Managers' Attitudes to Teleworking

GLENDA SCHOLEFIELD* and SIMON PEEL**

Abstract

This paper investigates managers' attitudes to and perceptions of teleworking. Despite many predictions that teleworking would become a significant mode of work, evidence suggests that the uptake of teleworking has been much less than might otherwise be anticipated. It is suggested that managerial resistance may play a part in this. This study surveyed 123 managers in marketing firms in New Zealand and followed this up with eight in depth interviews. It is clear that while managers overwhelmingly report positive attitudes towards the concept of teleworking they have significant concerns which affect their actual usage. This paper contributes to our understanding of these contradictory attitudes on the part of managers and suggests further avenues for research.

Keywords: Teleworking, managers' attitudes, human resource management.

Introduction

It is more than 30 years since futurist Alvin Toffler pointed to the absurdity of "ship(ing) millions of workers back and forth across the landscape every morning and evening" (1970: 4). Since then, writers such as Charles Handy have predicted that one third of employees would be working from home by the turn of the century. While in some workplaces teleworking is not uncommon, at least in an ad hoc opportunistic way, as a new form of work teleworking has not caught on nearly as much as has been predicted. While accurate figures are difficult to attain, research shows that only six percent of the EU workforce teleworks (Sanchez, Perez, Carnicer & Jimemez, 2007) and the UK figure is lower at four percent (Lupton and Haynes 2000). This article explores the role that manager's attitudes and perception play in teleworking adoption, and how these might go some way towards explaining why teleworking has not enjoyed the widespread adoption that might have been anticipated. It investigates managers as key stakeholders and decision makers in the utilisation of and effectiveness of teleworking arrangements. It suggests that while managers may express support for and endorsement for the concept of teleworking, in practice there are myriad reasons why they may not want to enable its use in practice.

Broadly speaking, teleworking is the concept of employees conducting their tasks by means of communication technologies from a location other than the usual workplace. Other terms have similar meanings and are often used interchangeably, although teleworking and telecommuting have been mostly used in the literature (Baruch and Yuen, 2000). As we study managers' attitudes towards and perceptions of a particular mode of working, we use the term 'teleworking' in alignment with by other researchers in the field (for example, Sanchez et al., 2007; Morgan 2004). We define it as '*paid employees who conduct their tasks from home at least one day per week, using communication technologies to do so*.'

* Glenda Scholefield is post-graduate student at Unitec and Product Manager at ASB Bank.
** Simon Peel is the Dean of Research at the Unitec Institute of Technology. speel@unitec.ac.nz

The concept of teleworking became a popular topic for academic discussion following the 1970's world oil crisis, when alternatives to traditional commuting were suddenly of great importance (Baruch & Yuen, 2000). Over the next two decades, interest in teleworking reappeared in conjunction with various significant occurrences, for example the advent of the new style of human resource management practices of the 1980s and the trend towards flexible employment practices as one way to achieve competitive advantage (Lim & Teo, 2000; Haddon & Brynin, 2005; Sanchez et al., 2007). Teleworking became more viable with the technological advances of the 1990s – particularly the fast-growing commercial and domestic usage of the Internet and email (Siha & Monroe, 2006). Teleworking is attracting even more attention in the twenty-first century, with issues such as traffic congestion, pollution and work-life balance gaining prominence and contributing to its contemporary relevance (Harpaz, 2002). With the ongoing fast-paced developments in technologies, teleworking will become even more accessible and affordable (Roukis, 2006; Kowalski & Swanson, 2005; van Winden & Woets, 2004). For example, the number of Western households with broadband Internet is rapidly expanding, particularly where purchasing decision-makers are educated professionals (Dwivedi & Lal, 2007; Gill, 2006; Halal, 2004). Trends indicate that employees and employers will increasingly prefer or insist on flexibility (Johnson, 2004; Rosendaal, 2003; Canny, 2002). Also, organisations today need to be responsive to a dynamic market in order to be successful or even just to survive (Schoemaker & Jonker, 2005; O'Keeffe, 2002).

Given this, it could be expected that teleworking would become a common mode of employment. However, the predictions of renowned futurists such as Alvin Toffler and Charles Handy of widespread use to teleworking have not come to pass (Ndubisi & Kahraman, 2005). In 2000, only six percent of the European Union workforce was teleworking (Perez, Sanchez, Luis Carnicer & Jimenez, 2004). Even the United Kingdom's National Economic Development Office's 1986 prediction that 10-15 percent of the country's workforce would be working from home by 1995 has proved to be greatly overestimated. According to the 1997 British Labour Force survey, the actual figure in 1995 was only four percent (Lupton & Haynes, 2000). However, evidence points to growth in teleworking in more recent years. For example, the number of employees in the United States whose employer permits them to work away from the office at least one day per month increased 63 percent between 2004 and 2006 (Telework Trendlines, 2007).

The study of teleworking is of considerable contemporary importance. In Western nations, where a service-based knowledge economy has overtaken the traditional manufacturing-based economy (Hill, 2005; Green, 2003), there is potential for teleworking to become more common. Yet, until as recently as the late 1990s, there were very few robust scholarly studies conducted in the field, due at least in part to the lack of consensus on an exact definition of the concept (Kowalski & Swanson, 2005; Mokhtarian, Salomon & Choo, 2005; Harris, 2003). Of the research that has been done in the area, most has focused on the individual teleworker (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). Although this has resulted in some valuable insights, there remains a lack of research from a management perspective (Perez et al., 2004).

Lupton and Haynes (2000) state that it is somewhat of a mystery why teleworking has not become widespread, as organisations benefit from increased productivity as well as saving on many of the costs incurred in running an office. Robert and Borjesson (2006) point out that firms that support teleworking improve their environmental profile. Other advantages for employers include being better-able to offer customer service outside of traditional business

hours, attract and retain skilled staff in a tight labour market and respond to the changing demographic such as the increase of women in the workforce (Morgan, 2004; Ahmadi, Helms & Ross, 2000).

On the negative side of the equation is the lack of social interaction causing feelings of isolation – and the risk of this resulting in decreased job satisfaction and company loyalty (Perez, et al., 2002b; Wicks, 2002; Ward & Shabha, 2001). Another disadvantage is the lack of company support for the employee. One survey found that over 30 percent of teleworker respondents stated that the lack of support, including technical assistance, was a disadvantage of working from home. The same study identified that difficulty in maintaining focus at home was a problem for some, but that this appeared to be dependent on the particular home environment (Mann, Varey & Button, 2000). However, many believe that if a teleworking programme is implemented properly, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages (for example Carr, 2006; Madsen, 2006; Ammons & Markham, 2004).

While factors influencing teleworking adoption include employee demand as well as organisational factors, it would not be possible to adopt a teleworking scheme without managerial approval. Even in lieu of existing organisational backing, a manager who is keen to implement teleworking for their staff will likely lobby the relevant decision-makers for permission. As organisational support is vital for teleworking adoption (Perez, Sanchez & Luis Carnicer, 2003b) and managers' roles are critical in the uptake and success of teleworking. Given this fact, the present study investigates managers' attitudes towards teleworking. Teleworking research lends itself to the study of white-collar, relatively autonomous work situations (Ahmadi et al., 2000). Morgan (2004) suggests that the biggest barriers to teleworking adoption are negative attitudes and perceptions on the part of managers. These opinions are then shared with other managers, thus perpetuating the negative view of teleworking. For this reason, more research into managers' attitudes is potentially valuable. This study responds to the gap in the empirical research identified by Bailey and Kurland (2001) in that it focuses on stakeholders, other than individual teleworkers, who influence or are influenced by the adoption of distributed work arrangements.

The Study

This study investigated middle managers' perceptions of teleworking using a mixed method of a quantitative paper-based survey and qualitative in-depth interviews. In selecting marketing managers, we chose a particular type of management context and a white-collar office environment. Many marketing roles, such as conducting market research, preparing communication briefs, writing advertising copy, designing promotional collateral, booking media, analysing results and reporting, could feasibly be carried out from home by means of commonly available and relatively cost-effective technologies. We limited our sample to managers with a moderate number of direct reports who were full-time and employed under a conventional employment arrangement, rather than part-time, temporary or contract.

The first phase of data collection was a survey questionnaire which was intended to give a broad view of marketing managers' perceptions of teleworking. It consisted of 22 questions as well as a section for open ended comments. It concluded with an opportunity to volunteer for phase two of this study – an in-depth interview. The questionnaire was mailed to marketing managers of companies with at least 25 staff across all industries from the two

largest cities in New Zealand – Auckland and Wellington. A pack including a covering letter, questionnaire and post paid return envelope was mailed out to 628 managers. A total of 123 completed questionnaires were received which was a response rate of 20 percent. Of the 123 respondents, 42 managers volunteered to be interviewed, an indication of the level of interest in the subject of teleworking.

For the second phase of data gathering, eight managers were selected for in-depth interviews. They were selected purposively based on a number of factors including having at least three full-time, permanent direct reports, as coming from a mix of industry sectors, a mix of ages and gender, whether teleworking was feasible for their direct reports, and a mix of those who had adopted teleworking and those who had not. The interviews were semi-structured and were conducted by the researcher face-to-face and audio recorded for subsequent verbatim transcription.

There were a number of limitations concerning the sample that should be noted. The sample targeted larger organisations despite the fact that New Zealand has a large proportion of small and medium enterprises. The volunteer nature of the interview sample also meant that it was likely that those managers with stronger views, either for or against, would be more likely to provide their details and participate further in this study.

Survey Findings

The questionnaire respondents were 64 percent male and 36 percent female. The tables below show other relevant sample information. The data on the age outlined in table one show the relative youth of marketing managers. In addition, the bulk of respondents were from organisations with more than 50 employees and had marketing departments of between one and nine employees as shown in tables two and three

Table 1: Age of the Marketing Managers

Under 25	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
2%	7%	41%	28%	22%	0

Table 2: Number of Employees

Numbers of:	1-9	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50+
Employees in organisation	0	0	4%	4%	7%	85%
Employees in marketing unit	76%	17%	1%	2%	1%	1%

Table 3: Number of full time direct reports

0	1-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15+
11%	23%	33%	20%	7%	4%	3%

Table four (below) reports the answers to a series of yes/no questions. Of those with direct reports, the majority stated that it was possible for them to telework, however, managers were evenly split between those who reported that they currently had some form of teleworking arrangement in place and those who reported that they did not. A larger number (62 percent) stated that they had considered allowing their reports to telework. Overall, the respondents saw the advantages as outweighing the advantages.

Table 3: Sample of survey questions

	Yes	No
Is it possible for your reports to telework?	68%	32%
Do they telework now?	48%	52%
Have you considered allowing teleworking?	62%	38%
Overall, do the disadvantages outweigh the advantages?	38%	62%

Respondents were asked a series of questions and asked to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with each of them. These are shown in table five (below) followed by a brief commentary.

Table 5: Sample of survey questions

Teleworking will:	Strongly Agree	Slightly Agree	Not Sure	Slightly Disagree	Strongly Disagree
increase company costs overall	2%	18%	33%	35%	15%
improve employee satisfaction	36%	39%	15%	7%	3%
improve preferred employer status	27%	49%	15%	7%	2%
improve environmental awareness and corporate social responsibility	8%	43%	24%	19%	6%
create physical isolation that will have a negative impact on performance	15%	46%	13%	18%	9%
create physical isolation that will have a negative impact on loyalty and retention	5%	30%	21%	29%	15%
affect the performance of the team negatively	8%	29%	14%	33%	15%
create difficulty in performance managing teleworkers	10%	41%	6%	33%	10%
make workers more distracted from their core work tasks, being at home	9%	41%	21%	20%	9%
result in workers working just has hard even though they are out of sight of management and co-workers	21%	33%	30%	12%	3%
allow the possibility of technological malfunctions that will have a negative impact on productivity overall	20%	48%	15%	13%	5%

From the relative agreement or disagreement with the statements, we can see that 50 percent disagree that it would lead to increased costs for the company with a large proportion unsure whether this would be the case. A solid majority of respondents agreed that teleworking can improve employee satisfaction and that a teleworking arrangement could improve the company's preferred employer status. As for whether supporting teleworking would mean that the company would be seen as more environmentally conscious and socially responsible, respondents were divided although a slight majority agreed with only 25 percent disagreeing.

A key question in the management of teleworking is whether a teleworker's physical isolation from the company and their co-workers will have a negative impact on the individual's performance. A majority agreed that the physical isolation of teleworking could result in reduced performance. With regard to the impact on loyalty and retention, opinion was divided. Opinion was also divided with regard to negative impact on the work team although 48 percent disagreed with the statement regarding the negative effect.

The literature suggested that a potential concern with teleworking is that it might be more difficult to manage the performance of teleworkers. Again, respondents were divided with a slight majority suggesting that it could be more difficult to manage teleworkers. As to whether teleworkers be more easily distracted from their core work tasks while working at home, the pattern of responses to this question was very similar to the earlier question relating to negative impact on worker's performance, with 50 percent agreeing, 29 percent disagreeing and 21 percent unsure.

Previously, a majority of respondents indicated that teleworkers might be less productive and might be more prone to distraction. When asked whether, despite being out of sight of management and co-workers, teleworkers would work just as hard, a majority of respondents agreed that they would work just as hard. A larger majority agreed that technological malfunctions at the teleworker's home will have a negative impact on their productivity overall.

Interview Findings

One-third of the respondents, 42 people, volunteered to participate in the second phase of this study which consisted of an in-depth interview. Eight in-depth interviews were conducted with five male and three female managers. Five had some sort of informal ad hoc teleworking system in place and three reported no teleworking occurring. The interview transcripts were analysed and comments relating to the managers' perceptions of aspects of teleworking were highlighted.

When asked to identify the main benefits of teleworking respondents most commonly identified the ability to focus on a project or task without distractions and interruptions. Other benefits identified, by more than two respondents, were attracting and retaining staff in a tight labour market and achieving better work life balance. When asked about the main disadvantages, all respondents cited technological unreliability and access issues affecting productivity. Other disadvantages offered by three or more respondents were home distractions, lack of impromptu communication and face to face contact, lack of service, and issues with building team relationships.

Respondents were asked about the factors that might limit the actual use of teleworking. All respondents stated that it would only work for certain personality types. Six out of eight suggested that it would work occasionally but not routinely due to the impact on individual and team performance. Other limitations cited by multiple respondents were that it would only work well when there was a suitable work environment at home, clear goals and outputs, a special project, regular contact, and appropriate technology. When asked why teleworking is not more common, two or more respondents cited accessibility of office systems, the need for a change of managerial mindset and increased trust, and the need for social contact. A typical comment was that: *"...there are certain roles which will work and certain roles*

which won't work... it's not for everybody and it can't be for everybody." As the interviews progressed, the reservations became more apparent, although most continued to indicate throughout the interview that they supported the concept of teleworking. What emerged were many statements that demonstrated concern about various facets of teleworking. For example, when discussing whether performance management would be any more difficult, one interviewee replied:

> *I think possibly it could be – that you're not seeing them day to day. When you're managing somebody... are they there, are they available, are they doing what people have asked them? You know what people have asked them because they're right there, they're in front of you, you're getting that feedback all the time.*

When asking whether teleworkers would be able to be as responsive as someone working in the office, another interviewee stated:

> *No, probably not in all instances... are they refreshing their email every two or three minutes to check that they've got a new email coming in? And in theory they should be answering their phone and have their mobile on and everything else like that.*

Many interviewees were concerned with the issue of home-based distractions: *"...being at home, having the distractions, having the temptations, I'd say people probably wouldn't work quite as hard as they would do at work".*

Discussion

This section discusses a number of key themes emerging from this study. The starting point is the finding that while managers indicated support for the concept of teleworking, they identified significant areas of concern that limited their actual usage of it. The balance of the discussion explores some of the reasons why there may be a gap between this overall favourable attitude and managerial practice.

Managers in our study were largely supportive of the concept of teleworking. Sixty-two percent of questionnaire respondents stated that they believed there were mainly benefits to be gained for organisations implementing such an arrangement with benefits identified such as improved employee satisfaction and preferred employer status. However, only around half of those for whom teleworking was feasible for their staff actually had some form of an arrangement in place. Despite supporting the concept of teleworking, most had concerns about how it might actually work in practice. The most common concerns were the risk that technological problems, physical and social isolation, and home-based distractions would result in loss of productivity. These factors are often cited in the literature as potential disadvantages of teleworking (Perez et al., 2002a; Wicks, 2002; Ward & Shabha, 2001; Ahmadi et al., 2000; Mann et al., 2000). This indicates that there are similarities between New Zealand managers' and their European and North American counterparts' attitudes towards teleworking.

The interviews with managers added richness to this finding. Six out of the eight interviewees stated that they were in favour of teleworking and indicated a range of benefits. Yet, while all had direct reports for whom teleworking was feasible, only informal arrangements were in place. The interviewees went on to identify significant disadvantages and many of the

benefits had conditions or qualifiers attached. A common theme was that teleworking was only suitable some of the time and therefore, several managers reported ad-hoc arrangements with staff. 13 out of the 39 respondents who added comments to the questionnaire stated that they used teleworking on a 'when required' basis. The managers' negative attitudes towards many aspects of teleworking and overall lack of utilisation corroborates Grantham and Paul (1995) and Lupton and Haynes' (2000) proposal that managers' negative attitudes are the single largest barrier to teleworking.

If most managers were in favour of teleworking overall, but identified more disadvantages than benefits, why might this be? One explanation is social desirability bias. Respondents may have wanted to portray themselves as modern, progressive, open-minded and flexible in their management style, and thus open to alternative ways of working, masking their antipathy towards the topic.

A major preoccupation on the part of managers (in the questionnaire and interviews) was the reliability and usability of information and communication technologies. For example:

> *I strongly believe that the success and effectiveness of teleworking is largely dependent on having competent technology (often difficult to get!)". "It would be more prevalent but for the cost – and unreliability – of the technology.*

Some writers have confidently asserted that since the 1990s teleworking has become a practical opportunity for many employees (Kowalski & Swanson, 2005). Nevertheless, some researchers of the day decried the lack of high bandwidth and Intranet accessibility, and proposed that this was a large reason for the prevalence of teleworking being lower than expected (Pliskin, 1997). A decade on, the interviewees observed similar hindrances, despite the fact that New Zealand has one of the world's highest levels of broadband internet and cellular telephone penetration (OECD, 2008). This raises the question of whether these hindrances are real or whether they merely provide managers with an acceptable reason to restrict the use of teleworking.

Another significant theme from this study is the importance of trust. While managers did not speak directly of lack of trust, it emerged as a theme in the interviews and can be seen to underpin questionnaire respondent's beliefs that productivity would be less for teleworkers. This supports Lupton and Haynes's (2000) contention that trust is a major factor in the reason teleworking has not become widespread – in fact, they go as far as to state that managerial trust is the largest obstacle. Cascio (2000) states that trust is so important that even if every other factor is ideal, without it, it is impossible for teleworking to be a success. Managerial attitudes to teleworking are linked to company culture. According to Kowalski and Swanson (2005), if the organisation's culture is not one established on trust, then the managerial trust required for teleworking implementation is unlikely.

This study supports previous research which indicates that key factors in the lack of teleworking adoption are managers' perceptions concerning the need for and enjoyment of social interaction and the prevalence of distractions in the home. The questionnaire asked whether or not a teleworker's physical isolation from the company and their co-workers would have a negative impact on the individual's performance. Although the term 'social interaction' was not used in the question, it is the social interaction aspects of employment that physical isolation would have the greatest impact on, as work tasks and functional communication are still able to be conducted from home. 61 percent believed that the

teleworker's performance would be negatively affected due to being physically absent from their workplace and colleagues. The pattern of responses indicated that managers were also concerned about distractions in the home. However, some saw fewer distractions at home. Cascio (2000) discusses a study that found teleworkers to be 40 percent more productive while working away from the office, mainly because they have fewer distractions. Thus, whether teleworkers are more or less productive may depend on the particular circumstances and distractions of their home environment in contrast to the distractions to be found in their workplace.

There is much in the teleworking literature regarding environmental benefits but managers in this study did not regard them as a key factor in decision making. This supports the Siha and Monroe (2006) contention that potential environmental benefits have played a relatively small part to date in motivating organisations to adopt teleworking. They draw attention to the growing number of United States government initiatives being put into place to incentivise teleworking adoption and suggest that governments in other nations will follow suit. This level of government involvement will have the effect of creating more organisational and public awareness.

Conclusions

This research began with something of a mystery. That is, there has been a much lower uptake of teleworking than was predicted decades ago. The fact that the mystery remains is due to the lack of scholarly studies on the subject. As managers are the ones who make teleworking possible, managers were the subject of this investigation. Although they may state that they are supportive of teleworking, busy managers are unlikely to make the necessary efforts to implement such an arrangement for their staff when, in reality, they have mixed feelings about the concept. This is especially so as many of their concerns involve productivity, something of immediate importance to most managers.

Most managers in this study stated that they were in favour of teleworking. Three-quarters of questionnaire respondents and interviewees believed that employee satisfaction and preferred employer status is improved. However, only around half of those for whom teleworking was feasible for their staff actually had some form of an arrangement in place. Although the majority of the interviewees stated that they were supportive of teleworking, they identified many more disadvantages than benefits. Many of the benefits that were noted, had conditions or qualifiers attached.

From a review of the literature, one might surmise that managerial trust and control issues would be the two main factors affecting managers' attitudes. In this study, technological issues, lack of social interaction and the prevalence of home-based distractions were prevalent. However, trust can be seen to underpin performance concerns and the lack of supportive managerial attitudes and organisational culture are also factors. Overall, it is suggested that managers' mixed feelings regarding the concept may be a key reason why teleworking has not become widespread. These findings are not incongruent with the findings of other studies in the area, most of which have been conducted in Europe and North America. However, some limitations should be noted. Teleworking research is beset by issues of definition and interpretation, despite the best efforts of the research to clearly define the domain of interest. It is likely that respondents continued to utilise their own definition of teleworking, although this was less of an issue with the interviewees, where they could be

reminded of the definition throughout the discussion. The possibility of social desirability bias affecting managers' responses was noted earlier.

There are many research opportunities in the field of teleworking. Future research could consider one or more variable in the adoption and success of a teleworking arrangement. For example, does it depend on the individual employee – the level of their need for social interaction or their particular home environment in terms of its distractions? Or does it depend on their manager's perceptions of one or more of these factors? Do demographic variables such as age and gender affect adoption? Further research is needed into other work contexts.

With continued advances in telecommunications technology, it is likely that the managers' concerns regarding these issues may become less prevalent, which means that the optimistic predictions from the 1980s and 1990s may yet come true. Younger generations of managers may shift company cultures in ways that favour teleworking. Associated negative side effects, such as the lack of social interaction, will likely be overshadowed by growing public concern over environmental issues and related problems such as traffic congestion. In addition, government and legislative encouragement could play a significant role. In New Zealand the Employment Relations (Flexible Working Arrangements) Amendment Act 2007, requires employees to be responsive to employee needs, which teleworking is one possible response. Because of these and other forces, teleworking is likely to remain a significant area of interest for researchers and practitioners alike.

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