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**Jay Mulki, Fleura Bardhi, Felicia Lassk and
Jayne Nanavaty-Dahl**

Set Up Remote Workers to Thrive

Telecommuter
Brent Cranfield,
working from
his home in
Marietta, GA.

Set Up Remote Workers to Thrive

As increasing numbers of employees work remotely, companies need to find effective ways to manage internal communication and social interaction, and also to provide these employees with opportunities to become more visible.

BY JAY MULKI, FLEURA BARDHI, FELICIA LASSK AND JAYNE NANAVATY-DAHL

DURING THE LAST DECADE, virtual work — professionals working remotely from home, from client locations or simply from the road — has become increasingly prevalent. Some Fortune 500 companies, including Procter & Gamble, IBM, Accenture and AT&T, have already partially or fully eliminated traditional offices.¹ As much as 10% of today's work force telecommutes from home — more than triple the level of 2000. In addition, as companies trim staff positions in areas such as information technology, accounting and public relations, they are relying more heavily on freelance workers.² Telecommuting and remote work arrangements will accelerate in the coming decades in response to the ongoing globalization of work, ever-increasing customer demands and the cost and time of commuting.

Virtual work arrangements appeal to both corporations and employees based on the economics and the personal flexibility and autonomy they offer. Flexible work has enabled corporations to



THE LEADING QUESTION

How can managers maximize the chances that their remote employees will succeed and provide benefits for the company?

FINDINGS

- ▶ Managers need to help employees prioritize their work and find the right work-life balance.
- ▶ To reduce remote workers' feelings of isolation, managers should promote face-to-face interactions with colleagues.
- ▶ Managers should be accessible and look for ways to provide visibility for remote employees within the organization.

hire and retain employees who value the ability to respond to family demands and desire more control over the time, place and mode of their work.³ By reducing the number of full-time employees on site, corporations are realizing higher productivity and savings in real estate costs. International Business Machines Corp., for example, saves \$100 million a year by allowing 42% of its employees to work remotely.⁴ However, virtual employees and managers alike are becoming increasingly aware of the challenges associated with virtual work as they relate to internal communication, social interaction and employee satisfaction and commitment.

The Pros and Cons of Remote Work

Traditional work is based on tying an employee's time to job tasks and location. It is structured around employees gathered in a central location, which allows managers to coordinate activities and advance internal communication. The traditional work format enables sharing of social experience, interpersonal coordination, modeling of work behaviors and giving and seeking advice. Virtual work, by contrast, refers to employment configurations outside of the traditional office — along a continuum that ranges from occasional telecommuting to “hoteling” (sharing office space in a company location designed for use on a drop-in basis) to home-based work to fully mobile employees.⁵

It is difficult to replicate all traditional office features in a virtual office environment, and this makes management's ability to build and maintain a corporate culture more complex. Technology advancements, such as instant messaging and social networking, allow corporations to bridge some of the differences, offering alternatives to some face-to-face interactions. At IBM, for example, team members on conference calls with clients can exchange work-related information via instant messaging in real time with their cohorts, and employees utilize a variety of virtual social networking sites (including Facebook.com and IBM's own site, Beehive) to find and connect with other employees. However, some issues require new management processes and solutions that go beyond technology.

Early research has shown that employees and companies have different experiences with remote work and adapt to it differently.⁶ On the one hand, both employees and companies see significant

benefits. Employees value spending less time and money commuting, having more flexibility and autonomy in their jobs and being more available to deal with family responsibilities. This often translates into greater job satisfaction, lower absenteeism and higher employee retention. For companies, benefits include increased productivity, improved customer service and lower real estate costs. On the other hand, both employees and companies point to challenges. Employees report liabilities to working remotely, the most serious being workplace isolation and a sense that opportunities for advancement are more limited. Companies attempting to manage remote employees cite a loss of organizational synergy, increased concern about data security and a loss of management control over remote employees.

This article focuses on four critical challenges involving remote work that require management attention: (1) finding the right work-life balance, (2) overcoming workplace isolation, (3) compensating for the lack of face-to-face communication, and (4) compensating for the lack of visibility. (See “The Key Challenges of Remote Work,” p. 66.) For each of these issues, we offer a set of management coping strategies drawn from our interviews with managers and remote workers (see “About the Research”). By making the effort to understand employee challenges, managers can apply these strategies to their advantage. However, even with supportive efforts by management, not everyone can be successful working in remote arrangements. As such, managers should hire confident, communicative, independent workers who will be able to operate in challenging work environments.

Challenge No. 1: Finding the Right Work-Life Balance

Managing the boundary between work and home and integrating these two domains has become an increasingly compelling and pressing issue for both organizations and employees. Work and family demands are often mutually incompatible, and integrating them can be problematic and fraught with tension.⁷ Lack of work-life balance can also undermine manager and employee performance and customer loyalty.

One of the main attractions of telecommuting for employees is the perception that it will allow

them to achieve a better blend between the demands of work and family life.⁸ To date, there has been limited research on work-life balance as it relates to remote work arrangements. A recent study suggests that telecommuting reduces work-family conflicts by offering job autonomy and scheduling flexibility.⁹ However, we found that remote work can have the opposite effect: Remote workers often found themselves working longer hours and struggling to make time for their personal life. In many cases, the idea of conducting personal chores during work hours is not possible; some remote employees end up working set office hours anyway. Yet families of remote employees have the expectation that the person staying at home will also manage household chores. This often leads to disagreements and family distress.

We also found that most remote workers have difficulty disengaging from work. The majority of remote professionals said they worked more hours per day than they did in traditional work settings. They often worked on weekends, holidays, evenings and during hours when they would have been commuting. Checking the last e-mail or voice message before going to bed was a common ritual. What's more, remote workers tended to work even when they were sick and would have gone home from a traditional office.

Such commitment clearly provides benefits to employers. But remote employees often feel overworked and stressed. Several of them stated that, given their heavy workloads, they would prefer moving to a traditional office environment if the opportunity arose. In one case, a manager quit his remote job and joined a competitor who offered a more traditional office arrangement.

Three key factors inhibit work-life balance in remote work situations. The first factor is the absence of the traditional boundaries (spatial, temporal or social) between work and personal life. In traditional workplaces, such boundaries are defined by when one starts and ends work. However, in remote work arrangements, employees have to control and manage their own time and learn to separate work and home life. This can be difficult because the spatial boundary between work and home is frequently absent: Work is "always there." Complicating matters, digital and portable technologies (e.g., personal digital assistants, cell phones and laptops) have

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The qualitative research described here is part of our ongoing research on remote workers. For part of this research phase, we worked with a group of remote employees at IBM, which is a recognized leader in managing mobile teams. More than 42% of IBM employees worldwide work remotely at least part of the time; 15% work solely from home.

We conducted 52 semi-structured interviews with remote employees and managers (full-time home-based workers, part-time home-based workers and fully mobile employees) between October 2007 and February 2008 (42 with employees, 10 with managers). Fifty-four percent were from IBM; the others were employed by 19 companies in areas including human resources and benefits services, instrumentation services, sales performance software and health care products and services. Consistent with qualitative sampling, we sampled a diverse group of remote employees along variables that may lead to variations in results (i.e., different professions, employment tenures and remote work arrangements). The majority worked from home full-time; the others had some other remote work environment (e.g., two days at a corporate office, part-time at a customer's site, etc.). Functionally, the remote employees represented communications, sales and marketing, public relations, finance, technical/software development and support staff.

The interview questions were based on the existing theoretical background on virtual work. Although the specific questions for managers and employees were distinct, we examined the following topics: (1) remote employees' personal, organizational and customer benefits, (2) key personal and professional challenges in working or managing remote office contexts, (3) workplace isolation, (4) organizational communication, (5) promotion and performance, (6) relationship building and trust, and (7) issues related to work-life balance. Most interviews were conducted via telephone, and the transcripts provided the data for this study.

made work mobile. With less separation between professional and personal roles, creating and maintaining role boundaries is more difficult.

The second factor working against work-life balance is the nature of remote work itself: The work tends to be carried out differently. Although the volume of communication is frequently greater in remote work arrangements, this doesn't necessarily mean that the communication is more effective; electronic communication suffers from a lack of contextual cues and norms.

The third factor inhibiting a healthy work-life balance has to do with the psychological demands employees place upon themselves, often to compensate for their lack of visibility and role ambiguity. Many remote employees (especially those who are members of global teams) feel a greater need to prove themselves by putting in longer hours and by being available beyond other people's expectations, which adds to the stress. In addition, several employees told us they felt they needed to "overcommunicate and overpromote" their work and accomplishments to become more visible to their colleagues working in corporate offices.

Management Strategies In order to leverage the potential of remote work arrangements, management needs to set organizational norms for working at home and help remote workers balance work and family roles. We found that remote employees were often confused about working hours or organizational norms of work-life balance. Companies can:

Set the tone on work norms. Successful managers of remote workers discuss “good practices” of establishing life-balance with their team members. This means formulating and communicating practices that they aim to facilitate. For example, some managers advise team members not to work on

holidays or weekends, to sign off at certain times and to leave BlackBerrys home during family vacations. Managers need to take the initiative by modeling how they practice work-life balance.

Prioritize employee tasks. Managers should prioritize tasks and provide frequent feedback to enable remote workers to handle the heavy workload. Otherwise, employees often feel there is no end to work, as all assignments have the same sense of urgency.

Recognize the unique nature of remote work. Remote work is conducted differently than traditional office work. It requires frequent and varied types of communication, more intensive time

THE KEY CHALLENGES OF REMOTE WORK

Among the different challenges associated with managing remote employees, employees and managers cite the following as the most critical.

CHALLENGES (DEFINITION)	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES
<p>WORK-LIFE BALANCE Employees’ “satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ “People think that when you work at home, you must be able to prepare dinner on time, have your laundry done ... I am just like, are you kidding? It is very hard to separate work from home, because they are physically together. The job was so enormous, it was never done!” (Sales manager, female) ■ “I find myself doing work early in the morning, all throughout the day, and sometimes late into the evening. ... There’s no separation between your personal life and your work life. ... It’s not compartmentalized like it used to be for me when I would go to the office and leave my work at the office when I came home.” (Business executive, male)
<p>WORKPLACE ISOLATION Employees’ perceptions of the availability of coworkers, peers and supervisors for work-based social support.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ “When you have new people, that’s a challenge, because it’s a lonely place to be when you’re just starting in an organization. ... the greatest challenge you have being virtual is when you don’t know who to call to get a question answered about something.” (Senior vice president, female) ■ “It’s all that informal communication that you missed. You are not hearing about what people did on the weekend. You also miss a lot of collaboration. We didn’t have the same kind of brainstorming.” (Sales manager, female) ■ “We were commenting at the meeting this morning that she’s [remote employee] sometimes disconnected from the things that we all understand very well. ... she was making suggestions. ... all the things she was suggesting are already in process ... she didn’t look too good ... because she didn’t know. But it really wasn’t her fault. ... it’s harder to be plugged into what’s going on when you’re not [at headquarters].” (Communications employee, male)
<p>LACK OF FACE-TO-FACE COMMUNICATION Lack of in-person contact.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ “Not being able to run down the hall and get a question answered is a big disadvantage. ... there’s a big difference in not being able to see the person’s face, cue in on their expressions and the nonverbal characteristics that really help you understand something more thoroughly and just develop a better relationship.” (Communications manager, male) ■ “It’s a little bit more challenging working remote than in the office, because you don’t have the opportunity to see that [your colleagues’] door is open, and to go in. And a lot of times it’s off hours when I tend to be able to get in and see my vice president.” (Software manager, male) ■ “You weren’t running into the people in the lobby or hallway, and so trying to check in pretty regularly without being a nuisance was a delicate balance.” (Sales manager, female)
<p>LACK OF VISIBILITY A deficiency in “the possibility for supervisors and others to observe workers.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ “I still think people are a little nervous about wondering whether remote employees are actually doing their jobs.” (Engineering manager, female) ■ “I think that there’s a lot of work that gets done in hallway conversations, and in side conversations that you’re not having when you’re virtual. I think that if the boss is in a traditional office and you’re not ... the old adage out of sight, out of mind, it’s somewhat true.” (Business executive, male) ■ “There might be a great opportunity ... let’s say my direct manager meets and ... they’re looking for a stretch opportunity for someone, and if I don’t happen to be on the call at that time, or walking down the hall, maybe someone from someone else’s team would get considered for it.” (Communications manager, female)

management and constant multitasking. When planning and prioritizing work, management needs to consider how much time activities might take.

Challenge No. 2: Overcoming Workplace Isolation

The second big challenge of remote work is dealing with workplace isolation and its implications. Employees who feel isolated often have lower job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment and increased turnover.¹⁰ Remote employees we spoke to described the experience of workplace isolation as “not knowing where or whom to turn to when questions arose,” “being disconnected from others in the organization” and having “no one to turn to when they needed advice or to bounce ideas.” When they were able to contact someone, they said it took longer to get the advice and support they needed than it did in traditional office setups.

Remote employees develop isolation perceptions when they sense an absence of support from coworkers and managers. These perceptions are amplified in remote work environments due to reduced opportunities for social and emotional interaction with coworkers. Remote employees sometimes described their home offices as “prisons.” Those who experienced isolation missed the social environment of a traditional workplace, especially the informal chats with colleagues, coffee breaks and opportunities to build relationships. Social isolation experiences were particularly common among employees who live alone, have recently relocated or are newcomers to the organization.

A lack of management action was often cited as a major factor in an employee’s sense of workplace isolation. Employees who experienced workplace isolation often stated that their managers — who operate as surrogates for the organization — did not conduct one-to-one meetings, did not follow up on action items and, at times, gave the impression of not being organized or not paying attention to them and/or their contributions.

Management Strategies Employees’ isolation perceptions are closely linked to managers’ actions. Some remote employees see managers as the main conduit for communication and the ones responsible for creating a sense of belonging. To reduce isolation, effective managers can:

Check in informally. Managers who reduced the effects of workplace isolation conducted frequent, informal, one-to-one or team meetings, sometimes in person. They checked in with employees to understand their issues and concerns relating to remote work arrangements. Informal discussions allow for give and take without making the remote worker self-conscious. They also convey the manager’s availability and support. Employees we interviewed were able to identify managers who did this well and thus were able to foster strong organizational commitment and a sense of belonging.

Promote social interaction among team members. Managers can further reduce the perceptions of workplace isolation by enhancing social interactions among virtual team members and between the manager and remote workers. Effective managers held formal weekly meetings to share informal and personal news, and they supported social networking among remote employees. At a company that provides infrastructure software, for example, remote employees from different locations and functional areas are encouraged to introduce themselves, exchange pictures and anecdotes about vacations and engage in games with prizes during informal teleconference meetings. In addition to being fun, these activities bring the team together. At other companies, virtual employees celebrate employee birthdays, exchange holiday gifts and share recipes and pictures. Additionally, face-to-face forums, conferences, workshops and get-togethers at the organizational or functional level provide good opportunities for remote employees to interact professionally and socially with the people they work with. These gatherings allow remote employees to learn about the company and share perspectives and experiences about working virtually. Managers who take their role of promoting the corporate community seriously find that their efforts are well received.

Encourage employee pairing and mentoring. Pairing remote employees with traditional office employees can help employees adjust to virtual situations. This works particularly well when there is a company office nearby where remote employees can attend social events and have informal meetings with their traditional office colleagues. Other companies, including an instrumentation supplier, find benefits in mentoring programs or

“buddy systems,” where new remote employees are encouraged to team up with individuals who have lots of experience working remotely.

Facilitate entry for new employees. Managers can smooth the way for new remote employees by providing welcome packages containing a list of team members with personal and contact information and photos. Managers should encourage team members to welcome the new employee with offers of help and support and share their experiences and best practices for remote offices.

Challenge No. 3: Compensating for the Lack of Face-to-Face Communication

With remote work, the primary mode of communication is electronic (e-mail, conference calls, text messages). This contributes to feelings of workplace isolation and makes it more difficult for remote employees to develop personal relationships and trust. Electronic communication generally lacks the richness¹¹ and social presence associated with face-to-face communication.¹² Remote employees noted that remote communication takes longer and requires more explanation because of the missing cues. In settings that rely on electronic communication, the volume of communication may be high but the efficiency is poor. We find that its inefficiency (the lack of attentiveness, the absence of contextual cues and norms and the potential for misinterpretation) can lead to feelings of frustration on the part of remote employees.

Management Strategies Managers should enable and promote opportunities for face-to-face communication and take steps to help remote employees cope with the challenges of virtual communication. Managers can:

Arrange face-to-face meetings with employees. To the extent possible, traditional managers should meet face-to-face at least once a year with their remote team at company headquarters. Remote employees talked about the value of such meetings and requested more of such contacts.

Use technology informally. When face-to-face meetings are not possible, conference calls, instant messaging and e-mails can be a partial substitute. But to the extent possible, these forms of communication should be used informally. For example, rather than starting

the weekly meetings with formal agenda items, managers can begin with a more informal discussion about personal and family news and exchange company information. The informal give-and-take can supplement the more formal communication about goals and activities and help with relationship building.

Challenge No. 4: Compensating for the Lack of Visibility

Many remote employees feel that their lack of visibility limits their contributions to the company’s success and their career advancement opportunities. Although some remote employees did not present this as a major concern, others felt that, as remote workers, they had to work harder than traditional employees to be recognized or promoted. As evidence, they noted occasions when they did not learn of important meetings, potential project assignments or new positions until it was too late. Some remote employees blamed their low visibility on a reluctance to trumpet their own achievements. In addition to losing out on opportunities, some remote employees worried that their unrecognized contributions could result in lower performance evaluations.

Management Strategies For remote employees, managers operate as surrogates for the organization. A manager’s way of dealing with subordinates can be a good predictor of employee job satisfaction, commitment level, performance and turnover intentions.¹³ Supportive managers can play critical roles in reducing employee uncertainty, ambiguity and “out of sight, out of mind” concerns. To boost the visibility of remote employees, managers and companies can:

Promote individual and team achievements. Supportive managers find ways to share information about individual and team efforts throughout the organization. For example, one manager at a software company noted that she e-mails her boss each week describing some of the key accomplishments of her remote employees.

Signal management accessibility. In order to provide employees opportunities to highlight their achievements, managers need to communicate that they are open to both formal and informal conversations. Managers should provide information on when they are available and set guidelines for how and when they will respond to phone calls, e-mails

and other communication. In addition, managers should use time during team meetings and one-on-one conversations to check in on organizational or personal issues that need to be addressed.

Develop best practices. Companies should develop and implement training that addresses the unique challenges of remote work and best practices for coping with these challenges. The training should be offered as broadly as possible — to employees new to remote work, to more experienced remote workers, to in-house support staff and to other relevant managers. To encourage communication across the organization, managers should develop a database about team members' personal information and their specific expertise. In addition, they should create a set of frequently asked questions that addresses the important issues related to remote work and how these issues should be handled.

ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY and communication have made the world smaller and created a global workplace. But this has also isolated employees both physically and psychologically from their organizations and from their coworkers. Reaping benefits from the new environment will require companies to develop a better understanding of what remote workers need to establish healthy boundaries between home and work, to communicate with managers and coworkers and to feel professionally motivated and valued. Successful companies will find ways to adjust to the differences and provide specialized training, mentoring and broad opportunities for social and business interactions with both traditional and remote employees.

Jay Mulki and Fleura Bardhi are assistant professors of marketing at Northeastern University; Felicia Lassk is an associate professor at Northeastern. Jayne Nanavaty-Dahl is a remote manager for International Business Machines Corp., residing in Beaverton, Oregon, where she manages global remote teams. Comment on this article or contact the authors at smrfeedback@mit.edu.

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