

# **Virtual Offices in Health Care Business Administration: Benefits, Concerns and Ethical Considerations**

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*Before implementing remote initiatives in health care business sectors, leaders must weigh benefits and disadvantages related to the employee and organization, as well as, ethical implications associated with teleworking. While research that directly links virtual offices to health care business sectors is limited, factors such as personality traits, roles and culture can be used to surmise the usefulness of these virtual offices in health care settings. Administrators must examine ethical issues, such as unequal distribution of privilege and invasion of personal privacy, and determine if benefits produce the most good, and at the same time, the least amount of harm.*

*Keywords: virtual offices, work-from-home, teleworking, health care, ethics, health care business*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Virtual offices, virtual teams, teleworking, remote work or working from home – no matter the label, the concept is the same although its definition is important. Teleworkers can be described as full-time or part-time virtual employees and may include those who are self-employed or freelancers. For the purpose of this paper, teleworkers are defined as those who work from home at least part-time and are still connected and in contact with the organization through information technology while off site. This paper reviews academic literature to examine the general benefits and shortcomings of virtual offices, their application to health care business administration and associated ethical considerations. With this information in hand, administrators can make informed decisions about implementing work-from-home policies in non-clinical, health care business sectors.

## **BENEFITS OF WORK-FROM-HOME INITIATIVES FOR THE EMPLOYEE AND THE HEALTH CARE NETWORK**

As organizations continue to research ways to promote employee culture and improve job satisfaction, productivity and spending, the concept of work-from-home initiatives is often brought up through employee feedback and at leadership forums. Timsal and Awais (2016) note that for employees, avoiding morning traffic jams, replacing commute time with family time and partaking in a change of scenery away from a stressful office may be the perk that keeps them happy and loyal. In addition to job satisfaction and retention, the authors hypothesize that the general benefits of work-from-home initiatives include allowing for a flexible work environment and hours, less distractions and stress, proximity to home and family, improved work-life balance and greater productivity and creativity.

Through a qualitative study of 62 teleworkers, researchers substantiated the perceived concept of greater productivity and performance through work-from-home initiatives (Baruch, 2000). These efforts resulted in more time devoted to projects as working hours for teleworkers were increased in 48% of the cases. Further, although findings were based on perceived performance rather than actual, 76% of those interviewed noted that overall work effectiveness, including quality and quantity of work done, was much better or better due to the elimination of distraction and the ability to focus on the project at hand. Teleworkers appreciated their autonomy and experienced less work-related stress.

While employees may benefit from virtual offices, organizations can reap financial reward as well. Cost-effectiveness is often a primary driver in directive decisions, and Baruch (2000) reports that work-from-home initiatives reduce overhead costs, such as the use of space and the cost of electricity and gas, as they typically shift such expenses over to an employee. Additionally, recruiters can expand their employee demographic reach to include workers without geographic constraints, as well as, single parents or disabled people who may not otherwise have the ability to work outside of the home. Virtual teams allow organizations to access the most qualified individuals regardless of location; respond more quickly to competition and provide greater flexibility (Gazor, 2012). A flexible work culture addresses the entreaties that so many new hires request.

## **VIRTUAL OFFICE SHORTCOMINGS IMPOSED ON EMPLOYEES AND THE ORGANIZATION**

At first glance, offering employees the option to telework can be described as a win-win – both staff and the organization benefit. However, teleworkers may have difficulty separating home from work, feel self-imposed pressure to continue their workday past normal business hours or feel alienated from coworkers, the company or promotion (Timsal & Awais, 2016). While less likely to avoid work and rarely absent for illness, teleworkers may avoid taking justified breaks, which can have negative influence on long-term health. Working remotely is associated with greater levels of job intensity, less time to complete work and worry outside of business hours (Felstead et al., 2002). Additionally, for some, working from home may create new career opportunities whereas for others, being out of sight is out of mind (Baruch, 2000). In this way, working from home can be restrictive when considering advancement opportunities.

Work-life balance is often a requirement for hires, yet little longitudinal data has been available to link work-life benefits with work attitudes of employees. Through research from the US. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) with the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey; results reveal that some work-life programs actually have reverse effects on talent retention. While virtual offices did result in positive effects on turnover intentions, drawbacks emerged, including home responsibilities interfering with work responsibilities and feelings of isolation from coworkers and the organization (Caillier, 2017).

From an organizational perspective, leaders may have less control or ability to motivate employees, and they may experience less team-working benefits if teleworkers are at home full-time (Baruch, 2000). Effective communication is necessary in gaining and maintaining trust, and communication technologies have limitations that can lead to misinterpretation. A challenge for leaders, then, is to establish trust within a team that spans distance (Gazor, 2012). Caillier (2017) suggests that employees should not telework more than two days a week to limit such drawbacks. Gazor (2012) notes that wise virtual team leaders should integrate face-to-face meetings into virtual teamwork to establish group bonding and trust.

**TABLE 1**  
**POSSIBLE BENEFITS AND DISADVANTAGES OF VIRTUAL OFFICES**

	<b>Possible benefits</b>	<b>Possible disadvantages</b>
Employee	Work-life balance, less stressful work environment, lower commute times, greater perceived productivity and performance, autonomy and satisfaction	Little separation of work and home, alienation from organization and co-workers, chance of promotional restrictions
Organization	Lower overhead costs, greater employee demographic reach and retention, flexible work culture, perceived productivity and performance, more effective workforce	Leadership lack of control to motivate employees, less team-working benefits, technology and communication limitations

### **APPLYING POLICIES TO NON-CLINICAL HEALTH CARE DEPARTMENTS**

Research related to virtual offices specifically in health care business sectors is limited and it is proposed that further studies be conducted to investigate its effects on such factors as overhead costs and employee culture within health networks. However, studies related to employee personality traits conducive to remote work, leading virtual teams and organizational culture could be used to surmise the usefulness of offering remote options in corresponding health care business sectors.

#### **Employee Personality Traits**

Health care leaders who are considering work-from-home initiatives should be acquainted with the individual personality traits of each staff member in the department. Those who are self-directed, autonomous and initiative-oriented may thrive in remote work whereas those who have high needs for affiliation and socialization may feel deprived (Baruch, 2000). Time management and the ability to keep in contact through technology are crucial skills for the employee to possess to be successful, although actual technical skills are not pivotal. Of course, role is significant, as those who are required to have face to face contact with others will not benefit.

#### **Leadership Roles**

Hoch and Kozlowski (2012) discuss practical implications for leaders of virtual teams, noting that hierarchical leadership is less strongly related to team performance when teams are remote. Providing management with the appropriate support and training may be helpful, as these individuals may need more time and resources allocated to leading virtual team members versus those who are face to face. In terms of health care business sectors, leaders will need to account for the time and effort that is necessary to implement and sustain successful work-from-home initiatives.

#### **Organizational Culture**

A primary theme that can be tied to the success of virtual offices and health care culture is that of control – or in reverse, a focus on accountability. Organizational culture has a significant impact on flexible work policies and companies with a control-oriented culture struggle with work-from-home initiatives (Timsal & Awais, 2016). Teleworking should not be restricted to virtual organizations. Rather, it will flourish in a culture that values trust from both managers and peers, as well as in departments that measure results rather than attendance (Baruch, 2000).

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH TELEWORKING**

Ethical involvement in health care business policy rarely equates to black and white; in fact, health care is constantly changing because of it. While patients expect to be treated ethically, professionals do as well.

John Stuart Mill's theory of utilitarianism is often used in policy development because of the nature of cost and benefit analysis (Morrison, 2020). This theory can be applied to work-from-home initiatives as benefits and disadvantages must be weighed by leaders, and the consequences of these decisions will ultimately form rules in terms of policy. When considering virtual office initiatives, leaders must determine if the benefits produce the most good for both the employee and organization, and at the same time, the least amount of harm. They must balance benefits and risks to obtain justice for all associated components. In terms of justice for staff, similar working employees should receive similar benefits – there is a need for fairness and equity in the treatment of health care staff (Morrison, 2020). While teleworking may be applicable to non-clinical departments, it is often not feasible for patient-facing providers, even when telehealth is an option.

### **A Privilege for the Already Privileged**

Often in health care, the issue of providing quality, comprehensive services to both the “haves” and “have nots” in a community is an important, ethical consideration for administrators. Distributive justice is no different when considering those who have the option to telework and what is fair or appropriate when allocating resources (Morrison, 2020). Felstead et al. (2002) notes that there are considerable differences between those who have the *option* to work from home and those who are *required* to. Often the most disadvantaged in society are required to use their home as a workspace whereas those with the option to do so generally already have advantageous positions. For example, those who are required to use their home generally are denied flexi-time, parental leave, cost of daycare, or other such benefits, and are associated with distinct divisions of health, job tenure and low pay. The authors conclude that, employees who have the option to telework generally have more say in the way work is organized and are more trusted, committed and satisfied. The ethical principle of autonomy and choosing for oneself is a basic moral human right and the lack of autonomy can affect wellbeing (Morrison, 2020).

### **An Invasion of Personal Privacy**

The use of technology can easily become an ethical concern for health care administrators when patient privacy or protected information is involved and security is necessary. Further, remote work can initiate an ethical worry associated with employee privacy. This presents a case in which invasion of individual privacy is feasible, as employee communication can be easily monitored and accessed without their knowledge or consent (Baruch, 2000). While this is common practice within the workplace, teleworkers are no longer publically monitored when they remote in, but now privately within their own homes. Ethically speaking, administrators must consider staff nonmaleficence when balancing risk and reward.

## **CONCLUSION**

Health care administrators can make informed decisions about implementing virtual office policies in non-clinical business sectors by weighing benefits and disadvantages related to both the employee and organization. Suggested actions to lessen telework shortcomings include giving employees the option to participate rather than requiring them to, limiting virtual offices to two or less days a week and integrating face-to-face meetings to establish bonding and trust. While research directly linking telework to health care sectors is limited, employee personality traits, leadership roles and organizational culture can be used to determine its success. In this way, leaders can determine if the benefits of virtual offices produce the most good for both the employee and organization, with the least amount of harm.

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