

HOME WORK

Why “home” and “work” may not be mutually exclusive in today’s changing workplace.

*By Stephanie Derammelaere
Photos by Duncan Garrett*



Alternative forms of employment—telecommuting, job sharing, flexible schedules, mobile offices and the like—are nothing inherently new. They’ve been around, in some form or another, for years. What has changed, however, are employers’ attitudes toward these options. But what may have started as a few unique cases (or as benefits from only very progressive companies) is now starting to make its way into a variety of business sectors, company sizes and job functions. While scientific and academic research has shown that offering alternative forms of working results in lower turnover, enhanced commitment and sense of ownership, the ability to recruit key talent and increased productivity, many companies are only now starting to “get it.”

Depending on their job function and industry, many of today’s workers enjoy more flexibility and options than comparable workers even less than a generation ago. But while some companies have developed specific policies pertaining to telecommuting, mobile offices, job sharing, flex time and compressed schedules (such as working four 10-hour days, and getting the fifth day off), other companies have looser guidelines.

A MATTER OF TRUST

“Autodesk, as an employer, is pretty progressive, open-minded and flexible,” explains Amy McKee, director of global talent acquisition for Autodesk in San Rafael. “For example, we don’t give personal time off or sick days. We assume, if you’re sick, stay home—we don’t want you to come in and infect anyone. And when you’re not sick, we trust you’ll be here to get your job done. We understand everyone has to go to the doctor sometimes, or take care of personal things, and as long as you’re getting your work done...[that’s what’s important]. I think it’s a great environment. It really empowers the employees; they feel trusted and valued.”

In some cases, company guidelines dictate an inherent lack of oversight. For example, Best Buy’s Minneapolis headquarters made news about a year ago when it implemented “ROWE,” a “results-only work environment,” that claims to judge performance on output instead of hours. The company has since moved increasingly in that direction. A study of 658 Best Buy employees looked at changes over a six-month period, comparing employees who participated in ROWE with those who worked in a more traditional environment. The results showed ROWE employees reporting more job satisfaction and viewing the corporate culture as family-friendly. Fewer ROWE workers came to work when sick, and more saw their doctors, exercised more frequently, had more energy and slept better. What’s more, fewer ROWE employees thought about quitting.

Some believe the impetus for more companies to offer these types of workforce alternatives came in the late 1990s, during the sudden boom of high-tech companies all vying for specific skill sets.

“During the dot com boom, when I was doing executive searches, companies were starting to implement more of these programs, because it was so difficult to find talent,” explains McKee. “There were so many jobs and not enough talent, so companies were coming up with creative solutions to attract people, and offering more flexibility was one of them. It seems like, when the market conditions get tighter, companies try to find



Workplace efficiency consultant Jamie McNeil works with some North Bay firms where more than half the staff works at home fulltime.

more creative ways to attract talent, and one way to do that is by offering creative benefits.”

FINDING—AND KEEPING—TALENT

Today, alternative work forms remain a recruiting and retention tool for many employers—especially when specific skill sets are hard to find locally.

“You might have a really difficult-to-fill position, and the only talent you can find is, for example, in Utah somewhere,” says McKee. “That person doesn’t want to relocate, but they’re a great person and they’re willing to travel to the office for meetings every other week. Well then, hey, let that person work at home and do their job, because that’s the only place you can find that particular talent....It costs the company more, because you’re paying for flights and hotel accommodations, but it’s worth it to get that talent.”

Even for the local workforce, coming into the office every day is becoming increasingly difficult, what with traffic congestion and high real estate prices that often force employees to live farther away (and therefore suffer longer commutes). This can prompt a situation where an employee works from home on Fridays, for example, or employs a 4/10 work schedule.

“I think it really started to occur right around the late 1990s, when people started to understand there are jobs you can do equally well—if not better—when you don’t have to spend as much time behind the wheel of a car,” says Reny Buduan, senior manager of human resources consulting for Fair Isaac Corpo-

ration in San Rafael. “You can capture the efficiency or productivity of an individual more fully if they’re able to work remotely versus having to commute to a location that, in the Bay Area, can take up to two to four hours to get to, depending on where you’re coming from. I think companies quickly realized—especially when things started to get really congested—that having an employee work remotely was a much more beneficial business model versus them coming in daily but having to leave at specific hours.”

Another reason alternative work forms have gained popularity can be credited to the younger generation entering the workforce.

“[Trends are changing] to reflect the new generation that’s coming into the workforce and what they value,” says Gina Berg, director of employee engagement with Fireman’s Fund in Novato. “They value their life outside of work and

prioritize having the time to do all of the things they like to do. Not to say the baby boomers don’t like that, too—but it’s something that [Generation Y] is demanding.”

As more employers begin to understand the needs and desires of the current workforce, the more creative work environments are becoming. And it’s gone past recruiting key personnel to become an important element in retaining them in today’s competitive environment. “If companies aren’t adapting and offering these sorts of benefits, they’re not going to be as competitive or as able to attract a broader talent segment,” agrees McKee.

Obviously, employees aren’t complaining about the increased alternatives available to them. Because while employees are occasionally forced into a mobile office situation (when a firm shuts down a physical presence at a certain location but would still like to have a representative in the area, for example), most of these alternatives are still initiated by the employees.

“I think you’re going to see that a lot across the country,” says Berg. “Companies are starting to consolidate their offices more and more. Fireman’s Fund is doing the same thing with some of the smaller offices—putting people in remote worker situations, where they’re working

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out of their house because there’s no office. Some companies are renting hotel space where employees can go if there’s a meeting they need to attend while otherwise working remotely from home. That’s the trend right now.”

While some of these alternatives have been proactively initiated by employers for the purpose of lowering overhead, they’re still seen as primarily a recruitment and retention tool, with the ultimate goal of having happier, more loyal employees. “It gives employees time to tend to their personal life—balancing work and life,” explains Berg. “The idea is, if you’re giving them the time to do that, they’re more focused on their work when they’re here, so they can increase productivity.”

Progressing the notion of alternative work environments has historically been the mark of



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high-tech firms, such as employers in the software and telecommunications industries. However, the trend is now reaching many more business sectors and job functions.

“Tech was on the forefront of [offering alternative work environments],” agrees Berg. “I’d also say financial services are definitely getting it—or, at least, they’re starting to understand the importance of it. In consulting, you see more of the remote worker or telecommuting arrangement. From what I’ve read, manufacturing isn’t able to offer these types of alternatives presently. But that might just be because of the type of work they do—you need someone there at a certain time and the work needs to get done in a certain way.”

STAYING MOTIVATED

Just as these workplace alternatives may not be for every type of company or industry, they’re also not for every type of employee. “[Compressed or flexible schedules] are usually for those positions that aren’t ‘customer-facing,’ meaning they’re not on the phone in a call center, and they don’t need to be there for a certain time during the day,” says Berg. “Or if they’re on the sales team and have to be out on the road—anything where they have to be available all the time to their customer—more often than not, that usually doesn’t work. Positions that are more project-based or that do a lot of internal work are a little more conducive to it.”

And even when a job function can be feasibly performed through a telecommuting or remote office position, not everyone will work in this type of situation. Employers definitely look for specific qualities in an individual before granting such requests.

“For someone to work remotely, they have to have a lot of self-initiative, they have to have a lot of drive,” says Buduan. “They have to be able to self-manage, for the most part, and have the type of character that drives them to succeed. They can’t be reliant on constant feedback or input, because it’s just not there when you’re remote.”

Not only does it take a certain kind of personality to make such an arrangement work, it also takes a certain kind of manager to oversee the situation—whether that manager is located in the firm’s physical office or is also remote.

“You need a manager who understands the type of person you have



OUT OF THE OFFICE *and loving it!*



Who’s working at home these days? Everyone from lawyers like Betty Neves (tp) to computer jockeys like Bill Freese. Teacher Annette Lebell (with son Ryan on her lap) does consulting from her Rohnert Park home, as does publicist Lenora Gay. Eita Graves (left) runs a mail order business from her garage in San Rafael.

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