Telecommuting: A benefit or a hindrance?

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Throughout the past couple of weeks we’ve heard controversy over telecommuting in the workplace revolving around Yahoo’s CEO Marissa Mayer’s decision to eliminate the practice altogether. There are two sides to this debate concerning telecommuting as either a benefit or hindrance. One side views the elimination of telecommuting as a step backwards in the workplace, arguing that its elimination is only going to place limitations on recruitment, diversity and engagement; the other side sees removing the option as a way to stop the abuse of working from home and create a more innovative and collaborative workplace. We all know that Yahoo needed a change, something that could pull the company out of the lull it’s been in so it can compete at the same level of its competitors, but was eliminating telecommuting the answer?

Years of research suggest that telecommuting has a number of benefits for employers such as increased productivity, morale, motivation and retention as well as reduced absenteeism, turnover and operating costs. For employees, there are additional benefits such as increased job satisfaction, savings of time and money, and enhanced employment opportunities. Along with the many benefits to telecommuting, research has also indicated potential limitations to employers such as difficulty measuring performance, impact on teamwork, and supervisor discomfort. Limitations have also been found for employees such as isolation, anxiety over visibility, and an increased potential for work/family conflict. Every employee and every position will not qualify for telecommuting. It requires a self-motivated, honest, dependable person who can work independently with little supervision and social contact. The most common positions involve writing and word processing, accounting functions, management/administration duties, software and web design, and CAD/computer graphics functions.
Marissa Mayer is right, bringing employees back into the workplace to work side by side, where they can spontaneously run into one another and have unplanned conversations that will lead to innovation and collaboration. Employees will be able to think of an idea, share it immediately with a co-worker, and take that idea to the next level; they’ll have the opportunities to share their work and collaborate with employees they might not have otherwise thought about while sitting at home. Employees who run into problems such as finding a baby sitter for a sick child, being at home for a UPS package so it’s not stolen, or who simply feel burnt out from the routine of going into work on a daily basis, could vent to fellow employees. Unhappy employees could distract others from work and hurt both innovation and productivity. Employees who were ultimately hired to telecommute full-time and can’t relocate will be lost and replacements will need to be hired. Moreover, the pool of recruits will shrink now that employees must either be located near Yahoo or be willing to relocate. This will limit the diversity in Yahoo, diversity that is needed to create innovation. Putting a ban on telecommuting will leave many parents, mostly women, unable to care for children as needed, not to mention generation Y expects to have the ability to work from home and generation X wants to have the option.

Pulling in the reins on telecommuting is smart in order to work on the company culture, increase morale and change the overall direction of Yahoo—but telecommuting shouldn’t be eliminated altogether. A compromise should be made. Employees with jobs that can be performed electronically and without any collaboration should be allowed to telecommute; others who require collaboration for innovation should come into the office to work on projects. Yahoo should still offer telecommuting as needed so employees have the flexibility to take care of non-work related issues. Managers need training to know how to manage telecommuters and prevent abuse. Telecommuting will need to be accepted as part of the culture all the way from Marissa Mayer down to team leaders so that employees will feel less restricted and able to use it when absolutely necessary. Yahoo will then be able to reap the
benefits of a flexible, innovative, and collaborative workplace with engaged and happy workers who are proud to say they work there.