

## Working from Home may not Always Work for Business

By Holly Culhane



The neck-snapping recent edict from Yahoo's relatively new CEO Marissa Mayer has touched off a firestorm of debate over allowing employees to telecommute, or work from home.

In late February, Yahoo notified its employees that beginning in June, they will be required to work in company offices.

"To become the absolute best place to work, communications and collaboration will be important, so we need to be working side-by-side," read the memo sent to Yahoo employees. "That is why it is critical that we are all present in our offices. Some of the best decisions and insights come from hallway and cafeteria discussions, meeting new people, and impromptu team meetings. Speed and quality are often sacrificed when we work from home."

Mayer, 37, was appointed Yahoo's CEO last July. The long-struggling Internet giant is facing belt-tightening. Many industry observers believe Yahoo is weighted down by a bloated staff. Some claim the edict is an effort to get rid of some employees.

Workplaces are trendy environments. And the trend the last few years has been to allow employees to work from home. The 2012 National Study of Employers notes that about 63 percent of companies allow at least some employees to work a portion of their time remotely. That's up from 34 percent in 2005.

But even technology giants, such as Google, that benefit from this telecommuting trend suspect it could hurt worker productivity.

In the wake of the Yahoo flap, Google's chief financial officer in Australia was asked by reporters how many of his company's employees telecommute. His response: "As few as possible. ... There is something magical about spending time together, about noodling on ideas, about asking at the computer, 'What do you think of this?'"

While Google makes some accommodation for employees to telecommute, the company invests heavily in benefits that entice workers to spend more time in the office, rather than at home.

There is no simple answer to the question: Should employees be allowed to work from home? Every company, every circumstance produces a different answer.

### **Does telecommuting make sense for your company?**

To know for sure, it's important you define the goals you are trying to achieve. Is it to provide workers flexibility and enhance productivity? Can the work be performed at home in a secure manner? Are you offering telecommuting as an employee benefit to retain highly skilled employees? Is it to help workers meet family needs? Can other arrangements accomplish the same things?

### **Measure the impacts.**

Set productivity goals for workers. Keep “before” and “after” statistics. Don’t just guess that the arrangement is beneficial. Be prepared to measure the results. Be prepared to adjust or discontinue the program if it is having an adverse effect on your business.

**Put it in writing.**

Define who qualifies for a telecommuting job, and the hours or days they can work at home. Explain supervisory arrangements and productivity expectations. Criteria must be established to limit the hours telecommuters are “on the job.” Labor code violations can result when telecommuting workers are expected to be on call 24/7. And, of course, workers’ compensation issues, and rest and meal period requirements still apply.

As Yahoo attempts to right its financially listing ship, its new CEO has decided she needs her employees working together – gathering around the water cooler and the computer – to nurture their creativity and increase their productivity.

Other companies and other circumstances may be more suitable to telecommuting. The key is to think carefully before beginning such a program. Be sure it’s right for your organization before you walk down this road.

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