that the methods of measuring, monitoring and rewarding performance are different. Just because you don't see your team members in-person every day, doesn't mean you can't engage with them or measure their performance.

Firstly, you should measure and reward performance based on results rather than effort. In other words, what matters is the work they produce, not the number of hours they spend doing it.

Secondly, remote work, by its very nature, is done electronically, and can be monitored and measured electronically. The third factor is that virtual workers are far less affected by "friction" in the workplace, meaning managers and leaders can make clearer assessments of performance.

Of course, these aren't the only factors that affect success. But knowing these myths will give you a head start in managing a virtual team, especially if it's new to you.

Gihan Perera is a business consultant, speaker and author



Consultant Gihan Perera



MOVING AHEAD: The challenge of all new technology is to engage users.

User experience key to success

SHIFTING conventional workplace practices into the virtual world involves a delicate balancing act between sophisticated technologies and the low-tech practices people are comfortable with.

As webinars replace seminars, travel budgets shrink in favour of teleconferences and paper makes way for digital file sharing, simplicity must always come first, according to Citrix Asia-Pacific regional director Lindsay Brown.

"People like their comfort zone," he says. "(Technology) has to address that and make sure the stuff it's doing fits in with the way people work. It always boils down to what experience people are going to get, and how it will allow them to be more productive.

"Sometimes, there are too many whiz-bang features."

In the Citrix online meeting tool GoToMeeting, for example, the Sightboard function allows a presenter to write on an ordinary whiteboard, but with a technological twist. The webcam shows the

board at all times, rendering the presenter transparent if they cover the board while they are writing.

"We want to replicate what we're doing in a meeting – we sit down, have a bunch of notebooks, draw on a whiteboard and talk face-to-face," Brown says.

"We want to make sure we can replicate that experience irrespective of where we are, and bring things like the whiteboard into that – it's the old becoming new."

Balancing easy accessibility with security

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LINDSAY BROWN
CITRIX ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONAL DIRECTOR

is another challenge in mobile work technologies. With a trend towards people using the same mobile devices for personal and work purposes, creating a security barrier that won't hamper convenience is the major challenge. Apps that allow users to toggle between work and personal settings are part of the solution, Brown says.

"With an app, your contacts within a work environment are enabled when you need them to be, but the missing piece is how can you make this work more seamlessly and automatically," he says.

And, while Brown says mobile work technologies have come along in leaps and bounds in recent years, the next frontier will be "gluing" them all together:

"There are a lot of options there in terms of the way people can collaborate, but the next piece of the puzzle is how we combine them into one experience - what's the glue that allows you to manage projects, collaborate and work within different documents across all those projects," he says.



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