Balance Is Important For Working Remotely

In my last two columns I have discussed how small businesses may wish to look at a mobile office setting and even allow employees to work remotely. Having said that, I will hasten to add that, like so many other issues, balance is important.

Last week, Steve Crabtree had a great article on this topic in the Gallop Business Journal, where he asked the question: Can people collaborate effectively while working remotely. I will share some of his insights.

Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer made headlines a year ago when she instituted a policy stating that the company's employees could no longer work from home except occasionally, when they had a specific reason for doing so. Yahoo's human resources chief, Jackie Reses, announced the change in a memo, saying, "To become the absolute best place to work, communication and collaboration will be important, so we need to be working side-by-side."

And Yahoo isn't the only business to be concerned about what may be lost when workers have little opportunity to interact directly. Google has faced its own challenges with employees working together while working remotely, according to Dr. Cerf, Google's vice president and chief Internet evangelist and Gallup Senior Scientist. "We had people participating in teams, [and] they would almost never see each other face to face. Often they were in different time zones, which meant they had to work harder to stay in sync," Dr. Cerf says. "So we started recompiling groups to make them, if not co-located, at least within one or two time zones of one another so that it was more convenient to interact."

As more workplaces become knowledge based, more companies will experience the tension of helping employees work together effectively while allowing them to do their jobs from almost anywhere. Mayer's move sparked a national discussion about the best way to manage how new IT tools have changed the way U.S. workers communicate and collaborate -- and indeed how they have altered the definition of "workplace" itself.

One of the most important questions regarding the ability to work from anywhere is the effect it has on employees' engagement levels. On the one hand, working remotely offers employees a measure of autonomy that helps them feel better equipped to do their jobs well. On the other hand, employees must have positive, trusting relationships with their managers and coworkers to stay engaged, and such relationships may be more difficult to sustain with fewer opportunities for face-to-face interaction.
Gallup's extensive employee engagement research -- presented in its recent State of the American Workplace report -- suggests that the ability to work remotely corresponds with higher engagement, but primarily among those who spend less than 20% of their total working time doing so.

- **Among those who never work remotely, 28% are engaged** -- meaning they are emotionally involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their work -- while 20% are actively disengaged, meaning they are unhappy at work and tend to disrupt their coworkers' productivity. The remaining on-site workers fall into a middle category -- not engaged.

- **Among employees who spend up to 20% of their time remotely, 35% are engaged** -- but engagement levels drop as employees spend more time off-site.

Dr. Cerf says that pattern makes intuitive sense: "There's a limit to the utility of remote work, and I think your statistics suggest that. You're seeing a positive response up to a point because people see that flexibility as a benefit, and then beyond that, you start to have less utility. So it's not a black-and-white situation."

I leave you with Crabtree’s summary: **Remote work, in modest amounts, is linked to higher employee engagement**

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