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How can organisations realise the positive benefits of 'anywhere working'?

Implications from the Trans-Tasman Telework Survey

What is anywhere working?

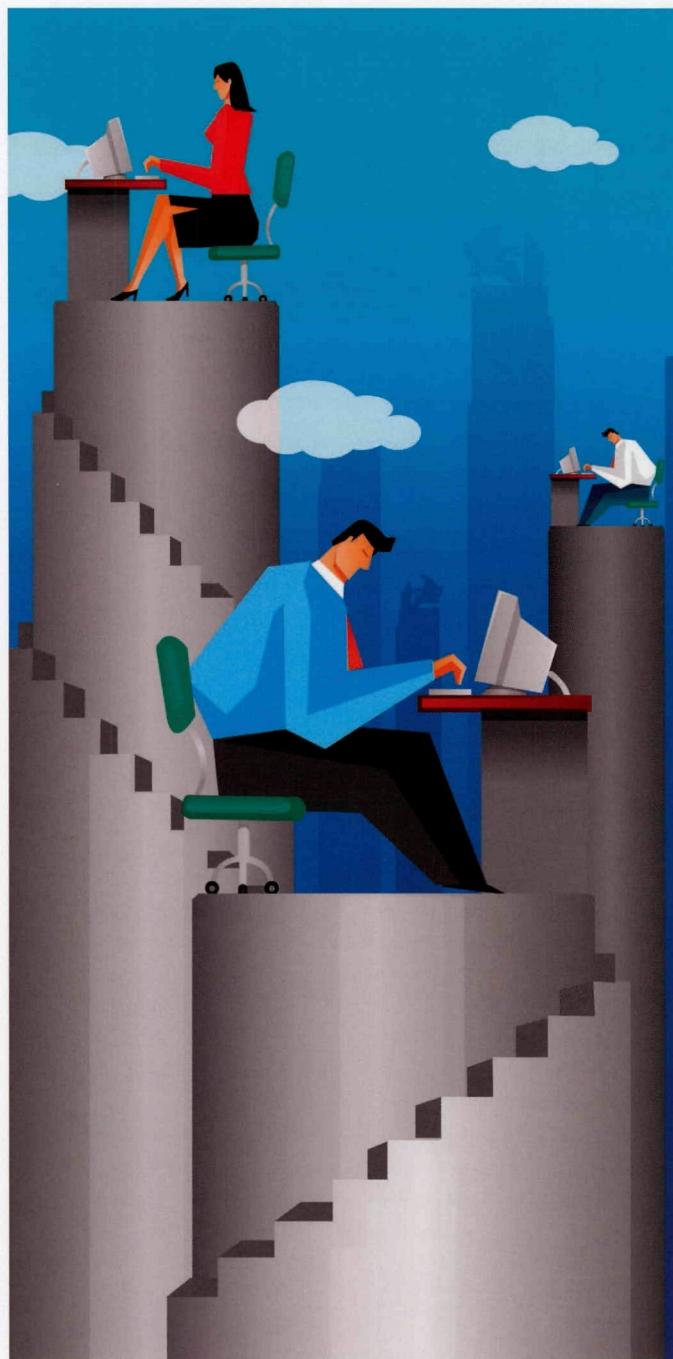
Telework (also called 'telecommuting' or 'anywhere working') is defined as "...a flexible work arrangement whereby workers work in locations, remote from their central offices or production facilities, with no personal contact with co-workers, but the ability to communicate with co-workers using ICT". This definition is rather misleading, however, as most teleworkers have some contact with co-workers, and are effectively hybrid teleworkers, having a balance of office-based and remote working arrangements. Moreover, many people confuse teleworking with call centre work and other forms of telephone-based work. Perhaps a better term for telework, avoiding this confusion, is 'anywhere working'. Anywhere working (AW) most commonly involves working from a home office, but also increasingly includes workers basing themselves within a co-working/smart centre or working remotely in the community.

Supporters of AW believe that hybrid anywhere working (one to three days working remotely per week) provides the best balance between the flexibility of AW and the benefits of face-to-face contact with management and co-workers, although the evidence for these benefits are yet to be robustly examined in the New Zealand and Australian context.

What are the benefits of AW?

AW is not new but it is only recently that this work arrangement has become an attractive and viable organisational choice to support work. This can be attributed to recent developments in information and communication technologies (ICT) (e.g. broadband Internet, mobile devices, social media, cloud computing, and networking tools), media publicity, and awareness of the apparent benefits of AW, which jointly encourage employees to participate in virtual work.

The international literature provides a mixed picture on the benefits of AW, although most evidence points to this form of flexible work offering potential benefits for organisations, including: productivity improvements, employee retention and well-being, real estate cost savings; employee cost savings; and other forms of competitive advantage. AW can also play a role in global efforts to address environmental sustainability, helping reduce carbon



emissions from unnecessary commutes and lessening traffic congestion around city centre road networks.

Why isn't AW business as usual in New Zealand and elsewhere?

A major barrier to AW appears to be negative management attitudes. Managers may often find themselves faced with requests by staff seeking to adopt some form of flexible work. Such requests may include the opportunity to work remotely, usually at home or from a co-working hub of some type. Whether such requests are considered favourably will depend on a range of factors, including previous experience of AW among staff from the organisation, the manager's personal attitude toward 'working from home', the productive qualities of the individual making the request, suitability of the proposed AW environment, and the availability of the required technology and technological support. Such decisions are therefore complex, particularly in the absence of a clear policy on flexible work arrangements that includes AW. In cases where no such policy exists, decisions regarding AW may be strongly influenced by negative cultural attitudes across the organisation. Indeed, the international literature suggests that, while the necessary technology is available to most knowledge workers, management attitudes to AW are a major barrier to realising the positive benefits of AW.

The Trans-Tasman Telework Survey

There have been no major research studies on AW in New Zealand, even though there is strong anecdotal evidence of AW being a common work practice here, as it is in most developed countries. A recent Cisco-funded study, led by the NZ Work

Research Institute in partnership with the University of Melbourne's Institute for Broadband Enabled Society (IBES), sought to address these research gaps, looking specifically at telework. The Trans-Tasman Telework Survey's aims were to identify manager and employee perspectives on worker productivity and well-being, and the conditions under which productivity and well-being can be improved through telework. The study used 50 Australian and New Zealand workplaces as the study context.

Some 1827 individuals from the 50 organisations participated in the survey, answering questions related to their telework experience, with a further approximately 100 managers interviewed on organisational flexible work policy and practices. A broad range of Australia and New Zealand organisations were surveyed, with respondents drawn from many different occupational groups and from across many industries within public and private sectors.

How much telework did respondents undertake and where did they do it?

The majority of respondents to the survey were either low-intensity teleworkers (less than eight hours per week teleworking: 35 percent) or hybrid teleworkers (one to three days per week: 38 percent). Just 16 percent anywhere worked more than three days per week, while 11 percent did no telework. The mean number of telework hours among the entire sample was 13 hours per week.

Unsurprisingly, most telework occurred from home (85 percent), although the majority (77 percent) of the teleworking sample had an office or permanent workstation available at their employer's workplace, suggesting many organisations

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may have opportunities to reduce real estate costs through hot-desking or workstation sharing approaches to save space.

Just one-half of the teleworking sample had any formal agreement, written or verbal, to telework, with many employees engaged in informal, ad hoc and unsanctioned telework. This is problematic, as where organisations are unaware of who is teleworking it is unlikely that their managers are applying appropriate motivational approaches to telework (e.g. goal setting/outcome focused) nor realising the potential benefits of telework, including office space saving. This finding is likely to reflect the fact that many participating organisations had no formal flexible work policy that included telework.

Employee and manager attitudes to telework

Telework was very popular with staff. Teleworkers predominantly expressed a positive attitude to telework, with the majority expressing a strong agreement with statements such as: 'Teleworking has a favourable influence on my overall attitude toward my job' (71 percent), and 'Using teleworking technologies fits well with the way I like to work' (73 percent). These findings suggest telework may be important for the retention of talent and the attraction of skilled employees who value the opportunity to telework.

Despite the much publicised concerns by Yahoo CEO, Melissa Meyer, about the impact of telework on work collaboration, teleworking did not appear to affect coordination with work colleagues in the study, with just four percent strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement: 'Teleworking causes problems coordinating work with my co-workers', and only five percent agreeing with the statement: 'Teleworking causes problems coordinating work with my manager'.

While some senior managers felt that cultural distrust of teleworking was still pervading thinking within their organisation, individuals engaged in telework believed management trust in them was relatively high. For example, a large proportion of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: 'My manager doesn't think I slack off when I telework' (64 percent). Similarly, most agreed or strongly agreed that: 'Overall, my manager trusts me to be productive while teleworking' (70 percent).

Who provides the technology for telework?

The technology most commonly available for telework included: email (89 percent); laptop or notebook (83 percent); mobile phone (76 percent); and remote access to organisation's intranet (75 percent). The technology used for telework was paid for or supplied by the respondent's organisation in 64 percent of cases. The costs of technology were shared between the organisation and the respondent in 19 percent of cases, and the respondent alone supplied the technology in 17 percent of cases. Broadband was provided by the organisation in 21 percent of cases.

Technology support was rated just moderately, suggesting an area where organisations can improve their support for telework. Some 55 percent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: 'This organisation implements appropriate technology as it becomes available', while 67 percent agreed or strongly agreed that: 'Technical support from this organisation is available when I need it'. Worryingly, less than half of respondents reported receiving telework-related training of any sort.

The teleworking environment

The study looked at whether the physical and psychosocial work environment influenced work performance. Teleworkers rated their work environment more highly than non-teleworkers

in terms of its impact on their productivity and work quality. However, a relatively large proportion of respondents reported unsatisfactory ergonomics aspects to their physical work environment (60 percent). While teleworkers reported no more injuries than non-teleworkers, they did report significantly more ergonomics problems overall. Thermal environment, noise and the workstation were the key concerns for the teleworking sample. These findings suggest training in setting up a home office, together with home workstation assessments are important where telework occurs regularly.

Are teleworkers more productive?

Telework appears to offer important productivity benefits to organisations. Individuals engaged in hybrid teleworking (one to three days per week teleworking) had significantly better perceived productivity outcomes across three separate measures than non-teleworkers or low intensity teleworkers, while low intensity teleworkers had better outcomes than non-teleworkers. The difference in mean scores for teleworkers and non-teleworkers for each variable (equating to between around 7-11 percent difference) were sufficiently large to suggest a meaningful practical productivity advantage for teleworking employees, and particularly hybrid teleworkers. To reinforce the apparent value of teleworking as a strategy for increasing productivity, managers of teleworkers rated them as more productive than non-teleworkers across the sample.

Does telework result in well-being improvements?

Teleworkers reported significantly higher job satisfaction than non-teleworkers, with mean scores for teleworkers notably higher, suggesting a meaningful positive outcome in terms of the experience of work for teleworkers. This suggests a promising approach where attracting and retaining key talent is important to the organisation, while satisfaction is also positively associated with productivity, motivation and morale of staff. Furthermore, managers noted that teleworkers contributed less to absenteeism and sickness absence from work, and telework teams scored higher on engagement surveys.

Negative well-being aspects of teleworking included social isolation, strain/stress, intention to quit and work/family conflict, each of which were significantly higher for hybrid teleworkers than other groups, although these differences were marginal in comparison to the positive telework variables of productivity and job satisfaction.

The critical role of organisational support for teleworkers

Following a social-technical systems approach the study examined the fit between technological and social variables in producing positive telework outcomes. Path modelling identified three support variables, management support for telework, peer support, and technological support, to be important for increasing productivity and job satisfaction, while reducing social isolation, work/family conflict and stress/strain. Manager support for telework and manager attitude to teleworkers was found to be a key factor in enhancing telework outcomes, and should be the focus of further research in this field given the acknowledged role of negative manager attitudes in the international literature as a barrier to telework arrangements.

Implications of the Trans-Tasman Telework Survey for HR management

Findings from the study provided further evidence that telework and AW more generally can enhance productivity and job satisfaction in organisations. However, these benefits will be most evident where the organisation provides the necessary

support for AW, including supportive manager attitudes, peer support and technological support. Support will also help reduce any potential negative impacts from social isolation, work family conflict and stress.

Where an organisation is considering widespread AW adoption, the following advice is given to HR managers and others involved with such initiatives:

- Trial hybrid AW within one or more workgroups of knowledge workers and assess costs and benefits before widespread implementation
- Ensure regular assessments of AW arrangements, contracts and policies to deliver best outcomes from management and anywhere worker perspectives
- Provide adequate training for AW and managers of anywhere workers
- Offer support in setting up a home office, where applicable
- Deliver adequate technology/ICT support for AW
- Provide excellent support for AW from line managers
- Measure and report the social, economic and environmental contributions of AW to individuals, the organisation and society.

The New Zealand Work Research Institute recently held the inaugural Anywhere Working Network Day for researchers, industry and government representatives interested in AW. If you are interested in joining this network please visit the NZ Work Research Institute website: www.workresearch.aut.ac.nz.

The Trans-Tasman Telework Survey was undertaken in the months, April-October, 2013, and was led by Professors Tim Bentley and Stephen Teo and Dr Laurie McLeod of the NZ Work Research Institute. A full report of study findings is available at our website: www.workresearch.aut.ac.nz. ■

References available upon request.

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