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Managing a blended workforce: Telecommuters and non-telecommuters

Brenda A. Lautsch, Ellen Ernst Kossek

{There's a} split community between telecommuters and non-telecommuters. Feelings non-telecommuters have of perks and favoritism.

-supervisor of a work group with a mix of telecommuters and non-telecommuters

Telecommuting is growing and – as the opening statement suggests – this growth poses new challenges for supervisors in managing a “blended” workforce. Telecommuting, also known as remote work, homework, virtual work, telework or distributed work, is work that occurs outside of a traditional office setting, but that is connected to it via telecommunications or computer technology. A report by the Gartner Group states that as of 2008, 41 million corporate employees globally telecommute at least 1 day a week, a figure that jumps to 100 million for telecommuting at least 1 day a month. Most of these are U.S. employees, as U.S. Census Bureau statistics show that as many as 15 percent of employed people now telecommute one or more times per week.

Telecommuting doesn't just alter the jobs of those who adopt this virtual work arrangement. It also makes new demands on managers, who must now interpret, adapt and implement nascent organizational policies regarding this growing flexible work form. Supervisors also often serve as gatekeepers, deciding whether or not individuals have access to telecommuting. Managers must learn how to supervise, maintain contact with, and elicit performance from telecommuting subordinates despite the fact that they are out of sight.

In this article, we identify key challenges that supervisors with telecommuting employees face, and provide suggestions for supervisors to successfully implement telecommuting policies. Although most telecommuting literature has focused more on how to manage those working offsite, in this article we demonstrate how important it is, in developing a managerial strategy, to consider not only the telecom-

muters, but also their non-telecommuting colleagues. Managing a blended workforce raises challenges for coordination, equity, and for the motivation and social integration of workgroups. Throughout the article, we discuss challenges and remedies in managing new ways of working, using examples from telecommuters, non-telecommuters and supervisors with experience in blended workgroups to illustrate their perspectives on these issues.

THE ROLE OF SUPERVISORS IN ACHIEVING THE BENEFITS OF TELECOMMUTING

The growth of telecommuting has been driven by several benefits. For organizations, evidence is converging from research by Golden, Gajendran and Harrison, as well as our own research, that telecommuting enhances employee performance and reduces turnover. Organizations can also save on real estate costs and are able to work globally and maintain more working hours in globally or nationally distributed work systems.

From the employee perspective, telecommuting is associated with higher job satisfaction and has been widely advocated as a solution to the challenges individuals face in reconciling their personal and work lives. Telecommuting can allow individuals to have greater control over work–family boundaries and to schedule work at times of peak efficiency or around family needs. The reduction in commute times that results from telecommuting also frees temporal resources that can be devoted to family or job needs, as employees often substitute commuting time for additional work time.

The positive effects of telecommuting are more likely to be realized when these arrangements are effectively implemented and supported by supervisors. Yet the adoption of formal telecommuting policies alone is not enough to reduce work–family conflict or support performance. Many organizations

Supervisory Issues	Key Questions
Gate-keeping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What criteria should be applied to determine who telecommutes and for what portion of the workweek?
Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the most effective ways for supervisors to monitor the schedules of telecommuting and non-telecommuting employees?
Social integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can telecommuters be made to feel an important part of the work unit?
Work-life boundary management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How should work-family boundaries be managed for telecommuting employees working in a home setting? • Should changes in work-life boundary management be considered for non-telecommuters as well?
Work group culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can supervisors ensure that telecommuters are motivated and able to help coworkers, despite their limited face-to-face contact?

Figure 1 SUPERVISORY ISSUES IN IMPLEMENTING TELECOMMUTING.

are realizing it is difficult to achieve these benefits without helping supervisors learn how to manage new ways of working. For example, companies like LexisNexis and government agencies such as the U.S. Department of Commerce provide training for supervisors to help them learn how to best manage telecommuting relationships. Without such efforts, telecommuting policies may not be utilized or may vary in the level of cultural support they receive from supervisors in work groups throughout the firm. A culture of inclusiveness, which values differences across employees and helps all workers to be productive, is required.

A key factor in creating an inclusive culture is ensuring that supervisors assist workers in maintaining their performance in their teams when they are taking advantage of telecommuting. There are five main issues that must be confronted in order to do so and to be an effective supervisor in the context of telecommuting: gate-keeping, monitoring, social integration, work-life boundary management, and work group culture (see Figure 1 below).

Gatekeeping: Who Gets it and Why

{We have} no policy to speak of. It's at managers' discretion."

-supervisor

{It is} important that the decision is left up to the individual manager, as it is harder for the leader when individuals telecommute.

-supervisor

When some people are given privileges over others, I think there is going to be some resentment. It certainly fosters a bit of a negative environment.

-non-telecommuter

Organizations like Cisco, Hewlett-Packard and others that adopt telecommuting vary in the degree of specificity of associated policies, but often provide only broad outlines of how this work arrangement is to be implemented. The first decision that must be made by supervisors in such cases is determining which employees will be permitted to telecommute, and what portion of their jobs they will be permitted to work outside the office (Figure 2).

For example, supervisors may be approached by an employee who would like to begin telecommuting, perhaps because of a long commute, the imminent arrival of a new baby, or a developing health problem or some other personal consideration. Should they let their decision be guided by the employees' needs, or should other factors have greater weight?

Managers typically consider three types of factors when deciding whether or not a given individual will be permitted to telecommute: (1) work-related considerations; (2) personal and household characteristics; (3) technological limitations. Work-related factors include the suitability of the job for telework, particularly the extent of face-to-face interaction required. Personal and household characteristics that are often considered include an individual's ability to work independently, and the presence of household distractions

Do:	Don't:
...keep in frequent contact with telecommuters.	...increase monitoring of telecommuters compared to non-telecommuters.
...encourage work-family boundary separation for telecommuters, for example, by providing information on the strains inherent in frequent interruptions and switching between work and personal activities.	...assume that non-telecommuters are always available for last minute projects or extra work.
...discuss and agree upon workgroup norms for availability for both telecommuters and non-telecommuters.	...make individual deals without at least getting some buy in or communication to others.
...foster a workgroup culture that rewards helping behavior	...ignore non-teleworkers and teleworkers' helping contributions.

Figure 2 SUPERVISORY DO'S AND DON'TS FOR TELECOMMUTING.

(e.g., young children, older parents). Technology can be a barrier to telework if the individual lacks access to computers or other required technology and the organization doesn't provide it.

In practice, work-related considerations appear to be the most important determinant of who telecommutes and who doesn't. Sometimes it is difficult, however, for supervisors and employees to determine when physical presence in the office is really essential for work performance and when it is not. Perceptions may differ between employees and managers over whether a task can efficiently be completed outside the office, as noted by one employee we interviewed who was permitted to work outside the office 4 days per month, but who would have preferred more:

It's more I guess {about} job structure and perception of what the job is and how it could be best done effectively. I have some conflicts with that with my manager. It's just a matter of difference of opinion... There are things that are probably better done outside of the office, whether it's from home or satellite office or a client site.

These kinds of different viewpoints about work requirements and the feasibility of telecommuting can create conflict that must be resolved to establish an effective supervisory relationship.

As some of the negative comments of coworkers suggest, managers must also be attentive to the reactions of those not selected to telework. Supervisors often desire discretion over this decision, and wish to deal with requests for flexible work on a case-by-case basis. However, the need to clearly communicate decision criteria and to appear fair in the approval

of telecommuting requests by employees should be paramount.

One way for supervisors to manage the gate-keeping challenge is to make sure both telecommuters and non-telecommuters have some input into how the gate-keeping rules are developed to ensure transparency. It is also important that workers do not view the access to telecommuting as a long-term entitlement. Periodically, the arrangement must be reviewed to make sure it is working well for the client, supervisor, coworkers and the employee—in other words the work is getting done and people feel the gate-keeping criteria are still reasonable.

It is important to note that gate-keeping is not always employee-driven or under individual supervisory discretion. Sometimes entire departments, job groups or whole business units may move toward telecommuting. For example, IBM Global Services migrated to a mobile work force strategy for nearly half of all jobs in sales or project management. Supervisors of employees in many of these jobs had little choice as to whether to allow teleworking, as jobs were redesigned to move to a mobile office where individuals worked in the field at a customers' workplace, at home or in a temporary office. These types of situations may still create gate-keeping dilemmas for supervisors. Perhaps some current workers, such as new junior employees, might be better socialized if they start in the office, even if their job is considered a telework job. Or the manager may supervise employees in a similar job group that is not part of a flexible workplace job design. Should these employees also be allowed to migrate to telecommuting if they desire to do so?

Monitoring: How Do I Know They Are Really Working?

The impression of working at home is that you are not doing anything.

-telecommuter

People who do work at home...are considered given "special privilege" and put on the shit list.

-telecommuter

Sometimes the perception is that work is transferred to employees who are in the office.

-supervisor

Supervisors who are worried about telecommuting staff who are "out of sight" may be tempted to monitor telecommuters differently. They make telecommuting jobs much more rigidly defined, and are more directive in managing. Under this perspective, supervisors must alter the ways in which they manage teleworkers to enable them to thrive and be productive while working in a new flexible way.

Our study shows instead that supervisors who are more successful actually manage telecommuters and non-telecommuters the same in these respects. Equity concerns underlie this approach. Telecommuters can feel excluded and penalized for working in alternative ways if supervisors treat them differently from workers who work a traditional schedule in the office. Similarly, non-teleworkers raise different equity concerns if they feel teleworkers have a different "employment deal" than non-teleworkers.

Supportive supervision of telework under this perspective requires managers to simply continue to define jobs and provide feedback in a similar manner for all workers, telecommuter or not, rather than to attempt to provide more detailed direction for their telecommuters. At The Travelers Co., for example, all employees are managed by results (with work plans agreed-upon between each employee and his or her supervisor), and no new or different arrangements are used for telecommuters. When telecommuters feel as though they are being fairly treated, they perform better in their jobs and experience less stress about how they are juggling their work and personal lives.

As the quotes illustrate, it is not only telecommuters who are affected by supervisors' decisions on how to monitor telecommuting employees. Non-telecommuters may be sensitive to any implication that their telecommuting colleagues are receiving special treatment from the supervisor. Non-telecommuters who perceive inequities in supervisory behaviors may attribute changes in their work loads to the telecommuter not working hard enough or being granted special privileges. This, in turn, may shape the extent to which non-telecommuters perceive conflict between their own home and work lives. These dynamics of comparison and competition across the two types of workers in a work group will be most intense in situations where telecommuters and non-telecommuters work together on teams and are very aware of each other's status and treatment.

Social Inclusion: Out of Sight, But Not Out of Mind

{It is} important to have frequent quality contact and check in. Make sure to include teleworkers in conversation and dialogue. Keep them engaged not just with work issues, but also with personal as well.

-supervisor

{My} manager works hard to keep {me} in the loop.

-telecommuter

One simple step managers may take to support telecommuters and ensure the success of new work arrangements is to be more frequently in contact with their subordinates. While some telecommuters may find intensified attention from their supervisors intrusive and interpret it as undermining their autonomy, researchers have often noted that telecommuters can be isolated and "out of the loop." More frequent contact with a supervisor may be a support that effectively eliminates this problem.

More frequent contact may be geared at helping to integrate telecommuters into their work group. Viack, for example, provides a written guide on telework implementation to its managers and supervisors, and urges them to communicate regularly, and to institute a "virtual water cooler" for the work team via a company intranet or shared e-mail folder. This may be an example of the kind of "active management" that is needed to be an effective supervisor in a virtual context. Organizations that combine telecommuting and non-telecommuting effectively foster a shared awareness of others, and help with work sequencing and member coordination of inputs and outputs. Increased supervisory contact helps ensure these processes occur. For example, one supervisor at a *Fortune 500* company we studied called Infocom (a pseudonym) reported contacting his telecommuting employees 32 times per week, well above the average in our study, and stated that it is critical to "be available" and to "make {telecommuters} a natural participant in meetings when they are telecommuting in." A telecommuting employee of this supervisor said that "the morale on {his} team is excellent" and that he isn't isolated because he is "constantly talking and e-mailing" with everyone at work.

Supervisory Control of the Work–Family Boundary: Are Employees' Dependent Care Arrangements Your Business?

No {doing} childcare {while working}, must treat it the same as if in the office.

-supervisor

Have a screaming baby or dog in the background, people get uncomfortable and irritated by it and will tend to favor calling your peers or others for similar information—I've seen it happen to others.

-telecommuter

Supervisors also may try to support their telecommuting employees by influencing how workers jointly manage the demands of work and home when they are working in the home—that is, how employees manage the work–family boundary. Research by Nippert-Eng tells us that individuals construct mental and sometimes physical fences as a means of ordering their social, work and family environments. Some of us are mainly integrators and like to blend work and family roles, switching between helping the kids with their schoolwork and downloading email. Alternatively some people are separators—they prefer to keep work and non-work separate, rarely working from home or on the weekends, for example.

Supervisors are increasingly trying to influence whether their telecommuting workers integrate or separate their

work and family roles. Many early adopters of telecommuting suggest methods and guidelines for managing families when working at home as part of their virtual office training. One example of this from a study at IBM by Davenport and Pearlson:

One IBM manager explained, “We tell our employees to teach their children that the parent is at work when he or she is sitting at the desk or in the office. When the parents are at work, they are not to be disturbed, but when they come out of that room, it is okay to play.” In some cases, parents are encouraged to tell their older children that if they need to speak with the parent, to go to the house phone and call the office number, even if the parent is just in the next room. “While it may seem silly from the outside, it reinforces the separation of the personal and professional time, even when the physical separation is minimal,” according to the IBM manager.

These efforts to influence work-life boundaries of telecommuters are intended to benefit them by reducing the conflict and strain experienced in juggling work and family roles.

Supervisors in our sample varied in the formality with which they encouraged work–family separation. Some initiated discussion with their employees, and others created a formal document that laid out expectations for the new work arrangements. But what was common across supervisors was a clear expectation that telecommuting employees would not be attending to family matters, particularly to the needs of children, during work hours. It appears that telecommuters, rather than resenting this intrusion, may benefit from supervisors’ coaching to create some separation between family and work demands. We surmise that for telecommuters, having the requirement to set up childcare arrangements is beneficial and enables them to avoid role overload. Telecommuters are less likely to be tempted to multitask and save on childcare expenses by looking after their children while working. This is consistent with some research on telecommuting that has identified strains for telecommuters in trying to jointly manage care for children and work.

Work Group Culture: Helping Out and Handling End-of-Day Emergencies

I have gotten to the point where I miss the contact and informal ways to contribute—during conversations that come up or if a coworker has a problem at the office.
–telecommuter

We have argued that supervisors who treat telecommuters and non-telecommuters the same, and who encourage telecommuters to separate work and personal life will be more successful, in terms of improving employee performance and reducing tensions between work and personal life for both telecommuters and non-telecommuters. Despite the benefits of these approaches, we did also find an unanticipated and negative side effect.

Supervisors who monitor both groups of workers in the same manner, and who encourage work-life separation, tend to have employees – telecommuters and non-telecommuters alike – who are less likely to exert extra effort to assist coworkers. The

explanation may lie in part in the kinds of coworker resentments that we outlined. While supervising the same may assuage some equity concerns for members of both groups, and be helpful in terms of work-life conflict and performance, this may not be sufficient to motivate group members to extend themselves to help each other. Instead, when alternative and traditional work forms are blended, more active supervisory behaviors may be needed to fully support and integrate employees and to assist them in performing fully.

Further, when telecommuters draw strict boundaries between work and personal life at the request of their supervisor, this may make them less available to assist their colleagues. Teleworkers who strictly separate work and family life may then no longer just be out of sight, but also may be unavailable for last-minute or unplanned work, and so non-teleworkers are more likely to be called upon to assist. This may also contribute to the fact that non-telecommuters in these workgroups find that their own work–family conflict increases.

Our data reinforces the idea that telecommuters who are forced to separate work and personal life may begin to look at work differently. They view time after work hours as their own. As one telecommuter, whose supervisor required separation, said: “Telecommuting isn’t about how long you can sit in a seat, {or about being} a 12/hour/day worker hero who accomplishes nothing.” Conversely, telecommuters whose supervisors did not focus on imposing strict separation of work and home life made comments that reflected the fact that their supervisors and coworkers expected them to be constantly available:

I get weekend calls and evening calls. When I’m sick, they {at work} still expect me to get work done since I don’t have to come into the office.
My flexibility includes carrying a pager and understanding interruptions.

Thus, telecommuters who do not separate work and personal life may engage in more helping behaviors because they are always available to their colleagues and supervisor. This factor likely contributes to lower work strains for their non-telecommuting coworkers.

Supervisors who wish to encourage separation for telecommuters, or to monitor telecommuters and non-telecommuters the same, will need to make other adjustments to their supervisory practices to compensate for these negative effects. For example, our other results do show that telecommuter-helping behaviors can be increased through frequent contact with telecommuters, which can ensure that telecommuters know of department needs and are more motivated to help out.

One may ask, what is the difference between “monitoring” and “frequency of contact”? The former has authoritarian dynamics, where workers are required to keep track of time and report on what has been achieved—a one-way communication dynamic. The latter, frequency of contact, focuses on two-way information, where work issues are discussed, problems are solved, and work is coordinated and scheduled. For this reason, we expect that increasing communication with telecommuters will not create the same sense of inequity that may result from differential monitoring. The comments of one telecommuter analyst for the IRS illustrate this distinction. She noted that her manager changed her style very little in order to

accommodate telework. "Management needs to trust their employees. We're all adults; we can get the work done." Yet there is still a need to keep in contact and coordinate work: "We talk or exchange e-mail everyday. . . She knows that if she asks me to do something, it's going to get done."

It may also be that a coordinated effort will be needed within work groups to develop a response that respects the work–family needs of all group members. The aim should be to avoid a situation where non-telecommuters lack needed assistance from telecommuters, or where they face greater work demands because of their availability in the office for last-minute or crisis projects that might be harder to assign to a telecommuting colleague. Work groups may benefit from negotiating rules about after-hours access for all employees. Alternatively, non-telecommuters, because of their longer hours in the office, may experience positive outcomes from being able to occasionally integrate their personal life into work time, and this may help reduce their work–family conflict. For example, non-telecommuters may gain from flex-time access, allowing them to alter the starting and ending times of their workday around personal needs; or to be able to take breaks at work to attend to personal needs; or to occasionally informally telecommute when they have personal needs to attend to such as a school conference or a medical appointment, or in case of inclement weather.

Ultimately, supervisors need to create a culture of support, so that coworkers help each other regardless of where and when individuals work. Such a culture would provide rewards to employees who help each other, and would make helping others a positive work group norm. Discussion of team member backup and norms for handling unexpected work that comes in at inconvenient times (e.g., Friday afternoon for a 9–5 office) need to be developed and socialized.

CONCLUSION

Our study shows that telecommuters benefit from equity in monitoring practices, from increased contact with their supervisors related to information sharing, and from encouragement to establish some separation in managing work–family boundaries. Some supervisors may not wish to intrude on the private family decisions of their employees regarding daycare, but still may desire to help employees avoid the

strains that come with frequent interruptions and to ensure work productivity. The ideal scenario may be one in which supervisors alert people to the pros and cons of different ways of managing boundaries, and then let individuals decide. There are pros and cons to both separating and integrating; to some extent, it's a matter of what fits with one's life and preferences. Most often in our study telecommuters did better when they recognized that their work arrangement created a lot of blurring of work and personal life; being conscious about that and managing it proved to be beneficial. This may not mean that employees necessarily need to work at home as if they were in the office (although we spoke to some people who thrived that way), but they also may not want to have endless interruptions, or to always be multitasking or juggling childcare and work requirements.

Supervisors need to develop new approaches attuned to the needs of workers in new flexible arrangements (i.e., increased information sharing and assistance in boundary management), but at the same time remain attentive to equity issues within work groups (such as monitoring equally). Non-telecommuters are also influenced by these practices, experiencing some positive outcomes from equitable monitoring practices, but also increased work–family conflict when supervisors require telecommuters to separate work and family. Accordingly, supervisors face a paradox: a supervisory behavior that benefits telecommuters may harm non-telecommuters and have other unintended negative impacts. As a result, they may need to experiment and work collaboratively with both work groups to derive new adaptive solutions to resolve these tensions.

Overall, it may be how telecommuting is implemented, rather than simply whether or not workers telecommute, that determines whether or not it will have positive effects on employee performance and work–family conflict. New ways of working are only useful if they are effectively implemented and supported by supervisors in ways that frame the new work style as an innovation affecting the total blended work group, rather than an individual employment deal.



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Brenda A. Lautsch is an associate professor of management and organization studies at Simon Fraser University. She received her Ph.D. in industrial relations and human resource management from the M.I.T. Sloan School of Management. Her current research focuses on new work systems and inequality, knowledge management, contingent work, qualitative research methodology, and on the effects of flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting, on work-life outcomes. Her articles have appeared in journals such as the *Industrial and Labour Relations Review*, *Industrial Relations*, and the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, and she is co-author of *Ceo of Me: Creating A Life that Works in the Flexible Job Age* (2008, Wharton School Publishing). You can reach her at blautsch@sfu.ca (Tel.: +1 778 782 3733; fax: +1 604 291 4920).

Ellen Ernst Kossek is university distinguished professor at Michigan State University's School of Human Resources & Labor Relations. She received her Ph.D. in organizational behavior from Yale University. She is associate director of the Center for Work, Family Health and Stress of the U.S. National Institutes of Health National Work, Family and Health Network. Her current research involves managing organizational change on workplace flexibility and the employment relationship, health and wellbeing, international human resources management, workplace inclusion, gender, and diversity. Her research has won many awards and she serves on many refereed journal boards. She has edited or authored seven other books on diversity, work-life and human resource management and workplace flexibility including *CEO of Me: Creating a Life that Works in the Flexible Job Age* (2008, Wharton School Publishing) with Lautsch. You can reach her at kossek@msu.edu (Tel.: +1 517 353 9040; fax: +1 517 355 7656).