

Working From Home: One Team's Story

by Stephanie Clark

Tales from the Field, a monthly column, consists of reports of evidence-based performance improvement practice and advice, presented by graduate students, alumni, and faculty of Boise State University's Instructional and Performance Technology department.

Introduction and Setting

In today's business world, it is increasingly common for people to work from home on virtual teams. With advances in technology and the creation of more knowledge-based jobs, organizational structures have been adapted to make it easier for people in different locations to work together efficiently (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). While working on a virtual team may be a condition of one's employment, it is not clear what makes individuals choose virtual work options, and when they do, what keeps them in such a position. This report summarizes a research project that was conducted in Dr. Winiiecki's Ethnographic Research in Organizations class at Boise State University in the fall of 2010. The purpose of this research was to identify factors that influenced members of a small virtual eLearning team in their decision to work from home, and the benefits and constraints which motivated individuals to stay with this form of employment.

Research Process

The research was conducted with eleven virtual team members scattered across the U.S. and Europe. As a member of the team, I was also one of the informants as well as the researcher. During the research, one team member worked in a company office instead of from home. To examine the influences that played a role in the decision to initially work from home and to remain there, this research blended two ethnographic paradigms: (a) ecological and (b) interpretive (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). The ecological paradigm allows the researcher to study systems from the top-down, emphasizing the influence of organizational and technological factors. The interpretive paradigm facilitates a bottom-up analysis, emphasizing the influence of personal and interpersonal factors on the system and its parts.

The preliminary framework was provided by Chevalier's updated Behavior Engineering Model (2003). Both paradigms and the updated Behavior Engineering Model illuminated possible environmental and internal factors that may have been major influences in the virtual team members' decisions.

Original data collected for this project came from open-ended interviews (ten team members), self-reflection, semi-structured interviews (nine team members and three family members), and a web-based search for employment opportunities. My data analysis solidified the factors and variables influencing team members' decisions. Then a final survey determined the weight of each of these identified factors for individual team members and the team overall.

Identified Influences in Work-from-Home Decision

Table 1 lists the six independent domains and their factors revealed through the data analysis. Figure 1 shows the independent domains and their interrelationships as influencers on the

dependent domain (DD): the team members’ decisions to initially work from home and to remain working from home.

Table 1: Independent Domains and Their Factors

Independent Domains		
Availability of Employment	Personal Knowledge	Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Companies’ trend: move to virtual • Layoffs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work relocated - Restructuring • Other employment opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialized expertise <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Highly complex roles - Strong computer skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Office space • Technology <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Computer hardware - Computer software - Phones
Family Situation	Flexibility	Other Incentives, Traits, Constraints
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children • Spouse’s work • Pets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hourly - Daily - Weekly • Household responsibilities • Location • Choose paid opportunities • Career path 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social • Traits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adaptability - Discipline • Boundaries

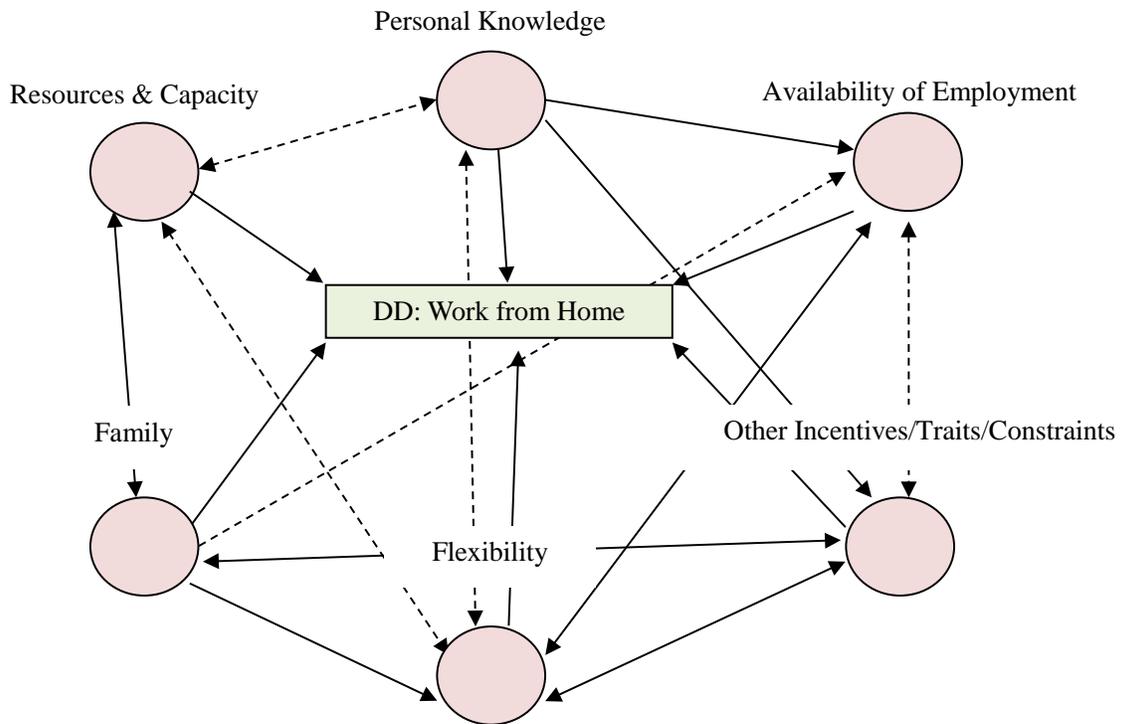


Figure 1. Relationships of Independent Domains and the Dependent Domain (solid arrows are strong, clear relationships; dotted arrows are underlying, more subtle relationships).

All domains were interrelated and had varying impacts on team members. Flexibility was the single largest influence for team members involved in this research. It not only influenced the dependent domain (work from home) but was related to all of the independent domains as well (Figure 1). In addition, for several people, unemployment and limited availability of employment were driving factors for initially working from home. Others chose to work from home for family reasons such as the ability to care for children. All of the team members either had prior knowledge of the company owners and/or company products, or had expert knowledge desired by the company before employment with the company.

As a virtual team, we are completely dependent upon technology, and in most cases, this technology is both supplied and maintained by individual team members. Therefore, computer expertise was a factor in team members' ability to work from home, as was the availability of appropriate space for a home office.

Finally, team members agreed that there were benefits and constraints to working from home and in order to be successful, the worker must be independent, self-motivated and disciplined, with strong organizational and time-management skills. Most team members did not search specifically for home employment but now prefer it due to the overall flexibility, added interaction with families and other personally-valued relationships (including pets), and rewards associated with the potential for increased productivity.

Transferability of Findings

This research details factors influencing one small virtual team. Findings here may inform subsequent research to determine the influence of these domains and factors on other teams. If they are found to be reliable across members in other virtual teams, this research can be the basis for subsequent organizational adaptations to attract and retain competent virtual workers. In addition, by exploring what factors are important for those who are successful at working from home, it may provide information that helps job seekers determine if they should expand their job search to include work-at-home positions. Finally, organizations can review this research to better understand motivating factors for their employees. This knowledge will help them evaluate whether virtual team settings align with company goals and would be advantageous to those involved.

References

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Author bio



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