WHEN THE WORKPLACE IS MANY PLACES

The Extent and Nature of Off-Site Work Today

Executive Summary

Amy Richman

Karen Noble

Arlene Johnson

A Study Commissioned by

ABC

American Business Collaboration
for
Quality Dependent Care

Written by

WfD
CONSULTING

This study was commissioned by:

THE ABC CHAMPIONS

Abbott Laboratories

Allstate.

Deloitte & Touche

ExxonMobil.

GE Capital

IBM

Johnson & Johnson

PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS

TEXAS INSTRUMENTS

"To do together what none of us can afford to do alone"

WHEN THE WORKPLACE IS MANY PLACES

The Extent and Nature of Off-Site Work Today

Executive Summary

Amy Richman

Karen Noble

Arlene Johnson

A Study Commissioned by

ABC

American Business Collaboration
for
Quality Dependent Care

Written by

WfD
CONSULTING

Who is the American Business Collaboration for Quality Dependent Care?

The American Business Collaboration for Quality Dependent Care (ABC) is a collaboration of nine "Champion" companies partnering to ensure that their employees have access to quality programs and services to help them manage their work and personal responsibilities. Since 1992, ABC companies have created and funded programs and services that merge business goals with the work and personal needs and responsibilities of employees. The ABC is managed by WFD Consulting, the thought leader and architect of the workplace of the future, offering innovative solutions and research to keep companies on the cutting-edge of key issues affecting business results.

Acknowledgements

When the Workplace Is Many Places: The Extent and Nature of Off-Site Work Today
ISBN: 0-9724090-0-9

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Though it is still common to envision a corporate office building or factory as the place where we "go to work," every day a large proportion of the labor force works "off-site" in another kind of environment—perhaps a room in their home, an airport lounge, or a customer's office. These off-site workers are a major and apparently growing component of the workforce.

To determine the prevalence and profile of off-site work, the American Business Collaboration (ABC) funded this study as part of its goal of providing leadership on leading-edge issues for a changing workforce. The primary objective was to obtain information that would enable ABC companies and the corporate community at large to manage off-site workers and a dispersed workforce more effectively.

The findings discussed here are based on a nationally representative sample of 2057 adults who are either full-time employees of companies with 500 or more employees, or family members of employees. The study presents a 360° perspective, incorporating the views of off-site and on-site workers, their co-workers, managers, and family members.

The Off-Site Worker Population
The vast majority of the workforce in mid-size and large companies work on a regular basis with people they cannot see. Taking together those who are off-site workers and those who work at least weekly with colleagues at a different site, the study finds that working over a distance affects more than 80% and is a nearly universal experience for workers today.

- There are five types of off-site work. "Regular tele-workers" work from home on a regular basis, an average of two days a week; "ad hoc tele-workers" perform their work from home about two days a month; and "remote workers" function full-time from a home location. "Mobile workers," as the name suggests, work from multiple locations including their car, their home, hotels, customer offices and company offices. "Customer site workers" are located in a customer office from which they do

all or most of their work. Mobile workers and customer site workers are the largest groups, together comprising about a quarter of the workforce. Tele-workers and remote workers together constitute another quarter.

- Off-site workers are represented in virtually all industries and occupations, though the mix of arrangements varies by industry.

The Benefits of Off-Site Work

For organizations, employee productivity, commitment, job satisfaction, and retention are all positively affected by various off-site arrangements. And individuals, especially those who work from home, cite a better work-life balance and a positive impact on family life.

- On a range of personal and work dimensions (e.g., productivity, concentration, stress levels, job satisfaction), managers, off-site workers, and co-workers all say that off-site workers rate as well as or better than on-site workers.
- Though off-site workers are likely to work more hours than their on-site colleagues, they are less likely to feel physically and emotionally drained at the end of the day.
- Those who work from home regularly are most likely to cite multiple benefits of the work arrangement.

Barriers to Effective Off-Site Arrangements

Though access to information and technology can be a barrier to working effectively from home, the major barriers identified in the survey are cultural—especially the emphasis on face-time and in-person work. All types of employees also share the belief that working off-site diminishes a sense of connection with the company.

- Getting in touch and staying informed is a problem for some. Generally, workers see the grapevine as more dependable than formal communication mechanisms.
- Meetings that involve off-site workers are common for 80% of the workforce. However, barely half believe that off-site workers are able to participate as effectively as those who are in the room where the meeting originates, due to practices that inadvertently leave them out.
- Though interruptions from family are commonly assumed to be a problem for at-home workers, off-site workers actually experience fewer work interruptions than on-site workers, who are frequently interrupted by other on-site colleagues.

Practices That Increase the Effectiveness of Off-Site Arrangements

Although off-site arrangements would be more effective if supported by guidelines, the proper tools, and specific training for off-site work, only a modest number of companies supply such support. Likewise, among the items that respondents say are most critical to effective work-from-home arrangements, many are missing from their actual experience.

- A system for being reached on a daily basis and high-speed access to the company's computer system are at the top of the list of "necessaries" for all types of off-site workers.

- Except for remote workers, few work-from-home employees have a designated work-space in their home, even though they say a set-aside workspace is very important to their effectiveness.

- Off-site workers and their families both say that the transition from on-site to off-site work was not difficult.

Managing a Distributed Workforce

Special training for managing off-site workers is rarely provided to managers, but when it is, it is effective. Manager training has a strong impact on manager attitudes toward off-site work and seems to be a factor in producing better results from off-site workers in their responsiveness, co-worker relations, and customer service.

- More than half of managers supervise off-site employees, but only 1 in 8 managers have received any training on managing off-site employees.

- Besides reporting the most benefits from off-site work, those who work at home regularly (remote workers and regular tele-workers) experience the highest degree of management effectiveness.

Technology Tools and Support

Contrary to the common expectation that off-site workers must have access to a wide array of technology, most off-site workers have the staple range of technology: computer, printer, fax, copier, and multiple phone lines. The technology provided is not always appropriate to the needs of a specific arrangement, and one-third to one-half rate their technical support as "only fair" or "poor."

- When equipment is provided, companies assume financial responsibility for purchasing and maintaining it for off-site workers, as they do for on-site workers.

- Mobile workers and customer site workers are least likely to have what they consider the necessary degree of access to company data and files.

- Mobile workers lack many of the tools needed for mobile communication. Remote workers—who are most reliant on electronic communication—are less well-equipped than tele-workers or on-site employees.

Communication and Connectedness

Since communication and connectedness with the company are identified as two of the few problematic aspects of off-site arrangements, focused attention in these areas will make a difference. Off-site employees use a range of communications methods, but, as might be expected, the intensity of different types of communication varies by work arrangement. For example, remote workers use e-mail most intensively.

- Employees spend a great deal of time communicating with members of their team or workgroup; half spend more than 3 hours a day on such communication.
- Most interactions are work-related. Regular tele-workers and remote workers, who spend the least time on non-work-related interactions, are more likely to report some difficulty in maintaining relationships with co-workers. However, maintaining relationships is not a prevalent problem for people in any work arrangement.

Observations and Conclusions

The data define three striking observations. First, the impact of off-site work is wide-reaching: only a small portion of the workforce has not experienced working over distances with off-site colleagues. Second, the corporate response to off-site work is modest and ad hoc. The absence of policies, guidelines, supports, training, and infrastructure are puzzling given that the effectiveness of 80% of the workforce is at stake. A third major conclusion is that off-site work experience varies widely, from remote workers who are very satisfied with their arrangement to customer site workers who are the least satisfied of any employee group.

Companies that correct the weaknesses in managing off-site work and draw on its strengths will find clear advantages: heightened employee commitment, increased retention of key talent, reduced stress levels, and even possibly improved management effectiveness. The data suggest several specific areas for action.

- Be more intentional about addressing off-site work issues. Develop an off-site plan as part of a workforce strategy.

- Treat the differences in work arrangements as one aspect of workforce diversity. Seek to understand and draw on the differences so as to allow each employee to make an optimal contribution.
- Offer training on managing off-site workers. The survey findings suggest that this may be the single most important and high-impact action companies can take to make off-site arrangements even more successful.
- Expand technology planning beyond the technical and cost aspects to focus on enhancing communication and connectedness between people, the business, and customers. Develop a technology plan that fosters connectedness, not just connectivity.
- Finally, consciously replace the office-centered model of work with a mental model of an omni-site extended network, in which distinctions of on- and off-site disappear—and no one is considered remote.

ABC

American Business Collaboration
for
Quality Dependent Care

*The ABC is a collaboration of leading-edge companies
dedicated to creating real solutions to critical workplace issues.*

For more information or to order a copy of the study, contact:

The American Business Collaboration
for Quality Dependent Care
Administered by WFD Consulting
200 Talcott Avenue West
Watertown, MA 02472

Phone: (800) 767-9863
E-mail: abcinfo@wfd.com
Web site: http://www.abcdependentcare.com