



Managing teleworkers

Develop effective working relationships despite physical separation



Didier Avril, série Storytelling

Our sources

This synopsis is based on the publications presented below and on the back page.

Making Telework Work
Evan H. Offstein, Jason M. Morwick,
Davies Black, 2009.

How to Manage in a Flat World
Susan Bloch, Philip Whiteley,
Prentice Hall, 2007.

Companies are investing massively in infrastructure designed to enable employees to work in geographically dispersed locations. In 2008 alone, over \$35 billion were devoted to the installation of collaborative software and platforms. These investments are intended to accelerate and reduce the cost of teleworker interactions.

Yet, experience shows that information technology can only go so far in improving the effectiveness of geographically dispersed teams. While advanced communication tools clearly facilitate the transmission of information, teleworkers must still find a way to develop real team momentum. Experience shows this can be trickier than it seems. Indeed, for telecommuting to work, teleworkers and their managers must not only effectively share information, but also completely rethink their work practices.

The experts thus underline that the performance of geographically dispersed teams depends first and foremost

on the quality of leadership and not on technology. Three helpful tips can be gleaned from this observation:

- **Select teleworkers carefully.** Companies are advised to apply a serious process to recruit telecommuting candidates, rather than simply ask for volunteers.
- **Help teleworkers get organized.** Managers are advised to discuss with teleworkers the requisite personal discipline as well as the material resources needed to establish effective telecommuting arrangements.
- **Adapt your management reflexes.** To manage teleworkers effectively, companies must actively compensate for the absence of the natural regulatory mechanisms that exist when people work together in the same physical location.

In this synopsis...

- 1 Specific challenges
- 2 Carefully select teleworkers
- 3 Facilitate the personal organization of teleworkers
- 4 Adapt your management practices

1 Specific challenges

Most employees and managers alike feel that telecommuting arrangements have more advantages than disadvantages. The following statement by the CEO of a large global corporation aptly illustrates this conviction: *"Telecommuting? It's win-win for everyone. Employees can work in locations near where they live, or even from home. No more time wasted*

Physical distance can create tension which can be all the more detrimental because it is unexpressed.

on commuting, or moving the family. It's very empowering for them! Telecommuting helps employers keep some good people they might otherwise have lost, and bring teams closer to customers and production sites. And the icing on the cake is

that with videoconferencing, we no longer have to spend a fortune on travel!"

At the same time, experience shows how difficult it is to preserve the effectiveness of a team of teleworkers. Indeed, physical distance combines with emotional distance to produce largely pernicious consequences (Figure A). Three issues can be observed in particular:

More interpersonal conflicts

When people telecommute, conflicts may quickly escalate. Tensions arise frequently when people work in the same location, but there are ample opportunities to resolve these conflicts – with a joke at the coffee machine, an informal conversation to clarify something left unsaid, etc. However, these regulatory mechanisms occur much less naturally when people telecommute. For example, few employees naturally pick

up the phone to ensure that there has been no misunderstanding or hard feelings after a disagreement. One manager in charge of a team of teleworkers scattered across three continents attests to this fact: *"People are quick to misinterpret the failure to respond to an email or an abrupt reply. And they are reluctant to disturb an employee in another time zone outside working hours simply to check that the person did not get the wrong idea! In this context, small conflicts may quickly snowball."* The formality of telephone conversations combined with time zone differences does not make communication easier. The fact that teleworkers may have very different everyday contexts, use very different languages and work in very different professional and national cultures creates a perfect recipe for serious misunderstandings.

FIGURE A Various facets of distance

Physical distance is the first thing that comes to mind when considering telecommuting arrangements. However, this is just the most visible constraint. In addition to physical distance, other types of distance may become serious obstacles to individual and collective performance. Being aware of these obstacles can help to regulate the resulting tension.



Based on *Uniting the Virtual Workforce*, Karen Sobel Lojeski, Richard R. Reilly, Wiley, 2008.

Less team momentum

The psychological distance that often accompanies physical distance weakens teleworkers' team spirit and sense of belonging to the group. A manager of the HR and financial consulting unit at SAP points this out clearly. Most of the fifty professionals under his responsibility work on the client site: *"Most of my subordinates have more contact with the client project managers than with their superiors and colleagues at SAP. They end up caring more about what happens at the client than inside their own company."* Many managers of teleworkers are keenly aware of this distancing. The sense of teamwork is easily the first thing to go. Individual teleworkers tend to focus on their respective tasks, and thus lose the spirit that facilitates the productive collaboration of large groups of people. People who work in different locations may gradually stop bothering to take five minutes to help a colleague or spontaneously share information gathered in the field. A telecommuting team may thus slip into a mechanical mode of operation, to the detriment of a real team dynamic.

More stress

Finally, many teleworkers are quite stressed. Surprisingly, while telecommuting is often perceived as offering a more comfortable lifestyle, experience shows that the reality is a mixed bag. In one U.S. accounting firm, for instance, twenty-four accountants enthusiastically accepted a telecommuting arrangement. The work in itself was perfectly suited to this type of arrangement – few face-to-face contacts, tasks essentially focused on data processing. The accountants expected their quality of life to improve as a result. However, six months down the road, the experiment turned out to be a disaster. Only four accountants continued to telecommute full time! Six had quit, ten had returned to working in the office, and four had opted for a mixed solution. The main reason is that the teleworkers

found it difficult to draw the line between private and professional life. For fear that they would be suspected of "goofing off" by their boss and colleagues, some overworked themselves. One of the accountants sent emails at four in the morning to show his engagement. When he quit, he explained that working from home had practically destroyed his marriage. Others had to struggle constantly with family claims on their attention – because they "were home," could they please go pick up the baby from daycare, or take care of calling for the plumber? As a matter of fact, this phenomenon affects teleworkers in general, and not only those working from home. Off-site workers are often subject to two types of pressure – their local colleagues don't hesitate to ask them to do things, even if they don't work explicitly for the organization making the request, and this also adds to the pressure they feel to prove their loyalty to their distant boss or colleagues back on-site.

Telecommuting, whether from home or in an off-site location, thus has major implications which largely surpass practical organizational constraints. To preserve the effectiveness of teleworkers, managers must assume three new responsibilities:

- Carefully select teleworkers;
- Support the personal organization of teleworkers;
- Adapt management practices to the specific demands of telecommuting.

2 Carefully select teleworkers

Curiously, teleworkers are often selected by default. Indeed, teams are often dispersed as a result of strategic decisions to globalize operations, specialize by facility or bring operational teams closer to customers. Likewise, most telecommuting programs are developed on a volunteer basis.

These decisions unfortunately fail to take account of the specific skills and mindset required to telecommute. Yet,

the experts underline that the choice of which employees will participate is critical. Three points must be verified in particular:

Organization and remote communication skills

Employees do not all possess the same aptitude for telecommuting. Some may be highly qualified, but still have trouble making the switch. Some people become demoralized, for example, when they are physically separated from their superiors and colleagues. Similarly, the predominance of email over vocal communication requires challenging traditional operating models to manage differences of opinion, organize creativity and recognize performance.

Teleworkers must be selected methodically, rather than haphazardly or on a volunteer basis.

Criteria specific to telecommuting arrangements must be taken into account when selecting teleworkers (Figure B). One manager of a telecommunications company explains that he gives preference to internal candidates who are accustomed to holding substantive discussions by email or phone. He feels that this is a good predictor of their future success as telecommuters. Another company chose to conduct a large-scale simulation before launching a new telecommuting program. For three days, employees were asked to restrict their interactions to those they could have remotely. By participating in this exercise, company leaders and employees could assess their level of comfort with the new arrangement. The simulation helped the company adapt the organization so that individual preferences and aptitudes could be integrated more effectively.

Complementarity of profiles

The most effective teams are composed of a combination of "performance-oriented" and "relationship-oriented" individuals. However, volunteers for off-site work arrangements generally fall into the first category. If companies select teleworkers exclusively on a volunteer basis, the resulting team is likely to focus on performance to the detriment of personal relationships. Although such teams generally produce good short-term results, their motivation and sense of camaraderie naturally tends to drop over time. Teleworkers are thus often observed to suffer from a medium- to long-term decline in performance and morale – eventually causing turnover to rise.

For this reason, companies are encouraged to focus on human relations aptitude when selecting teleworkers. For example, it might be better to choose an individual whose performance is not the highest, but who possesses a strong team spirit. This would

typically be the type of person who spontaneously picks up the phone to chat with colleagues, adds a personal touch to email messages, or regularly reports on team events in a collaborative workspace. These employees tend to make the connections required to create the strong bonds needed to turn a group of individuals into a real team.

Level of trust

Not everything can be verified from a distance. Teleworkers have many opportunities to skip work, withhold information, hide mistakes or underperform. These potential pitfalls may tempt managers to establish time-consuming micro-management practices, although such practices are rarely effective due to the physical distance involved. A high degree of trust is thus particularly critical.

When choosing teleworkers, companies must consequently take care to verify that these individuals possess an attitude and aptitudes that foster trust. The ability to communicate transpa-

rently, meet deadlines and keep promises, as well as interact effectively by email and videoconference are thus critical prerequisites for teleworkers.

Facilitate the personal organization of teleworkers

Organizational issues may easily sap the efficiency and motivation of teleworkers. Indeed, work is traditionally organized to provide structure. Employees have specific working hours and routines, and attend meetings to pace their work. The ergonomic and technical environment is designed to allow them to concentrate fully on doing their jobs.

Managing telecommuting relationships requires addressing typically tacit issues.

When telecommuting, however, people are often left to organize their work as they see fit, all the more so

FIGURE B A few criteria for selecting teleworkers

Traditional recruiting criteria do not necessarily include the aptitudes required to telecommute effectively.

ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY FROM A DISTANCE	• Ability to write clear, concise emails • Ability to communicate comfortably on the phone • Ability to make online presentations that speak for themselves
PROACTIVE ATTITUDE IN RELATIONSHIPS	• Reflex to alert the superior or colleagues quickly when a problem arises, e.g., delays, technical issues, budget overruns, etc. • Reflex to coordinate with the rest of the team without waiting for formal occasions
PERSONAL DISCIPLINE	• Discipline with regard to time management • Ability to structure day-to-day work, identify tasks to carry out, plan according to established priorities, manage time allocated by task, etc.
WILLINGNESS TO "PLAY THE GAME"	• Willingness to invest in communication to make sure that information flows smoothly and the team is continuously synchronized • Willingness to follow the rules governing remote communication, such as taking turns during conference calls

Based on *Making Telework Work*, Evan H. Offstein, Jason M. Morwick, Davies Black, 2009.

because managers often hesitate to address organizational details for fear of being perceived as micro-managing, or even intruding into the personal domain, if the concerned employees are working from home.

Yet, issues that may seem trivial when adjustments can be made off the cuff can turn into major problems for lack of opportunities to keep things in check. The managers of teleworkers must consequently oversee two dimensions they would normally ignore:

Discuss employees' personal organization

People may easily become disorganized when they telecommute. Indeed, teleworkers often find that the line between their private and professional life becomes fuzzier. Emails arrive at all hours of the day and night, for example. How many employees find themselves checking their email at midnight, consulting their BlackBerry messages while eating or driving, or participating in a telephone conference as they keep an eye on the kids' dinner? What is more, far from their managers and other team members, teleworkers have great

freedom to organize their days. At home, there is constant temptation to deal simultaneously with professional and personal issues. When people work far from their home base, the demands of colleagues who are physically nearby may quickly take precedence over the expectations of their own team.

There is thus a considerable risk that these organizational challenges will chip away at the performance and job satisfaction of teleworkers. Making personal organization a legitimate discussion topic is the best way to keep this from happening. Managers of teleworkers must consequently overcome their reticence to seem intrusive or

FIGURE C Identify the risks of organizational deterioration

The organization of teleworkers is much more likely to be disturbed by logistical or material issues. Managers can help telecommuters acquire a more productive framework.

EXAMPLES

Do teleworkers have access to facilities adapted to their work?

(layout, location, environment, ergonomics)

- A journalist working at home had trouble concentrating when writing articles. He decided to move his office to a quieter part of the house. He also made a rule that when the door was closed, his children should not disturb him except in case of emergency.
- A product marketing manager delocalized to New York had to coordinate amongst many employees and suppliers in different countries, generally by phone. However, the shared services platform where he was located turned out to be very noisy. Although he was unable to get a private office, the installation of soundproof partitions immediately improved his productivity.

Do teleworkers have the right equipment?

(remote communication and collaboration tools, up-to-date software versions, technical infrastructure, etc.)

- In a large software company, the fear of losing data forced engineers working at home to make regular, time-consuming backups. Managing software glitches remotely was not only difficult, but very frustrating for teleworkers who were not trained in this domain. The company took two measures to solve this problem, by reinforcing the telephone hotline and asking teleworkers to work directly on the network whenever possible.
- The internal communication manager of a cosmetics manufacturer regularly had trouble sharing documents with teleworkers. The messaging system severely limited the size of transferrable files. The establishment of an online data sharing solution saved the manager an enormous amount of time.

Do teleworkers have efficient work routines?

(order of priorities, time management, routines for dealing with email and miscellaneous distractions, etc.)

- An extremely competent teleworker gradually became isolated from the team. As he talked things over with his superior, he realized that since he began working remotely, he tended to focus on his job to the detriment of team coordination. He forced himself to start each week by having a short chat with his colleagues to validate the week's priorities. Within a few weeks, he had recovered his place in the team.
- A telecommuting consultant significantly improved his productivity by simply changing the way he managed his email. Rather than reading them as they arrived, he scheduled three dedicated times each day to process them. This arrangement helped him concentrate on other tasks for longer periods of time.

Based on *Making Telework Work*, Evan H. Offstein, Jason M. Morwick, Davies Black, 2009.

persnickety. Indeed, if the same people were working on site and were having organizational difficulties, the issue would naturally be raised without hesitation. Managers are unable to observe teleworkers from a distance, however. As a precaution, it is therefore a good idea to review and discuss potential pitfalls openly and non-judgmentally. For example, is there a separate room where the teleworker can physically close the door to draw a clear line between the professional and private sphere? How does the teleworker manage his time and set priorities at the start of each day? How does he manage his email or phone calls? How does he relate to those working near him? Must he spend time dealing with issues of which his manager is not aware? Discussing such issues is not only a normal responsibility for managers of telecommuting teams, but is also critical to ensure that teleworkers remain motivated and continue to do well over time (Figure C).

Invest in support services

Aware of the impact of the professional environment on performance, companies are paying greater attention to this factor. Great efforts are now made to optimize the workplace, by installing ergonomic office furniture and necessary computer equipment and developing a more effective layout of work space. Teleworkers, however, often do not benefit from these collective facilities. Indeed, they are often left to their own devices to manage these material aspects, in addition to doing their normal jobs. Oftentimes, they are neither specifically trained nor asked to address these issues, which may be quite time consuming.

The managers of teleworkers are thus responsible for ensuring that material issues do not become a major cause of frustration or undermine performance. This essentially involves verifying that teleworkers receive the same level of support as those working on-site, despite the distance. One service company, for example, established a system to ensure that teleworkers are regularly contacted by the IT department to review their technical installation, as

well as update software, anti-virus programs, automatic backup systems, etc. Some companies even hire "ergonomic consultants" to help teleworkers organize their work space. Thus supported, these employees can find the peace and comfort they need to focus on more value-added tasks.

4 Adapt your management practices

Teleworkers cannot be managed in the same way as employees who work side by side every day. The limited opportunities for informal communication and lack of natural opportunities to balance workload may create additional tension and sap morale. In this context, the role of the team manager is paramount. In particular, priorities must be rethought along four dimensions:

Communicate more!

In order to maximize efficiency, many teleworkers try to limit communication time to the bare minimum needed to coordinate work properly. This is a big mistake. Indeed, communication must

FIGURE D Maintain a perception of fairness within the team

From a distance, people tend to primarily see their own efforts and minimize those put forth by others. Moreover, people may easily form negative impressions in the absence of the opportunity to directly observe colleagues at work. Proactive managerial involvement is thus critical to maintain a sense of fairness.

Set clear standards of interaction	Example: Nobody is expected to respond instantaneously to the emails of their colleagues. Conversely, all must acknowledge reception within six hours. Each team member must also clearly know the times when he and the other members of the team are supposed to be working and contactable.
Establish rules applicable to everyone on the team , whether they work on- or off-site	Example: If people working on-site are not allowed to miss or be late for a meeting, the same rule should apply to teleworkers, time zone differences notwithstanding.
Help all workers gain visibility for their individual contributions and perceive the contributions of others	Example: Prepare teleworkers to play their respective roles during telephone conferences by sending them contextual information beforehand and explaining where their input is expected in particular.

Based on *Making Telework Work*, Evan H. Offstein, Jason M. Morwick, Davies Black, 2009.

be deliberately reinforced to avoid the problems that can arise due to the absence of informal or nonverbal communication. Managers of teleworkers must consequently make a point of communicating massively on company and team objectives and issues, and think to ask specifically about individual motivation, day-to-day frustrations and the challenges linked to de-synchronization. They must also remember to share victories, express their satisfaction and send small signs of recognition. This is something managers do naturally when they run into their employees informally, but may easily forget when communication is more normalized. Yet, such factors are among the most powerful motivators over time.

Managing teleworkers means mitigating the impact of distance.

The experts thus recommend redoubling managerial presence and communication when people work at a distance from one another. Various communication channels and different styles can be used to do this, e.g., email or phone, followed up by an internal department newsletter, blog, etc. Managers must not be afraid to repeat themselves.

Some companies have also adapted their management systems to position managers as "performance coaches." In particular, they organize more frequent formal evaluations, on a quarterly, monthly or even weekly basis during the period when teleworkers first begin working off-site. This close tracking helps to both mentor individuals and regularly resynchronize the team.

Ensure equal treatment

Telecommuting may easily generate perceptions of unfairness. This is especially true for teams where some members work on-site while others work off-site. Indeed, on-site employees frequently believe that their counterparts working off-site have it easy, while the

latter struggle to find their place on the team and prove their worth.

Managing this risk must be a priority for the team manager (Figure D). As one telecommuting team leader put it, *"During conference calls, I never let people say things like 'You're lucky to be working at home with this good weather.' I don't want to let anyone get the idea that teleworkers have special privileges. By the same token, I am intransigent about compliance with common rules. Everyone is expected to attend scheduled meetings and be punctual, whether they work on- or off-site. And I am particularly careful to make sure that everyone participates in discussions, by, if necessary, actively calling on participants to speak during phone conferences, because I know trying to get a word in edgewise from a distance can be very difficult."* This is an effective way to ensure that everyone is adequately recognized.

Actively maintain a sense of belonging

Teleworkers often have trouble creating a team spirit. The first step in fostering this spirit is to schedule a minimum number of opportunities to meet face to face. One annual meeting is a strict minimum, according to the experts. But meeting regularly is not enough, and must be supplemented by other measures to be defined according to the sensitivities of the team. For example, the manager of an eight-member team of telecommuters had the idea to call his team "The Jackals," in reference to a film with Jack Nicholson. Merely giving a name to the team, to symbolize the existence of a shared mission, greatly contributed to the sense of belonging. One software consulting firm manager created an online game. Teleworkers logged into this game to fight, exchange avatars, and forge alliance strategies. The space became a fun place where teleworkers gathered after work, to chat informally and even discuss their problems. By the end of the year, the team members had grown much closer and worked much more smoothly

together, to a point where performance indicators ranked the team in the top 5 percent!

Beware of the least sign of tension

Finally, with teleworkers, detecting conflicts and signs of falling motivation is a real challenge. The signs that normally warn of a behavioral change or a drop in performance are often much less perceptible from a distance. This means that problems may remain undiscovered until it is too late to fix them.

The managers of such teams are thus advised to be on the lookout for minor variations, for example, in communication style or the quality of deliverables, as this may denote that something has shifted. For instance, one manager noted that the emails of one formerly verbose teleworker had become unusually terse. Rather than waiting to see what would happen, the manager called this individual and raised the subject with him. He learned that a close family member of the employee was seriously ill. This helped the manager avoid misunderstanding the person's frame of mind. The employee also became aware that the quality of his work had fallen without his realizing it. When done tactfully, this type of initiative keeps people from jumping to conclusions and misunderstanding the intentions of others, which can happen quickly from a distance.



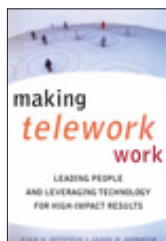
Telecommuting is not natural for most people. Both teleworkers and managers must make fundamental changes in order to acquire the right reflexes. The subject must be addressed as a real transformation to be undertaken to optimize the performance and satisfaction of telecommuters and the team as a whole.

Our selection

To find the best ideas on this subject, we recommend the following publications:

Making Telework Work

Evan H. Offstein, Jason M. Morwick, Davies Black, 2009.



Delocalized teams, working from home, flex time--the authors observe that technological advances have accelerated the spread of telecommuting arrangements. However, they argue, technological breakthroughs are not a panacea, and can be disappointing, especially if companies believe that technology alone is enough to enable telecommuters to work exactly as they used to do at the office.

Indeed, the challenge of managing teleworkers largely surpasses the issue of implementing the best collaborative tools. Telecommuting requires redefining leadership practices. In this book, the authors thus lay out the conditions for the success of telecommunication arrangements. They start by providing a detailed description of the new habits teleworkers must acquire to manage the distance from their superiors and colleagues. They then underline the classic traps and errors to avoid. Based on voluminous feedback, they also glean some best practices from those who have fully mastered the art of managing teleworkers. This book offers a wide range of useful advice.

How to Manage in a Flat World

Susan Bloch, Philip Whiteley, Prentice Hall, 2007.



With a simple click, the world seems to be at our fingertips. The omnipresence of increasingly sophisticated communication tools fools us into thinking that it is easy to communicate with anyone, anywhere, making face-to-face communication secondary. Yes, but... Susan Bloch and Philip Whiteley also underline the traps of this façade of facility. They describe six strategies in detail to help managers find their way in these new work environments. How can you use technology more effectively to stay in contact with colleagues? How can you preserve an acceptable work-

life balance by maintaining a minimum of separation between the private and professional spheres? How can you maintain team engagement, regardless of where the members are located? This book is both pragmatic and supported by concrete case studies to guide managers through their first steps into the "virtual" world of telecommuting.

Secrets of Virtual Success

Erin Meyer, INSEAD Working Knowledge, October 2010.

How can you manage a team spread across several continents and time zones? In this short article, Erin Meyer interviews several INSEAD experts on virtual management practices. They succinctly cover five domains in which leaders must radically adapt their methods: leadership, decision-making, trust, negotiations, and communication. This very brief article underlines a few powerful ideas.

And also...

We also relied on the following publications:

- **Total Engagement**, Byron Reeves, J. Leighton Read, Harvard Business Press, 2009.
Use games and virtual worlds to change the way people collaborate.
- **Uniting the Virtual Workforce**, Karen Sobel Lojeski, Richard R. Reilly, Wiley, 2008.
Understand telecommuting mechanisms and draw conclusions about leadership.

Further readings

To explore this topic further:

- **Remote collaboration and technology** (Manageris synopsis 173a)
Get the most from modern collaboration tools.
- **Leading Cross-functional Teams** (Manageris synopsis 135b)
Five critical success factors for cross-functional team leaders.
- **Combining individuals into a real team** (Manageris synopsis 191b)
How to create high-performance teams.

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