Telecommuting

A MANAGER'S GUIDE TO FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

Joel Kugelmass

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To my son Joseph, and to his future

Preface

Flexibility seemed well on its way at my employer, the University of California, Davis. The Chancellor had just issued a ringing endorsement of telecommuting and flextime. The Telecommuting Task Force for which I worked launched the new flexibility policy with a series of lunch hour briefings attended by hundreds of employees. Their excitement was palpable, but so was their skepticism. Was this for real? Many openly doubted that their supervisors and managers would consent to the new policy. Their incredulity was well-founded.

When we put together a closed-door meeting for managers and supervisors, the large meeting room was again filled to capacity, but the mood was tense, and the questions were often hostile. When a supervisor declared her authority was being challenged, many nodded in agreement. Underneath the fractious questions were genuine anxieties. Their positions and hierarchies, often carefully developed over years, seemed threatened. One manager dubbed flexible work "an invitation to anarchy."

This book answers the apprehensions and misunderstandings with which many managers and supervisors view flexible work. It offers that wary supervisor who fears control will suffer evidence of the ways in which flexibility actually increases control through managing by objective. It encourages organizations to see how they can use flexible work arrangements to improve productivity and to reduce costs of space and skyrocketing absenteeism with only modest expenditures. It shows how management interested in a more effective and reliable work force can motivate flexibility programs. It demonstrates how telecommuting leverages existing technology and personnel investments. Rather than shying away from the risks

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of flexible work, this book suggests how they can be managed and minimized.

Flexible work discussions are shrouded in mythologies: flexible work is only for highly paid professionals, or it is only for low-paid clerical workers trying to solve child care problems, or it is an expensive excursion into the latest computer and communication technologies for the home office. These theories are debunked by the experiences of over a hundred companies and public agencies in every part of the United States and in Canada, Europe, and Japan. Flexibility can be applied to nearly every type of organization.

Flexible work is primarily a management strategy for organizations of every sector regardless of type of product, level of technology, or type of work force. Because per-employee costs of flexible work are low and are overwhelmed by cost-savings, both very large and very small organizations can apply flexible work; indeed, small-to-medium organizations may have the advantage of agility when they apply flexible work to increase productivity, improve recruitment, use space more efficiently, and provide better coverage to customer service functions. The downsized organization, making due with less and already changing the way it works, is similarly advantaged.

Is flexible work right for your organization? Almost certainly. Undertaken thoughtfully, flexible work can succeed in your organization as it has in natural gas companies, high-technology firms, police stations, advertising brokerages, universities, organizations of twenty-five employees, and those of 25,000. The critical factor of success is the manager, supervisor, and employee.

If I have even partly illuminated the issues of flexible work from a management point of view, it is because of good friends to this effort. I wish to thank the University of California, Davis, for assigning me rights to my report, "Telecommuting and Flextime for the UC Davis Administration." I am indebted to Patricia Mokhtarian, Assistant Professor of Civil Engineering at UC Davis, for her encouragement and for her unique help in researching flexible work issues. I thank my good friend Paul Rupert, a flexible work consultant with Work/Family Directions, and my wife, Lois, for believing in this book in the face of my hesitations. Finally, I give special thanks to my editor, Beth Anderson, who insisted on writing as purposeful and exact as possible.

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I

Understanding Flexible Work

1

Working in a Changing World

In the upscale cafe in Sacramento, California, the entrepreneur across the table ignored his salad as the interview progressed. Instead, he relished describing the recent expansion of his architectural firm to Taipei, Taiwan. There, he emphasized, architects hire on for a tenth of the wages paid to comparable American professionals. "What they don't know," he allowed, "are our concepts and building codes." Architectural ideas are shipped from the Sacramento headquarters to Taiwanese employees by computer, fax, and occasional telephone calls. Digitized drawings, sent back by modem, get readily modified on computer screens to meet U.S. specifications.

I asked whether his architects here in California telecommute. He looked puzzled, then challenged. "You mean working from home? Oh yes, we're definitely thinking about that," he said, his discomfort evident. Turning to his meal with new-found devotion, he sought to deflect the obvious irony: Managing remote workers across an ocean is practical, indeed profitable, but managing remote workers across town is provocative, even threatening. The manager overseeing production thousands of miles and many time zones away gets uneasy when his staff wants to work from home a few days a week to avoid sixty-mile commutes. Robust, versatile information technology is in place to support telecommuting, but the management vision needed is not.

The electronic immigrants, foreign information and professional

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workers who provide their products via telecommunications, are firmly established sources of productivity. There are few businesses, large or small, that do not contend with international, electronic competition from labor or make use of it to the disadvantage of other companies. The global workforce is tapped for tasks large and small using telecommunications.

A publisher in a coastal resort hundreds of miles from an urban center commissions book illustrations from an artist in the Philippines—and pockets the substantial difference in charges he would otherwise have to pay an American. For a decade, Boeing Aircraft has directed the construction of commercial jetliners by engineers in Seattle, Washington, linked by telephones, computer communications, video, and inevitably, fax machines to fabricators in Japan.

Jamaica Digiport International [JDI], a joint venture of AT&T, Cable and Wireless (United Kingdom), and Telecommunications of Jamaica sells advanced telecommunications to ten data processing companies. These companies operate data-entry services in Jamaica's free trade zone; wages of the 600 employees of these firms are 10 to 20 percent of those paid in the United States for the same work.[1] A U.S. computer software company, Saztec, runs a remote data-entry facility in China where wages are two dollars a week. American Airlines has located its entire world ticketing operation in Barbados.[2] Similarly, remote data-entry and administrative operations have opened in India, Ireland, Israel, Korea, Mexico, Singapore, and Taiwan.[3] Even in the United States, prairie states are boasting of new jobs in data-entry shops reached by satellite because their prevailing wages and housing costs undercut those in the West and South.

To the dairyman in Santa Rosa, California, who manages his farm fifteen miles away by telephone, or to the aerospace company that manages the construction of fault-intolerant aircraft by telecommunications, the technology of remote work has proven itself productive, economically advantageous, and serviceable.

The professional down the hall borrows the office laptop computer to finish a project at home. The manager calls a branch well into its day's work in another time zone before leaving for his own office. The sales force meets by teleconference. Electronic mail flows in from around the world; conversations are no longer synchronous. For growing numbers of employees, telephone tag is a thing of the past. Within seven years the time spent transmitting electronic mail over "telephone" systems will exceed the time spent talking. Monthly productivity can't be measured until employees at far-flung locales upload their spreadsheets to the network hub. Many of the people we work with closely are not close at all.

The modern manager travels through computer cyberspace, wades through facsimiles, and dutifully listens to a dozen voice messages each morning. Thanks to telecommunications and computers, many workers spend far more time viewing screens than one another. At Pacific Bell, thousands of managers listen to a voice mail newsletter prepared the evening before; they retrieve it over cellular phones as they drive to work–or rather, they work as they drive.

Telephone callers to JC Penney catalog sales are routinely helped by telecommuting representatives working from their homes, physically remote from customer and company both. A group of Best Western Hotel reservation takers are inmates in a woman's prison in Arizona. Small businesses may have operations scattered around a city, because telecommunication links allow them to avoid the cost of consolidating facilities. Handshakes are still interdigital, but the digits are more frequently electronic.

Using telecommunications for remote management is not itself a new phenomenon, all of the hype of the Information Superhighway notwithstanding. Remote work, or "managing at a distance," was invented in 1857 when J. Edgar Thompson, owner of the Penn Railroad, discovered that he could use his company's private telegraph system to manage remote divisions, provided he delegated to them substantial control in their use of equipment and labor. Railroad organization followed the telegraph wire, and the outwardly mobile corporation transformed itself into a complex of decentralized operations.[4]

What *is* new is that in the private sector and the public sector, in large organizations and small, affordable, high-performance telecommunication networks have clearly become ubiquitous, vital partners in managing work. Modern organizations of every kind disperse because their own communication capabilities allow them to. With the growing physical chasms between workers within organizations and between workers and consumers filled in by information and communication systems, even the most hands-on managers quickly learn the new boundaries of the workplace. No longer is it a tidy, tangible entity. They must come to terms with remote work, managed electronically. No longer can employers rely simply on employees filing into the workplace at the appointed hour to take their appointed seats.

Management Traditions

Despite the development of global organization, remote work technologies, and telecommunication-based coordination, management practice remains tradition-bound. It relies on two forms of control: rules and visual observation of the work process. Rules tell workers what to do and observations confirm how well they do it. It's a tight, familiar formula. For the last hundred years legions of managers and supervisors, and of course their employees, have worked by it, sworn by it, and often sworn at it. The most fundamental work rules, and generally the most explicit, have stated starting-time and starting-place. The time-based organization of work was presaged in the fifteenth century when clocks were mounted in church and town hall steeples, ringing in work and worship alike. It got practical when clocks became small enough to carry around and inexpensive enough to purchase for the home.[5] The Industrial Revolution cemented place-based work. The uniform regulation of time and place of work is essential to conventional production: Labor must be physically synchronized so the output of one productive process is timed and stationed to become input to another.

Now information products (and the processes that produce them), the bulk of the GNP, are produced at one time or at one place and utilized at another time or at another place. The portion of the Western economies devoted to the storage, manipulation, retrieval, and creation of information may grow to 70 percent by the year 2000.[6]

The increasing role of remote work, distance-spanning technologies, and information-based jobs would appear to challenge the industrial tradition of "same time, same place" models of work. Synchronization is feasible among those working in different places at different times. Experience with remote work increases the alacrity with which management by observation can give way to management by objective. But will the traditional time and place rules and work accede to a more contemporary concept of management? Not necessarily.

True, the time clock is an anachronism in many organizations. But industrial models of production have been forced upon information work. Although quiet assembly lines of information workers transform pieces of information rather than physical commodities into value-laden objects, the workers go to work much as workers always have. Management by observation continues as usual even if dressed up in computing and communication systems that keep tab on work done, conversations had, and workers' perambulations to water fountains, restrooms, and snack bars. More often than not, forms of management in the Information Age differ little from those in the Industrial Age.

Changes in the technologies that bind our workplaces together require flexibility in the way we organize work. But the changes indispensable to modern management are greater still. The domestic work force is shrinking, conflicts between work and nonwork sap productivity as never before, dissatisfaction with traditional work arrangements and rewards is intense, and an intolerable commute kicks the day off.

Changing Work Force Demographics

While the global labor pool grows, ironically, the domestic supply of skilled, educated, or experienced workers dwindles. In 1970, the work force grew by nearly 3 percent a year; by 1990, its growth rate had fallen by a third to 1 percent annually. Table 1–1 summarizes the labor shortage as viewed by human resource professionals. When a surplus of workers competed for jobs, they willingly sacrificed family life to overtime and long days. Now, it is employers who compete.[7] Small businesses, especially, will be hard hit by tough competition from large employers for workers.[8]

Those willing to initiate flexible management are arguably better positioned to attract and retain employees in a tight labor market.[9] In this regard, smaller, younger organizations—including small businesses—may find establishing flexible management easier than tradition-bound firms. They may compete successfully for workers despite the higher pay and material perquisites that larger, bureaucratic firms offer favored recruits.[10]

TABLE 1-1

The Growing Labor Shortage

Readers of *Nation's Business* in a survey characterized the labor shortage:

How would you describe the supply of skilled labor for your employment needs over the next five years?

3.8%	Abundant
7.8	Above average
33.2	Adequate
55.2	Inadequate

How often are you experiencing difficulty in finding qualified workers for the jobs you must fill?

21.5%	All the time
24.8	75 percent of the time
29.6	50 percent of the time
24.2	25 percent of the time
9.7	Never

In hiring, how often do you find workers who already have the skills you need?

5.0%	All the time
14.2	75 percent of the time
29.6	50 percent of the time
43.2	25 percent of the time
8.0	Never

Source: *Nation's Business*, February, 1991.

Compounding the problem of a dwindling work force are declining educational levels. Only 5 percent of job applicants to one major employer test at seventh grade level or better. A new study claims half of all American workers are functionally illiterate.

Maintaining a stable and capable workforce claims more and more of the manager's time. In pursuit of recruits, managers will increasingly depend upon women, minorities, and the physically challenged to overcome labor shortages.[11]

Work/Family Conflicts

Family issues are certainly not new. Rather, the workforce is changing so dramatically that home and work wrestle with fresh vengeance. Women are just under half of the workforce, yet their

TABLE 1–2

Flexible Work Responses to Lifestyle Drives

Choices	Drives				
	Travel	Work	Family	Leisure	Environmental Ideology
Flextime	X		X		
Compressed work week	X		X	X	X
Telecommuting	X	X	X	X	X

Source: Adapted from Mokhtarian and Salomon, *Modeling the Choice of Telecommuting: Setting the Context.*

responsibilities for homemaking and child rearing have changed little from the days their husbands brought home the bacon and they cooked it. Today, dual income-earners characterize the American family. Single heads of households spiral in number. Elder care strains a fifth of the work force, and many are in the "sandwich generation," caring for both children and elders. The entry of large numbers of women into the workforce with no corresponding diminishment of calls on their time for household labor and family care creates a demand for scheduling flexibility.

With these social and economic changes have come new values. For both women and men, care-giving, family life, leisure, the so-called personal spheres, are typically as important as career interests. It now appears that commute avoidance and environmental ideology may also help mold some lifestyles.[12]

Many employees expect to strike balances between home and work—their ambitions have diversified. They'll often take less pay, refuse jobs, reduce hours, call in sick, strike deals with a willing manager, whatever they can do—to have it all. As Table 1–2 illustrates, lifestyle values call for flexible work arrangements. Often they quit when a compromise is unattainable.

There is an assumption that these balancers are mostly women. However, in a survey of 1,200 men in a Minneapolis firm, 70 percent of those under 35 years old report serious conflicts between work and family.[13] Many admit to turning down promotions to avoid increasing work/family conflicts. In the National debate lead-

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