Being Efficient Working From Home
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As the work force continues to evolve and globalize, more companies are evaluating a telecommuting strategy to save overhead costs, increase retention, improve productivity and lower carbon footprint.

According to a recent 2009 Cisco Telework Survey, they found approximately 69 percent of the employees surveyed cited higher productivity when working remote, and 75 percent of those surveyed said the timeliness of their work improved.

Cisco reported it has generated an estimated annual savings of $277 million in productivity by allowing employees to telework.

Teleworking can also be a great "green" initiative to promote in a company. It can not only reduce time spent on the road but lowers carbon footprint and reduces gas consumption. Vehicles on the road now account for at least 25 percent of the CO_2 emissions nationwide, according to the Federal Highway Administration. According to the Telework Coalition, www.telcoa.org, based in Washington D.C., if 32 million working Americans could telecommute at least one day per week, they would save 74,164,700 gallons of gas.

Along with benefits of improved productivity and reduced commute time, there are challenges too. Telework tends to amplify pre-existing worker challenges. Managers need to trust their employees are achieving the same performance results while working from home. Consistent and reliable communications is also a common challenge cited among teleworkers and their colleagues.

Here are some key tips for companies, employees and managers to have successful telework programs.

Establish Clear Guidelines

All employees should have clear guidelines and expectations when working from home. Ideally, there should be a company policy on telework along with a contract agreement between managers and employees on communication expectations and performance results. This policy should cover core work hours, communication expectations, IT equipment supplied, performance expectations and mandatory training. Commuter Challenge, www.commuterchallenge.org, has some great resources and templates on telework guidelines, policies and agreements.

Create communication plan

Meetings and face-to-face interaction are necessary in any business. In a telework situation, it is still important to maintain strong communications to have effective team communication and collaboration. Although there are many types of non face-to-face communication methods, most offices use the primary three; phone, email and instant messaging.

With these communication tools it is important to establish clear guidelines of use and expectations. A lack of responsiveness reinforces the belief that teleworkers are neither working nor producing results. For instance if there was a daily check-in established with an employee and manager in the office, determine how to do that check-in via other communication options.

When a manager needs to get a hold of an employee immediately, determine which communication tool is most appropriate. Be clear on expectations of responsiveness. For example, a guideline might be with e-mail a 24-hour response is expected whereas with phone communications within one to two hours.

Encourage visibility

Some employees worry if they are not "seen" they may lose potential promotion opportunities or not develop strong relationships with their colleagues. There are many ways employees who work from home regularly can maintain visibility and foster relationships.

Have employees maintain a presence in the office by keeping or sharing an existing cubicle or office. Encourage teleworkers to attend, or volunteer, at company events and functions. It is just as important for colleagues of teleworkers to be mindful, too. Make sure to invite the telework colleagues to meetings, events and other functions. Although, teleworkers may not be able to attend, they will feel glad they are included.

Use time wisely

Working from home's biggest advantage is the increase in productivity as shown in Cisco's study. Although many managers fear that working from home can lead to increased distractions, those who have implemented telework programs have found the opposite to be true.

Employees find they can better concentrate on work without office distractions and background noise.

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