

TOP 10 MYTHS ABOUT MOBILE WORK

Open Work Services Group

White Paper

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Abstract

Common myths and misconceptions about mobile work abound. This paper aims to clear the confusion and provide organizations with the information needed to answer management concerns regarding mobile work. Learning how to work effectively from a distance has become a fundamental imperative for surviving and succeeding in today's connected economy.

Introduction

Mobile Work Defined

Mobile work, also called telework, nomadic work, remote work, or flexible work, is characterized by work done at an alternative worksite away from the employer's office.

Today, technology and distance collaboration tools allow knowledge workers wide latitude in choosing where and when to work. Teams of workers, often separated by distance, have replaced the traditional office as the primary means of production. Mobile work is fast becoming the way we work.

Industry analysts at IDC predict that the number of mobile workers worldwide will increase to one billion, or about one in four of the total global workforce.¹ IDC estimates that the number of U.S. mobile workers is 68% and will rise to 75% by 2011.

A number of factors are driving the growth of mobile work, including potential cost savings from a reduced office footprint, the need for access to global talent, threats of business disruption, concerns for eco-responsibility, employee work/life balance, and the financial hardship to employees caused by the high cost of commuting.

But mobile work has not reached its full potential. There are three major factors that impede its growth:

1. Lack of awareness of the potential of mobile work
2. Manager's worries about output and control
3. Employee concerns over visibility

Our goal is to help you better understand mobile work and dispel the myths surrounding mobile work. We've assembled the top myths surrounding mobile work and have provided research-based information to help your organization assess distributed work options.

¹ "Worldwide Mobile Worker Population 2007-2011 Forecast," IDC, January 15, 2008.

Sun's Open Work Program

Sun's 14-year, award-winning Open Work program is built on the concept that employees can work anywhere, anytime, using any device.

At the end of June 2008, nearly 20,000 employees (more than 56% of the workforce) were working away from the office at least one or two days a week.

Myth #1

If employees sign up for mobile work I'll never see them again. Managers and team members will lose direct contact with remote employees.

Reality: Although most employees report a desire to work from home, very few say they would like to do so more than one or two days per week. That means they would still work in the office a majority of the workweek and be available for mandatory meetings, face-to-face collaboration, and team interaction. Sun studies indicate that more than 75% of employees want to work from home one or two days a week. However, less than 10% are actually suited to do so three or more days per week.

Myth #2

Productivity will suffer if employees work remotely from home.

Reality: The most important factor in the productivity equation is determining suitability for remote work. If you select correctly and provide the right tools, productivity can actually increase. Results of Sun's internal quarterly survey showed that employees believe that the Open Work platform provides them with the tools and technologies to support their work environment and to help them feel more productive. More than 75% of employees think the Open Work program provides the flexibility and support they need to accomplish work objectives.

Data on commute time saved through flexible and home options indicate that Sun's employees typically give half of the time saved commuting to Sun, and take the other half for themselves and their families. In addition, a 2007 national survey found that more than three-quarters of managers surveyed (78%) reported that their telecommuting workers were more productive than or as productive as office-bound colleagues.²

² Futurestep Trends@Work, Korn/Ferry International, January 16, 2007. Survey polled 1,320 global executives in 71 countries.

About Our Survey

Sun's Work Profile Assessment Survey analyzes data across 6 different industry sectors, 15 companies, and 35,000 respondents. It represents companies with a total of over 120,000 employees. The survey measures the following factors:

- Work activity
- Location
- Interaction
- Preference

Myth #3

Teams can't be productive if they don't sit together.

Reality: Teams need to sit together sometimes in order to be productive, but it depends on the work task. In many cases, distant teams can be more productive than those that sit side-by-side. For example, a major global study found that far-flung virtual teams “were not only productive but also more innovative than face-to-face teams.”³

Sun recently acquired MySQL, a software engineering firm that has 70% of its engineers working from home in 30 different countries. Yet these remote teams are highly productive. A 2007 poll of global executives found that over 75% think teleworkers are equally productive as or more productive than their office-dwelling colleagues.⁴

Myth #4

Employees prefer traditional work arrangements.

Reality: Indeed, some employees still prefer commuting to the traditional office. However, survey data shows that, on average, 85% of employees would prefer nontraditional work arrangements.⁵ And our own surveys reveal that 60% are suitable for such work. Organizations that satisfy worker's workplace needs enjoy higher employee retention and worker satisfaction. Sun's Work Profile Assessment, a survey of over 35,000 employees across a variety of industries, found that home-assigned employees have a significantly lower turnover rate and higher performance ratings than other employees.⁶

Myth #5

Implementing a mobile work program will cost too much.

Reality: Companies with distributed work programs save money in several ways, especially through cost savings due to a reduced office footprint. Sun reports that flexible employees' initial and annual workspace expenses are about 30% lower than employees assigned to fixed offices. And, home-assigned employees' initial and annual workplace expenses are about 70% less than fixed-office employees.

3 “Enabling Knowledge Creation in Far-Flung Teams: Best Practices for IT Support and Knowledge Sharing,” Arvind Malhotra and Ann Majchrzak, *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 8, November 4, 2004. Study examined 54 teams in 26 different companies.

4 Futurestep Trends@Work, Korn/Ferry International, January 16, 2007.

5 “When Working at Home Doesn't Work: How Companies Comfort Telecommuters,” Sue Shellenbarger, *The Wall Street Journal*, August 24, 2006. According to a 2005-2006 survey of 1,015 adults by the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business, 14% of employees want to stay in the office.

6 Normative Data Preference Results for 35,000 employees representing 120,000 of employees from various industries who have completed Sun's Work Profile Assessment, 2007.

Myth #6

Only technically savvy employees can work remotely.

Reality: Although working remotely does require basic technical skills such as Internet access and use of mobile devices, acquiring these fundamental skills and adapting to mainstream technology advances is typically sufficient to facilitate access to colleagues, data, and work tools. For example, a study by WorldatWork indicated that U.S. teleworkers are nearly twice as likely to access the Internet via a wireless device than all U.S. Adults.⁷

Myth #7

Working remotely adversely affects career advancement. If employees aren't physically present, their job security and opportunities for career advancement will suffer.

Reality: There is a perception that mobile workers have reduced career opportunities, and this perception is often reported anecdotally in the popular press. If people are measured by results, career advancement should be the same for all workers — regardless of their remoteness. Although this aspect has not been measured as thoroughly as some others, teleworkers reported that teleworking affected their career positively in a 1997 national survey. Approximately 33% reported no impact on their career and only 3% reported a negative impact.⁸

Myth #8

Remote work won't work for my business.

Reality: All sizes and types of businesses have benefited from the flexibility of remote work. For example, among the “2008 Fortune Best Companies to Work For” list, 84% had a telework program. The list included companies from a broad range of industries such as construction, energy, finance, healthcare, hospitality, insurance, law, manufacturing, retail, and technology.

7 Telework Module of the 2006 American Interactive Consumer Survey, conducted by The Dieringer Research Group for WorldatWork.

8 1997 AT&T National Survey of Teleworker Attitudes and Work Styles, conducted by FIND/SVP and Joanne H. Pratt Associates, May 1997.

Myth #9**If managers allow mobile work, they will lose control.**

Reality: The role of the manager is not diluted in any way just because the team is dispersed. In fact, studies show that management is even more important to distributed teams.⁹ Managers need to be intentional in their management style and proactive as leaders. As such, they set the stage for remote collaboration and model successful behaviors.

Myth #10**Mobile work won't have any measurable impact on employee attraction and retention.**

Reality: Flexible work options are seen as an attractive work/life benefit. A major work trends study in 2007 revealed that more than 73% of telecommuters were satisfied with their employers, compared with 64% of office-bound workers. Fifty-three percent of remote workers said they weren't considering leaving their company within the next 12 months, while only 46% of office workers said leaving wasn't a consideration.¹⁰ Another worldwide survey conducted in 2006 found that 87% of respondents said that work/life balance is critical in their decisions to join or remain with an employer.¹¹ Sun's own experience supports this.

Sun's 2008 Annual All Employee Survey results show that our flexible and innovative work environment and our ability to attract and retain top talent are two of the top reasons 82% of employees said they would recommend Sun. Employees can achieve a better work/life balance because of the tools and technologies that enable them to perform in a globally distributed environment.

9 "Can Absence Make a Team Grow Stronger?," Ann Majchrzak, Arvind Malhotra, Jeffrey Stamps and Jessica Lipnack, *Harvard Business Review*, May 1, 2004; "Managing the Life Cycle of Virtual Teams," Stacie A. Furst, Martha Reeves, Benson Rosen, and Richard S. Blackburn, *Academy of Management Executive*, May 2004, Vol. 18, No. 2; "Distributed Group Work Practices," Eric Richert, presented at the New Ways of Working Network Symposium IV, February 3, 2008.

10 WorkTrends, Kenexa Research Institute, August, 2007. Survey based on responses by 10,000 U.S. workers. Telecommuters were defined as those who telework one or more days a week.

11 Association of Executive Search Consultants Survey, May 2006. Survey based on responses by 1,311 senior executives worldwide.



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