TREASURES AND TRAVAILS OF TELECOMMUTING

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to address a knowledge gap in the theoretical and conceptual underpinning of both an individual and organizational decision to telecommute. Accordingly, the main aim of the paper is to provide a literature overview, leading to propositions for further thought about this issue. Based on a typology involving "individual and organizational capacity for telecommuting", on one hand, and "work amenability for telecommuting" on the other hand, four different scenarios were identified. In the case of individual factors contributing to telecommuting, personality profile, gender and intrinsic motivation were identified as key, based on the literature. Biases hindering an individual's desire for telecommuting were also discussed, with suggestions for overcoming such biases. Positive and negative repercussions of telecommuting with industry implications were also addressed.

Key Words: Telecommuting, Individual and Organizational Factors, Biases, Implications

1. Introduction

Many employees have replaced their commute to work with electronic links to their workplace. Telecommuting to work is trending upward. A survey in PCworld (Kanaracus, 2007) indicates that approximately 23% of all employees in the USA regularly do their work from some place other than the office. Although this is an innovative way to complete work, there are significant risks experienced by both the organization and the employee who is engaged in telecommuting.

When a telecommuting experience is unsuccessful there may be a tendency to conclude that the situation was not conducive to telecommuting. This type of conclusion would tell only a part of the story. An important issue pertains to the suitability of an individual for a telecommuting experience. Thus, it is the confluence of a number of individual and organizational issues that will contribute to the suitability of the telecommuting experience for both individual and organization. The purpose of this paper is to develop a framework from which we can understand the issues involved in the decision to engage in telecommuting from both an individual and organizational perspective.

2. Telecommuting to the forefront

Certain factors in the last decades have led toward the reliance on and adoption of telecommunication in the workplace. Many factors contribute to the background, implementation, and advantages of companies executing telecommunication. The first major factor contributing to telecommunication is the recent financial crisis America has faced. Companies can save money by reducing the amount of work space and other work environment enhancers in the company's office. Campbell (2007) makes the point that less money is spent on workstations, maintenance, utility bills, common office space, and insurance.

Companies may also implement telecommunication in order to retain geographical freedom in the ever-changing work environment. Some companies do not have a static geographical base. Instead they rely solely on telecommunication. Companies can maintain an employee pool worldwide with employees in many time zones, and each person can work at hours convenient for them. Younger generations are more inclined to want to telecommute due to their familiarity with technology as well as their desire for autonomy in the workplace. Companies who telecommute have more potential to succeed in the event of a natural disaster, terrorist attack, or epidemic.

Caine (2009) has suggested that there may be advantages to telecommuting during the traditional height of flu season, not to mention winter blizzards and weather calamities, some experts are advising that businesses prepare for the worst by planning to allow employees to telecommute. Furthermore, in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, pre-established telework practices at American Express helped ensure that the business could continue functioning. By decentralizing the workforce, companies can still maintain operational readiness under almost any situation.

In addition to corporate advantages and savings, the individual employee can also benefit from telecommuting. Ransom (2010) suggests that thanks to improved technology and the high price of gasoline, working remotely has become an increasingly popular--and less expensive --option for both large and small work forces. Companies who support telecommuting to their employees offer the employees fiscal savings on the individual employee's work-related costs, such as work clothing, transportation, lunches out, child care, and other various costs associated with working outside of the home. Stress related to travel to and from work can be nearly eliminated with the use of telecommuting thus producing a happier, more efficient worker.

Telecommuting also offers employees greater opportunity to balance work and personal life. With flexible schedules and mobile technology, employees are no longer tied down to one specific location during the work day in order to accomplish their responsibilities. The increased scheduling flexibility gives the employee the opportunity to provide more care to their family; an absolute necessity for single parents taking care of their children. Employees also save time by eliminating the commute to and from work. These hours can be used for personal pursuits or as additional hours in the work week, thus creating more efficiency and job satisfaction among employees.

With increased trust towards employees, companies can expect to gain a return of trust towards company from telecommuting employees. Telecommuting is also offered as an employee benefit for companies wishing to retain employees who are either unsatisfied with their work environment or who are looking for another job. The advantages of telecommuting in the workplace, both for the employee and employer, are endless. Money, moral, efficiency, crisis-reaction, and time are all major factors of implementing telecommuting to the company and individual work related schedules.

3. Theoretical underpinnings

Telecommuting or telework is considered as working outside the conventional workplace and communicating with it by way of telecommunications or computer-based technology (Nilles, 1994; Olson & Primps, 1984). It constitutes an early form of virtual work, which has inspired research disciplines ranging from transportation and urban planning to ethics, law, sociology and organizational studies (Bailey et al. 2002). Amongst several forms of "work-at-home", this paper uses the term "telecommuting" to refer to work carried out at home during regular office hours by employees of organizations (Yap and Tng, 1990).

There are individual and organizational factors that influence the decision to engage in telecommuting. The authors attempt to investigate these in light of the previous research findings, and extend that to formulate meaningful propositions.

3.1 Critical success factors for telecommuting

A critical look at both the organization and the talents of the available workforce will provide a gross yardstick for considering the potential for the implementation of telecommuting. The two most important factors are: 1) The organizational and individual capacity (OIC) for telecommuting, and 2) The amenability of the work (WA) to telecommuting.

If the OIC and the WA are both high then the situation appears to be a good fit for telecommuting. In a situation where OIC is high and WA is low there appears to be a situation in which there is a poor level of fit between the workforce and the work. If OIC is low but the WA is high, telecommuting may be possible if an organization makes an attempt to upgrade both technology and the level of personnel employed by the organization. If WA and OIC are both low, then it can be concluded that telecommuting is a poor fit in this situation. This is an initial evaluation. There are myriad other factors which influence this decision.

Figure 1. Telecommuting Typologies
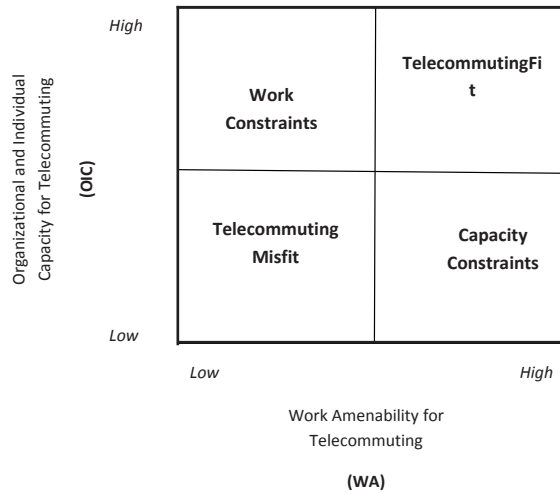
Source: Author's concept

3.2 Industry scenarios

Based on the typology described above (Figure 1), the following industry scenarios can be considered.

Scenario 1 (OIC –low, WA – low)

Manel is front office assistant of a bank, and her work involves direct contact with customers. She explored the possibility of working from home, but was not possible due to the nature of her work.

Scenario 2 (OIC – high, WA – low)

Pahan is a creative writer in an advertising firm. His company is flexible in allowing him to work from home. However, he has to visit clients and needs to attend regular meetings in others' offices. Hence, there is a challenge for him to fully resort to telecommuting.

Scenario 3 (OIC – low, WA – high)

Ananda is an entrepreneurial CEO of a trading organization. He has a dozen of marketing executives who used to work in a large office. With the dismal performance of last year, he is under pressure from the board of directors for more stringent cost control. However, he has financial issues in dealing with infrastructure requirements such as computer availability with

internet connectivity for his employees. Thus, even though the team is very much willing, the support for telecommuting does not exist here.

Scenario 4 (OIC – high, WA – high)

Janaka is a systems analyst and enjoys working late night. He need not go to office, thanks to the flexible arrangement offered by his firm. With the internet connectivity, he shares his programs with the office and is in touch. He has access to company servers located in different locations and there is no need to be physically present at meetings in the office. He uses web tools to be in touch with his clients and colleagues. This position is amenable to telecommuting.

4. Individual desire for telecommuting

Among the variety of literature, *job related* factors and *family-related* factors influencing the individual desire to telecommute can be found. Focusing on job related aspects, it can be seen that, idiosyncratic details of individual jobs, than the general job traits, are more likely to determine whether a specific individual can telecommute (Mokhtarian, 1998). Further, perceptions of job suitability based on intimate knowledge of specific jobs, rather than global job categories, may better predict who can telecommute (Bailey et al, 2002).

With respect to family related factors, maintaining a healthy work-family balance (e.g. Shamir and Salamon, 1985) has been identified as a factor influencing an individual's choice for telecommuting. A study involving public sector employees in Germany found that lower family-work conflict as a psychological influencer for home-based telecommuting (Hornung, 2009). A job involving the mode of telecommuting was found to attract candidates who seek a higher work/life balance and thereby influence the job choice (Thompson, 2009). Male professionals and female clerical workers were identified as predominate categories who opt for telecommuting (Bailey et al, 2002).

Employees themselves expect greater autonomy and flexibility that could lead to better balancing of private and professional duties (Tuskin and Devos, 2005). Considering the marital status of employees and their age, no clear pattern could be seen with regard to their preference or engagement in telecommuting, owing to contradictory findings (Venkatesh and Vitalari, 1992).

A study based on samples of more than 500 workers in public agencies in the US, reflected that work-related factors are most predictive of an individual's choice to work remotely (Mannering & Mokhtarian, 1997). As they reported, these factors include manager's willingness, workplace interaction, and self-perceived job suitability, in addition to a number of personal and household attributes such as lack of personal discipline, household distractions, and preference to work with a team, family orientation, and workaholism.

5. Employee and employer responsibilities with telecommuting

Company leadership has certain responsibilities towards employees who telecommute. Telecommuting employees must also display responsibilities and productivity back towards the company. *Ransom (2010) offers companies guidance in managing telecommuting by starting* off slow, utilise probationary periods, set expectations, use technology, do not "stalk" employees, and establish performance measurements.

Leaders must assign specific responsibility and guidelines to the employee. Telecommuting may not be offered to every employee. Companies must perform appropriate risk and screening processes prior to implementing telecommunication into an employee's work schedule. Telecommuting can be offered to an employee after trust and responsibility is demonstrated in traditional work climate. Time synchronization is also a responsibility of the employer. Companies who primarily telecommute may have many employees in different time zones. These time differences present certain constraints on project deadlines, company meetings, or simply time responses to email conversation.

Companies must exercise certain guidance with time synchronization of telecommuting employees. Schramm (2010) illustrated the responsibilities of company leadership in that HR professionals are deeply involved in setting policies and procedures, ensuring technical support, providing training and development for off-site workers, and establishing work/life balance guidelines that ensure the success of virtual working. Companies must also be practical with their expectations of employee output of quality of work, not quantity of work. Employees may be motivated to work more diligently and efficiently during the day when they do not feel the pressure or responsibility of being tied down to their "workspace" from 9am to 5pm.

Furthermore, performance-based results should be valued over number of hours spent behind a desk. Companies display trust in empowerment of employees and increase employee autonomy with work-related tasks and responsibilities when they allow employees to telecommute.

Employees also have responsibilities with regard to telecommuting. As much as the company may task an employee, the decision is left to the employee in their definition of the difference between work and home. Genova (2010) opines that the more situational freedom employees enjoy, the more liability follows their natural proclivity to blend business and personal activities. Companies and employees will have to work together to determine guidelines for work hours and circumstances an employee can be called during non-work hours. The employee may be expected to display an increase of performance with the increased responsibility and independence.

Essentially, the employee and the employer must exhibit trust and responsibility toward one other in telecommuting situations. Although they both have increased responsibility and communication requirements, the employer is ultimately responsible for the success or failure

of the telecommuting worker. The employer has to provide the same standards of an office environment to an employee's at home workstation. Although the employee has increased autonomy, company leadership must provide appropriate measures in order to maintain employee efficiency and keep employees contributing at a productive rate towards the company.

6. Need to decide on telecommuting

Telecommuting is not necessary in all situations. Leadership needs to exercise rationale in deciding what positions as well as how many employees they can release to telecommuting. There is a delicate balance companies must manage in what needs to happen in person and what can be done electronically. A good rubric for determining whether telecommuting can be successful is the following: In determining whether telecommuting will work for your company, the first factor that must be considered is the type of work that is to be done. Word processing, writing, accounting and research analysis are ideal, and productivity levels may even increase if this kind of work is done outside of a traditional office environment.

As implied, computer and technology based job descriptions are more suitable to telecommuting than professions which require direct interpersonal interactions and relationships in the workplace. However, a face-to-face meeting is always more valuable and

sincere than an email or text message, both of which can be interpreted in many different ways.

Individuals and companies need social interaction during the interview and hiring process. Companies can truly see a person's character during a face-to-face interview as opposed to a teleconference interview. Physical appearance is also a rapport builder and psychological factor in interpersonal relationships. Additionally, companies need to be delicate with disciplinary or firing/release from work situations.

The movie *Up in the Air* portrays a company that is contracted to terminate employees from the workplace. The company tries to jump on the technological bandwagon while cutting costs and tries to implement video teleconference layoffs. The laid off employee is essentially counseled and released from work through a third party over a computer screen. The idea brings about huge potential for failure and lack of command and control of the releaser during the process. Some things are better told in person, even if it is bad news, in order to maintain a humane effect towards the subject.

7. Individual factors associated with telecommuting

Having discussed the work and family related factors associated with the individual *desire* for telecommuting, it is useful to explore the nexus between such desire and the individual factors associated with telecommuting. Aspects such as personality profile, gender, and intrinsic motivation could be found through the literature.

7.1 Personality profile

Personality of an individual can have an association with his/her desire to telecommute. Personality can be viewed as an intrapersonal, dynamic, organized system of psychological processes influencing behaviour (e.g., Allport, 1937; Block, 2002). Jung (1971) introduced three personality dimensions, extroversion-introversion, sensing-intuiting, and thinking-feeling. The fourth dimension was added in the process of developing the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBIT), as a tool to operationalize Jung's theory (Myers & McCaulley, 1985). These four dimensions produce sixteen psychological types, but researchers often use the more parsimonious construct of cognitive style, which focuses on just sensing-intuiting and thinking-feeling (Frisbie, 1988). With respect to individual desire for telecommuting, investigating which MBTI profile would be the best fit will be a worthwhile exercise.

The five-factor model, or 'Big Five' (Goldberg, 1992) is a more compact way of looking at personality. The five-factor structure has generalized across cultures and rating formats (self, peer, observer, and stranger ratings), and evidence show that the Big Five are heritable and stable over time (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The factors comprising the Big Five are: (1) extraversion, which represents the tendency to be sociable, assertive, expressive, and active; (2) agreeableness, representing the tendency to be likable, nurturing, adaptable, and cooperative; (3) conscientiousness, referring to the traits of achievement, organization, task-focus, and dependability; (4) emotional stability, which is the tendency to be secure, emotionally adjusted and calm; and (5) openness to experience, which is the disposition to be imaginative, artistic, non-conforming, and autonomous (Cable and Judge, 2002). With respect to the individual desire for telecommuting, it is seen that, a high degree of conscientiousness is associated. The relative influence of all five dimensions on individual's choice for telecommuting is worth investigating.

7.2 Gender

The literature on telecommuting shows that women are more likely to list family benefits as a motivation for telecommuting than men (Mokhtarian et al., 1998). Yap and Tng (1990), reporting on female IT professionals in Singapore stated that nearly 75 per cent favour telecommuting, citing time to take care of family as a major benefit.

7.3 Intrinsic motivation

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can be key drivers of behavioural change (Davis et al., 1992). Intrinsic motivation is described as the pleasure and inherent satisfaction derived from a specific activity (Vallerand, 1997), while extrinsic motivation refers to performing a behaviour to achieve a specific goal such as rewards (Deci and Ryan, 1987). A person with a high level of intrinsic motivation tends to seek ways of improving job performance whilst searching for higher job satisfaction, despite a possible absence of extrinsic motivators. This aspect has a high relevance to telecommuting; where as an individual with a high degree of intrinsic motivation may enjoy the mode of telecommuting more.

8. Work related variables in telecommuting

The world of work has significantly changed in many of the developed nations. In the United States for example, more than half of the workforce in 2009 is composed of women. This has changed dramatically since 1967 when women made up less than a third of all workers in the United States. In fact, in 2009, mothers are the primary breadwinners or co-breadwinners in nearly two-thirds of American families (Shriver, 2009). Because of this demographic shift, it might be fortuitous for organizations to look at the hours of work as a variable that might make work more amenable to a large portion of the workforce. According to Shriver (2009), a nation that has a large percentage of women as workers "changes everything."

Work can also be viewed somewhat differently. It is, in many instances, evolving from someplace we go to something we do. Many employees (over 80% in this survey) have expressed a desire to work more from a place other than the office if there were no negative repercussions associated with this work flexibility (Galinsky, Bond & Hill, 2004). There is more than just flexibility involved here. In one survey, 90% of telecommuters reported the opportunity to telecommute better enables them to balance work and family. Moreover, half of these telecommuters, 46%, indicate they are more productive working from home (University of Connecticut, 1999). Furthermore, this may make it easier for women to serve in the dual roles of mother and breadwinner.

Importantly, though, telecommuting is more applicable to some occupational classifications than it is to other occupational classifications. This is readily apparent in surveys which demonstrate that the occupation which is most amenable to telecommuting is Management, Professional and Related occupations (44%), Sales and Office Occupations (24.9%), and Service Occupations (18.4%). Occupations with a high concentration of customer service needs would not be amenable to these work arrangements. Thus, the type of work and the extent of personal interaction requirements with end customers is an important variable in determining whether telecommuting can successfully be implemented. Importantly, research (Potter, 2003) has suggested that approximately 65% of all jobs are amenable to telecommuting at least on a part-time basis. So it appears as though there are many more options available for telecommuting.

One of the largest costs to organizations is dealing with unplanned absences from work. According to Cascio and Boudreau (2009), after turnover, absenteeism is the second highest cost to organizations. In general terms, when a worker is absent, organizations pay twice for the same work. The absent worker and the replacement are usually paid. According to one recent survey (CCH Incorporated, 2005), alternative work arrangements rank at the top of work-life programs in effectiveness in reducing unplanned absences from work. So, offering an alternative of telecommuting might significantly reduce the costs associated with absenteeism. In fact, work by Meyer, Murkerjee, and Sestero (2001) has demonstrated that when the proportion of employees working from home increases by one percentage point, the firm's profit rate increases by an additional six-tenths of one percent. For some organizations, this may be a considerable increased amount of profitability for organizational stakeholders.

Often overlooked in the telecommuting debate are the potentially decreased costs of real estate and other overhead issues (Boldgett, 1996). Organizations will need less office space and thus will have significantly reduced fixed costs in terms of heating, air conditioning, and building maintenance. For example (Girard, 1997), in 1996, Bell Atlantic reported that telecommuting implementation and employees telecommuting allowed the company to save between $1,500 - $5,000 per telecommuter, per year, due to reduced real estate costs and fixed costs in environmental areas (heating, etc.).

In spite of all of the potential positives associated with telecommuting, there are significant potential downsides to the implementation of telecommuting in organizations. Supervisors have a tendency to doubt the ability of workers to produce quality work and consistent and high productivity when they are telecommuting (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 1998). In additon, there is significant concern over the ability to ensure necessary office coverage, the scheduling of essential office meetings, and reliable access to relevant information at work (Galinsky et al, 2004). Furthermore, as Golden (2001) has reported, most organizations do not currently have in place appropriate procedures to effectively utilize telecommuting. Thus, access to telecommuting is typically decided on an individual basis with minimal consistency and equitability.

A serious problem that accompanies telecommuting is based upon the time and place model of social interaction. Two of the cells of the time and place model of social interaction can be applied to telecommuting: same time/different place interactions and different time/different place interactions. Each of these combinations has serious problems associated with them. With respect to same time/different place interactions, it is estimated that as many as 70% of phone calls fail to reach their intended individual. This indicates that, for the most part, while telecommuting, one is fairly isolated and has lost the opportunity to interact which may be so important in many occupations.

Congruent with the lost opportunity to interact is the inability to share information through informal communications and the inability to seek and receive concurrent feedback upon issues at work. With respect to the different time/different place interactions, individuals experience a temporal asynchrony, the result of which is, from a learning perspective, the ineffectiveness of receiving feedback that is not temporally contiguous with performance.

9. Biases that hinder telecommuting

Telecommuting may be hindered by four key biases:

1. *The temporal synchrony bias:* Since we are working at different times, there may be a tendency to misunderstand communications which is accompanied by an inability to correct these misunderstandings in a timely fashion. Misunderstanding uncorrected may result in the expending of significant effort toward goals that are misunderstood.

2. *The squeaky wheel bias:* We have a tendency to become rude and impulsive when we are communicating over a computer. We become much more adversarial when we are communicating in other than face to face fashion. Factors that usually suppress negative emotions in person are absent when communicating over a computer.

3. *The sinister attribution bias:* We have a tendency to misattribute the behavior of others and this is exacerbated when our only communication with individuals is via computer. Similarly, we are likely to ascribe diabolical intentions to those we don't know and we are more likely to mistrust and suspect the other party of lying when our contact with them is via a computer. In fact, we are more likely to attempt to deceive another person over the computer.

4. *The burned bridge bias:* When interacting over a computer, we have a tendency to engage in more risky behavior in terms of threats and demands. We neglect many of the "politeness rituals" which are so important from a business perspective. We ignore the "social lubricant" which is important in managing and directing others.

Many of these issues can be minimized by building in significant face to face time with those who are tasked with telecommuting. But, while that may help with the problems which arise due to the time place model of social interaction, that solution would seem to minimize many of the benefits of telecommuting.

10. Repercussions

Despite its many advantages and situation variables, telecommuting has potential hazards towards the workplace and the specific employee. Individuals are vulnerable to a merging of work and personal life when they work from home. Some people need the separation as well as the commute to and from work in order to transition between work and home. There is potential for more distractions at home than the workplace. Family, pets, and other at-home comforts present challenges in balance of work and home. The office environment is a more fostering and work supportive atmosphere. An office has all of the physical, emotional, and interpersonal resources readily available to support an employee in difficult situations.

With the advanced use of email to replace conversations as well as phone calls, a "lost in translation" dilemma becomes possible during telecommuting The proliferation of email has made communicating at a distance much easier; however, email blunders can lead to missed opportunities, inaction, misunderstandings, damaged relationships, erroneous decisions, and legal liability. Digital messages need to be clear with guidance and detail. They cannot be left open for interpretation of the reader. Companies can utilize telecommuting only if they are aware of the risks and disadvantages and are prepared to mitigate possible misuse and the pitfalls telecommuting presents to the modern employee.

Assuming that telecommuting is one significant alternative for organizations, it might be helpful to develop a model that can be used by organizations to determine if telecommuting is a good fit with their organization.

11. Increasing necessity of telecommuting

The technology and business practices necessary to allow workers to telecommute have advanced a great deal in recent years. Emails, cell phones, and other electronic communication tools are used more and more as the primary means of communication. Telecommuting has many advantages to offer, both the individual employee as well as the company as a whole. However, it is the responsibility of both parties to set standards of reasonable behaviour regarding the use of telecommunication. Telecommuting does not have to be the only input of work from an employee. Companies can offer a balance between presence at the workplace and telecommuting from home or the road.

Telecommuting is no shield for employees to hide behind. Employees are expected to perform to higher standards and production rate with the extra freedom associated with working from home. Different situations and jobs will require increased or reduced usage of telecommuting. Organizations will always be adapting to ever-changing societal needs and technological advances, but individuals will always be held responsible for the success or failure of product input and quality towards the workplace.

12. Specific relevance to Sri Lanka

Based on the above discussion, there is an opportunity for Sri Lankan organizations to explore the prospects of telecommuting. As the typology clearly showed us, it is not the panacea for all corporate illnesses. Careful selection of specific tasks that can be handled through telecommuting, as well as ensuring the availability of necessary infrastructure are critical steps in this direction. Comprehensive studies with respect to Sri Lankan industries need to be done to explore further opportunities.

In the way the rest of the world is benefiting from the practice of telecommuting, Sri Lanka can also utilize its strengths, in the process of its ongoing economic expansion.

13. Conclusion

The decision concerning whether to engage in telecommuting is an important one. As it was demonstrated, this decision is not one to be taken lightly by organizations. There are myriad factors which must be considered in order to ensure that telecommuting is the optimal path toward organizational effectiveness.

While telecommuting holds many potential advantages for individuals and organizations, the disadvantages must be taken into account as well. It is suggested that consideration of the above mentioned issues will facilitate an examination of the appropriateness of telecommuting based on organizational/individual/job related factors. Strategically, organizations need to engage in those practices which will facilitate their efficiency and effectiveness based upon the variables that exist in that organization.

Hence, the treasures and travails of telecommuting need through attention locally regionally and globally. Reaping the rich benefits by tactful implementation of telecommuting can be a sure fire way forward with regard to attaining organizational and individual objectives.

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