

Pondering the Fault Lines of Anywhere Working (Telework, Telecommuting): A Literature Review

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Abstract

Anywhere working (other terms include telework and telecommuting) has been of interest to researchers, policymakers and practitioners for over 40 years. The predicted uptake of anywhere working as a flexible working option has not eventuated to the extent expected. This monograph reviews some of the key areas of research on anywhere working. Achieving the proposed benefits while mitigating the limitations of anywhere working is complex, requiring consideration of many factors including government policy, technology, management and service quality (customer service). The purpose of this monograph is to evaluate the anywhere working research on themes in the literature that provide insights into sustainable anywhere working. Stakeholders including government, researchers, organisations and their employees need to understand how the adoption of anywhere working can provide quantifiable organisational, societal and individual (employee) benefits. This review ponders the fault lines (that is, the tensions and contentions) of anywhere working including a critique of the implications for employees. On the one hand, the proponents of anywhere working argue that the technological advances inevitably lead to this way of working becoming business as usual. On the other hand, detractors of anywhere working point to the limitations, like social and professional isolation, as barriers to full-scale adoption. The monograph concludes by proposing a long-term research agenda to develop a sustainable framework for anywhere working.

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1

Introduction

The industrial revolution brought employees from their homes to the factories. With information and communication technologies (ICT), the reverse is possible, with employees able to move back into their homes [Simitis, 1986]. The flexibility for employees to be able to work any time at any place is technically feasible for many employees and has been for many years. Anywhere working (also telework or telecommuting) has been the subject of both academic and practitioner literature for over forty years [Nilles, 1975, Wilkes and Frolick, 1994, Hunton and Strand, 2010]. However, the projected growth rate has not been as expected [Huws, 1991, Da Silva and Meghna, 2010].

Organisations, their employees, industry bodies and government are still debating the fault lines of anywhere working (other terms include telework, working from home, flexible work, digital work amongst others). The fault lines in this monograph refer to the tensions and contentions around anywhere working. Hybrid telework, where employees work some of the time from home, was found to contribute to significant productivity improvements [Bentley et al., 2013]. On the other hand, in 2013, Yahoo and HP either banned or significantly limited the ability of their employees to work from home [Cairns, 2013, Matos,

2013]. The stated reasons were that working away from the office is not conducive to teamwork, collaboration and employee engagement.

Government policies relating to digital infrastructure, flexible work policies, occupational health and safety and tax policies are drivers of the anywhere working trend. Technology trends such as bring your own device (BYOD), smartphones and the cloud have provided workers with the tools to work anywhere, anytime and with anyone. Management issues include responsibility for technology support, data security and privacy, acceptable use and governance. Regardless of the location of work, the customer should receive a level of service that will provide an organisation with a competitive advantage.

Presenteeism, distractions, collaboration opportunities, social isolation, work intensification, work, health and safety are potential limitations of anywhere working. Trends such as co-working centres, work hubs and smart work centres may mitigate some of these limitations by providing opportunities for collaboration. Good job design and communication strategies may alleviate some management and employee concerns of anywhere working.

Reducing commuting time and providing opportunities for employees to have a better work-life balance may increase employee well-being. A flexible workplace attracts and retains quality employees. Providing opportunities for engagement of workers with the organisation is a crucial component of anywhere working. Having an engaged workforce with the skills and capabilities to deliver exceptional service to the customer is the overarching objective of organisations.

Some of the limitations of anywhere working will not be relevant and may not cause an organisation any difficulties. However, managers should be aware of the benefits and limitations of anywhere working so that anywhere working provides workers and the organisation with sustainable benefits while mitigating the limitations.

This monograph examines the fault lines of anywhere working (a term that includes telework and telecommuting). This monograph considers the expected benefits and limitations of anywhere working over the last forty years and the extent to which the identified benefits and limitations may be the same or different in 2015. First, the scope and

methodology is explained. Second, the the background and history of anywhere working is outlined. Third, government policy around anywhere working is examined. Fourth, a discussion of the issues relating to anywhere working and technology. Fifth, the management and employee matters relating to anywhere working. Sixth, the topics relating to service quality and anywhere working. The conclusion and future research section completes the monograph. The monograph concludes by proposing a long-term research agenda to develop a sustainable framework for anywhere working.

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