

Was Dorothy Right: Is There No Place Like Home?

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ABSTRACT

Many companies within the pharmaceutical industry have adopted the practice of allowing their SAS programming staff to work from home either part-time or full-time. To many programmers this trend offers several benefits including reduced travel time, less disruption in family life, improved work-life balance and more flexible hours. For management and the company as a whole the benefits include cost savings, increased productivity, improved employee motivation, employee retention and improved employee satisfaction. But there are challenges to working from home for both the employee and the company including loss of focus, poor working environment as well as loss of connection and/or collaboration with other team members. This paper will explore the pros and cons of working from home from the perspective of someone who works from home full-time and successfully manages employees who work both as telecommuters and participate in more traditional working situations.

INTRODUCTION

As our world has become more virtual, more and more people are looking for alternatives to the traditional work environment where you get up, get ready, jump in the car and fight the traffic to spend the day in the office and then get back in the car and drive home. Who wouldn't want to exchange that for getting up, grabbing your morning coffee, walking 5 seconds down the hall and working the day in your pajamas? As I write this I have to chuckle because I am sitting in my office, in my pajamas, drinking my morning coffee, answering emails and feeling ready for the day.

The advantages to this type of work environment seem so clear for both the employees as well as the companies they work for. But is life working from home everything it seems to be on the surface? What are some of the benefits and what are some of challenges? How do you manage remote people and help keep them connected to their peers as well as what is happening within the company? We will examine more closely the benefits, the challenges and examine whether working from home is potentially the right choice for you.

BENEFITS

When you think about working from home I am betting you can create a list of benefits fairly quickly. There are benefits for the employee, the manager and the company.

FOR THE EMPLOYEE

When I tell people I work from my home they are usually fairly jealous. They envision that I am watching television and eating bon-bons all day and don't I wish that were true. In the real world of working from home the benefits are much more substantial.

- **Reduced Travel Time** – Driving into the office every day not only takes time, it can also be very stressful and costs money and who doesn't love to save a little money. Eliminating this daily commute gives the employee back time and helps start their day earlier and with less stress. But more importantly this one saves you money by spending less on gas, getting better insurance rates and no food on the go.
- **Flexible Work Hours** – Working from home often allows for varied work schedules. Say you need to run to the bank at lunch or you have a repairman coming to fix the cable; you are home to let him in. What if one of your children is sick, you can be home with them but still stay connected to the office. With this flexibility we need to remember not to take advantage and keep our kids home full time or take 2 hours lunches each day.
- **Improved Work-Life Balance** – Since you don't have commuting time every day, you have more time to spend with those most important to you; your family and friends. When we have more time for the things we love to do we have less stress and are more productive, we are happier in general and that inevitably shows itself in our work.
- **Less Interruptions** – We've all had one of those days when working in the office where you get absolutely nothing done because people keep dropping in to talk to you. They want to see how your weekend was, when you will have those tables ready, what are you doing for lunch, the list goes on and on. When you work from home most of this interaction is eliminated and you have the time to focus on getting your work done.
- **Reduced Stress** – There isn't someone looking over your shoulder, checking to see that you are doing what you know needs to get done. There's no office politics to get caught up in and all the drama comes with that. You can focus on doing your job and doing it right.
- **Increased Productivity** – All of these benefits lead to better productivity. Less time is wasted and more work is completed.

FOR THE MANAGER

I have a unique perspective being that I not only work as a manager from my home, I also manage a group of programmers who work from their homes. As you will see, the benefits for a manager of remote employees overlap greatly with the benefits for the individual.

- **Reduced Travel Time** –When employees spend less time in the car they are able to log on on time and able to be focused once their day begins. There is no hurrying out the door to beat the afternoon rush. More of their time is dedicated to their jobs and focusing on the end product.
- **Flexible Work Hours** – Employees take less time off for sickness or to take care of non-work responsibilities. Since they are home they can care for sick family members or answer the door for that package that needs a signature but still answer emails and help program that last minute request.
- **Improved Work-Life Balance** – Ever heard the old adage “happy wife, happy life”? Well think of it instead as, “happy employee, happy boss”. Ok it’s not exactly the same but you get the picture. When your employees are happy and content then they are doing a better job and producing more quality results.
- **Less Interruptions** – Employees cut out that water cooler time and are able to be much more productive as a result. They can focus and have time to concentrate on quality.
- **Reduced Stress** – Without the need for the office politics game and all that comes with it your employees are more relaxed and able to be innovative.
- **Increased Productivity** – All of these benefits lead to better productivity. Less time is wasted and more work is completed.

FOR THE COMPANY

We can’t forget that the company benefits greatly from this work-from-home arrangement and isn’t that what really makes it feasible.

- **Employee Retention** – When our employees are satisfied in their work life and enjoy their work situation they are less likely to wander from company to company. It is much more cost effective to retain great talent rather than to continually train new people.
- **Increased Job Satisfaction** – We all want to love our jobs and the idea of starting over is often overwhelming. But when you love your job your whole outlook is brighter. You come to the table eager to learn and share. You are open to new ideas and willing to share your knowledge and experience. This is a huge benefit that the company is able to reap.
- **Greater Resource Pool** – What do you do when you are struggling to find a great lead programmer but there are no qualified candidates geographically located near your office location? You look to the work from home employee of course. The perfect candidate may not be in a location where they can get into the office but they have all the right skills and experience to complete your team. Remote employees really expand the resource pool and allow companies to hire the most qualified candidates regardless of where they are geographically located.
- **Increased Profits** – More productivity = More profits. Quality results = More profits. Also there is less cost for things like office space, electricity, toilet paper and coffee. What company doesn’t want to make more money?
- **Reduced Office Space Need** – One of the biggest costs a company expend is for physical office space where there people come each day to do their work and interact with each other. As we move to having more and more people work from home we need less of this actual office space. This reduces costs for leases, electricity, maintenance, cleaning, coffee, cups, cream etc. Some of these cost savings seem silly but they really add up and help the bottom line.
- **Increased Productivity** – All of these benefits lead to better productivity. Less time is wasted and more work is completed.

CHALLENGES

How could there be any real challenges when you work from home? I know it’s hard to fathom but it is true.

FOR THE EMPLOYEE

You’re sitting in your living room at the end of a long day and are so glad the day is over when your office phone rings. Everyone on the team knows you work from home and that you always answer the phone, so of course you pick it up and face the emergency that is on the other end of the line. If you had been in the office you would have already been in your car and whatever the emergency is it would have waited until tomorrow or someone else would have stepped in to help. Where is the line and who should recognize its existence?

- **Work-Life Balance** – When does the work day end? Oftentimes people who work from home find it hard to walk away at the end of the day. Where is the line between home and the office when your office is in your home? There's always one more table or one more question to answer. It's so easy for co-workers to expect that since you're at home anyway you can just jump in at the last minute to help out. It takes great self-discipline to set realistic expectations which you share with your team and stick to them. You have to be your own advocate and close the office door at the end of the day and refuse to answer the phone. Whatever the issue or problem is it will be there in the morning and you can tackle it then.
- **Home-Office Boundaries** – When your office is located just down the hall or in the basement our families tend to forget that it is a place where we work and that when the door is closed it means stay out. Just like setting expectations with your boss and your co-workers you need to set realistic expectations with your family. Remind your spouse that just because you're home all day does not mean you were cleaning the house and making dinner. The kids need to have ground rules for when it's ok to come ask you a question and when they need to stay away.
- **Connectivity** – Have you ever worked over the VPN? It doesn't always respond optimally. You're right in the middle of your final updates to the code you have been working on all day when the connection to the VPN fails. Or heaven forbid your system crashes and you need an IT person to actually take a look. You have to mail your laptop into the office and get a replacement. You are offline for at least a day.
- **Technology** – We are part of an ever evolving technological work and gone are the days of simple phone calls and email chains. When you work from home you need to embrace these new technological advancements. Have you ever video conferenced before? What ways can you share your desktop with someone half way around the world? IM is a great tool for staying connected and most packages include a way to share desktops. Even with all the technology don't forget that sometimes picking up the phone and having that conversation still works the best.
- **Career Development/Advancement** – It is less likely that you will be promoted when working from home because you are less visible to the people in power positions. You are easily overlooked when people don't see you every day. It's human nature to only see the things that are in your direct line of vision. As a work from home employee you will need to make sure that your voice is heard and your contributions are recognized.
- **Isolation** – You just got the latest team lunch invitation. Everyone is going to your favorite place and they are going to get away from the office for an hour or so and spend time laughing and catching up. Of course since they are 200 miles away you don't get to go. How do you still feel like you're a part of a team, when you may have never actually met any of them? It is important to pick up the phone and talk to fellow team members rather than relying too heavily on email or IM. It may seem unimportant to actually talk to each other but it is an easy way to stay connected, you become a real person and not just an email address.
- **Collaboration** – You are struggling to get your code to work, wouldn't it be great if you could just stick your head over the wall and ask your co-worker to take a quick look? This kind of collaboration is much harder when you are working from home. Instead you send an email to a co-worker and ask them to look at the program; they look and email you back with their findings. If that doesn't work there are more emails. Maybe you even pick up the phone and call someone or you set up a web meeting so you can share your desktop but the effort is so much greater. There really is something to be said for the camaraderie that comes from working in the same space as other member of your team.
- **Perception** – Are you doing the dishes, changing the laundry or just catching up on the latest episode of "Day of Our Lives"? Anyone who works from home will tell you that there is not enough time in the day to do these things but they often feel like they have to prove that they are not. This perception is more often than not self-inflicted but it real none the less.

FOR THE MANAGER

When people work from home who monitors them, who checks in on them and who makes sure they get their jobs done? Of course that all falls to the manager. It would be great if we required our work from home employees to have nanny cams so we could see them whenever we needed but as an at home employee I would hate that.

- **Onboarding** – When we have new employees start there is much to be done and when that person is remote we need to think a little differently. Do they have equipment and know how to log into the system? How are you going to train them? Will they need to visit the office for some face time and system checks? How will they get basic office supplies? Be sure to reach out to your new person early in the day so they know you haven't forgotten they've joined your team. It is daunting to start a new job but when you're on your own the first day it can be nerve raking. As managers we want to make people feel comfortable as quickly as possible.

- **Monitoring the Progress of Your Team** – When I was managing a team who were all located in the office I could walk around and see what people were doing. I could tell if people were running into problems and needed help or if they were on task. I could also see if they were checking Facebook or calling their spouse 10 times a day. As a manager of a remote team it is nearly impossible for me to know what people are doing or gauge if they need additional help. I have to think outside the box to keep in touch. I have monthly one-on-one meetings with each of my team members as well as monthly team meeting where we all get together to brainstorm and information share. It is important to remind your team frequently that they should reach out to you if they run into any problems. When you're in the office they can walk by and see if you're free but when you're remote that is a bit harder. If you have IM make sure that the status is accurate so people know when you are free. If you don't have IM encourage your people to call and leave a message if need be, you will call them back and be sure to actually call them back.
- **Keeping the Team Motivated** – How do you team build when you have a team of individuals who you have never met face-to-face? What motivates them? It is likely that you will need them to go the extra mile from time to time but how you build their trust? It's hard enough to keep a team motivated even if you see them face to face each day. Remote workers need motivation as well. Pick up the phone and talk to them individually, tell them what a great job they are doing and how important they are to you, the team and the company. We forget that words of encouragement go a long way. People want to know they are doing a good job and it helps to hear it from people you think matter.
- **Discipline** – When you have an employee who is not meeting expectations it is much harder when they are not located in an office where extra help is readily available. Phone conversations can be misunderstood and expectations misinterpreted. It is really important to follow up such conversations with emails in an effort to clarify the situation. Ultimately you have to be extra diligent when working with employees who are struggling.
- **Ensuring Work is Being Completed** – When you send an email and your work from home employee doesn't respond for 2 hours your first instinct is that they must not be working. What are they doing? Are they even logged on? Are they just ignoring you? How do you know that your people are fulfilling the expectation that you and the company have outlined for them. There could be a simple reason for their lack of communication, like they are busy putting together that presentation you asked them to do. But our knee jerk reaction is to think the worst first. It is important not to jump to conclusions but rather stress the importance of timely communication and meeting timelines as a way to ensure work is being done as expected.

FOR THE COMPANY

Determining the challenges for the company is not as clear-cut as those for the employee or the manager but they still exist.

- **Not a Good Fit for Everyone Who Thinks It Will Be** – The road to hell is paved with good intentions. Even when everything looks perfect on paper sometimes it just doesn't work out as planned. What do you do when you have a work from home employee who isn't meeting expectations? Can you easily transition them into an office role or are they geographically located somewhere that this isn't possible? Then what? You may end up needing to let them go and having to replace them. This costs time, money and often times hurts the teams as they try to pick up the slack.
- **Trust** – When employees are in the office we can monitor the work they are doing more clearly but when working with remote employees we have to trust that they are doing what is expected of them. We need to trust that they are not taking a 2 hour lunch or caring for their young children rather than working. In general, work-from-home employees do not take advantage of the situation but the company needs to ensure that expectations are clearly defined.
- **Jealousy** – Just because your company allows for work from home situations doesn't mean that everyone should be allowed to work from home. That new intern who's fresh out of college and needs more hand holding or the employee who has not been meeting expectations are prime examples. But it is likely that these people would love to work from home as well. Why can't I work from home when others are? Setting clear expectations and guidelines around who can work from home will help but there will always be someone who thinks they deserve special consideration.

WAS DOROTHY RIGHT?

In Oz Dorothy tells the world that there is no place like home and of course she wasn't referring to working from home but if she was would she have been right? That really depends on you and the company you work for. As with any choice in life there are pros and cons that need to be carefully evaluated. Are you a people person, do you prefer working independently, can you be your own best advocate? You will need a dedicated work space, not the kitchen table but an office with a door that can be closed. You also need a reliable internet connection and typically a land line to use as a primary office phone line. A strong routine is also beneficial. When you get up, get the kids out the door, take your morning shower, grab a cup of coffee and get dressed. We all think working in our pajamas sounds heavenly but in reality when you dress for bed and lounging you're really less productive. You don't need to don a three piece suit or heels but leave the sweat pants for after work relaxation or the gym. The bottom line is that you need to treat it like a job and not an extension of your home life. The more separation you can provide the happier and more successful you will be.

Managing the work from home employee is often challenging but can be extremely rewarding as well. We try to hire programmers who are able to stay on task, get the job done, strive for perfection and work best when faced with adversity. Remember that this type of programmer rarely asks for help and when working from home this is an even bigger problem. Managers need to over communicate with their teams and make sure they understand that you are there to support them and make them successful. Set clear expectations and follow-up repeatedly if need be. Be their ally and their advocate. Make sure everyone knows how valuable they are to the team and ensure their efforts are recognized. Think of ways to keep the team connected to you and each other. Maybe exchange pictures so everyone knows what people look like, having a face for a voice on the other end of the line makes that person more real.

Companies need to recognize the work from home employee exactly the same as they recognize the employee in the office. Make sure they are connected and part of the team. We work in teams because we learn from each other and can share experiences and knowledge. Working from home is not meant to be working in a vacuum or on a deserted island but rather an alternative to a more traditional work situation.

When we look at all the benefits and challenges for all parties involved we see that in order to be successful we need to have a solid plan. When the plan comes together working from home is a win-win for the employee, the manager and the company.

So was Dorothy right? In my case she absolutely was. I can no longer imagine going into an office every day but there are times I really miss the interactions and the people but then I run an errand at rush hour and remember why I love working from home.

THE STATISTICS

We are numbers people and seeing the numbers always drives home the point so here they are.

According to an article I found on Flexjobs.com:

- Since 2005 the number of work from home employees has increased more than 60% with more than 2 million people working at least part-time from their homes.
- 75% of all workers would work from home at least part-time if the option was available.
- Working from home saves the employee on average between \$2,000 and \$7,000 a year on things like transportation and clothing.
- The cost savings for companies is even higher, they save about \$11,000 a year per employee when people work at least half time from home.

On CareerMind.com they surveyed 2,000 telecommutes and found:

- 75% said their work was more timely when telecommuting
- 83% said their ability to communicate with co-workers was the same or better than in the office
- 67% claimed that the overall quality of their work improved
- 91% said telecommuting was important to their overall job satisfaction

When I looked at statistics from naiop.com I found the following numbers:

- 50 million US employees work from home but only about 2.9 million consider home to be their primary workplace.
- By 2016 there will be about 4.9 million telecommuters, a 69% increase
- About 76% of work-from-home personnel are from the private sector.
- The average telecommuter is 49, college educated, salaried in a professional role, earning about \$58,000 a year for a company with more than 100 employees.

CONCLUSION

Working from home is not only a job choice, it is a lifestyle choice. It is a privilege that comes with great responsibility. If you are prepared for the challenges and have a solid plan for how to face them you can be very successful but remember that working from home is not for every individual or every company.

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