TAKE THIS JOB HOME AND LOVE IT:

Virtual employment that works

by Stephen Brimmer

Over the past few months, I interviewed five people who work in a virtual environment. Considering it was relatively easy to find virtual employees for these interviews, telecommuting is growing in popularity, especially in areas where traffic congestion and drive times are increasing. Marvin, one of my interviewees, stated he would not want to return to a traditional office environment even if the pay were greater for the same job.

Becky left her previous job, in part, because her employer was unwilling to consider a tele-work option. She believes it is the most desired perk for many in the Washington, D.C. area. Cindy Waxer (2006), contributing editor for TMCnet concludes that the combination of broadband Internet availability, a large number of tele-work friendly jobs, and Washington, D.C.'s distinction of having one of the most time-consuming and costly commutes in the U.S. increases the benefits of telecommuting.

Tele-work is defined as normal work responsibilities with a technology component, such as telephone or computer outside a traditional office environment. In the next few pages, we'll explore what tele-workers experience in the virtual environment, focusing on the unique aspects of communication, structure and relationships in managing an effective virtual team.

Lots to Love

All of my interviewees expressed a high level of job satisfaction as virtual employees. Typically, their employers were very selective in choosing tele-workers, which created a feeling of being recognized and rewarded for possessing the right qualifications. In addition to this, I noted several other common reasons for loving tele-work.

Good-bye Road Rage

Tele-workers are delighted to avoid traffic congestion and long commute times. The future for local commuters doesn't look very bright. "Regional forecasts for 2020 show a 70% increase in vehicle miles traveled, while highway capacity is projected to increase only 20%" (www.wmtc.org, The Future is Now section, para. 1).

Three of my interviewees have positions that require a significant amount of air travel. Craig regularly visits his company's offices in St. Louis and San Diego as well as in Washington, D.C. Karolyn makes trips to the West Coast at least twice a month. Peter travels to wherever he is needed as a recruiter

for IBM executives. While air travel can have its own frustrations, my interviewees would choose them over sitting bumper to bumper on the freeway.

Hello Blue Jeans

It's nice not having to dress up for work every day. Jennifer is a programmer/analyst for IBM. All six members of her team work at home. Marvin now works alone at home after many years of managing a traditional office for a major telephone company. Both Jennifer and Marvin find their home environment relaxing and productive. Mary Naylor (2006), founder of VIPdesk, argues that tele-work reduces turnover in personnel, benefits families by creating a better balance of work and life, and ultimately helps the economy.

Thanks for Caring

Looking out for employees is good for business. In fact, all of my interviewees think it is good business practice for employers to provide tele-work opportunities. When employees have more control of their work environment, production increases because they put out more effort (Pfeffer, 1998). Becky recently left her high-level security clearance job in a company that does a lot of government contracting. She was burned-out and frustrated because her company was downsizing, leaving her with even more responsibilities. Adding to her pain, company executives were unresponsive to her suggestions for improving efficiency. One of the suggestions Becky and others were making was to develop virtual teams. This could result in both cost savings to the company and employee satisfaction. Unfortunately, her bosses were resistant to change.

Some Flies in the Perfume

Notwithstanding the benefits of tele-work, it is not utopia. The virtual environment creates some unique challenges for both leaders and workers. Craig supervises a staff of 215 people who work in 16 locations. He believes it takes more time and effort to manage people outside the traditional office for several reasons. First, it is more difficult to get information to them. Second, feeling connected can be a problem for people at all levels of the virtual team. Phone calls are not always answered; voicemails and emails are not always acknowledged in a timely manner. Third, when out of sight, it takes above average organizational skills to keep up with who is where.

Not Blinded by Love

Other disadvantages mentioned by my interviewees are feelings of loneliness from lack of face-to-face time with office colleagues and infringement on family time. As virtual team leaders, they were provided cell phones and Blackberry's with the expectation that they would maintain a high level of accessibility. This sometimes results in disruption of meal times, family outings and even normal off-hours conversations.

Under New Management

In a traditional office, performance and productivity can be measured by observation of employees. The virtual worker cannot be observed and therefore must be managed in a different way. This has created "managerial dilemmas" for leaders who believe worker productivity is linked to how closely they are watched and controlled (Handy, 1995). Each of my interviewees cited the importance of virtual workers being capable of self-management. The leaders in their virtual environments were quite comfortable with this practice. Self-management is viewed as "a partial substitute for leadership" (Yukl, 2006, p. 136). Tele-workers usually take more personal responsibility for their work and depend less on leaders to direct and motivate them.

Leading From Good to Better

Karolyn works for a government launch agency. She leads a staff of five project engineers who influence the design of the rockets needed to put their satellites in space. Karolyn lives in Virginia. She reports to her director who lives in Los Angeles, whose boss lives in Virginia. They are part of a unit of 200 people who live in six locations ranging from Washington, D.C. to California. The entire unit "tags up" daily through conference calls or video-conferencing. Once a week they also access charts by computer during the call. This virtual team has combined technology and appropriate management techniques to achieve outstanding results. They are constantly evaluating and searching for ways to improve team effectiveness.

High-level Communication

Peter is a recruiting program manager for IBM. He interfaces with company vice presidents, technical recruiters and potential hires to fill specific upper-level positions. All of Peter's team members are tele-workers. His boss lives in New York City while his primary technical recruiter lives in Texas. He rarely sees either but is in daily contact with them. Communication is vital to his success. For Peter, the purpose of frequent contact is to keep everyone updated about what is happening and what's coming up. He works hard "to hold everyone together in the process."
Effective communication is vital to effective leadership because it shapes the attitudes and behaviors necessary to accomplish group goals (Hackman & Johnson, 2000). Everyone on a virtual team, especially leaders, must be diligent about regular interaction with other team members.

Leading by presence. Jennifer requires her team, all working at home, to work the same hours "so she can keep the pulse on everybody." There is constant peer communication among her team members. She doesn't worry when team members are offended by her inquiries about their work activities – "sometimes you have to have thick skin and pry." Communication through phone, email and database sharing is one of the supervision tools of a virtual leader. Keeping that presence is a way to know what everyone is doing.

Sharing of information among Jennifer's team is a key component of producing deliverables and meeting deadlines. For example, her team recently produced a report for the Office of Planning and Coordination for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration. Their assignment was to determine the satisfaction level of people going through the immigration process based on quantitative and qualitative research methods. Information was gathered through a website survey and an "800" line manned by 10-15 temporary hires. In addition, her team conducted focus groups and waiting-room interviews. Several college students were hired to analyze the data.

Jennifer's permanent team of six people was responsible for the coordination of gathering of data, analyzing the data, passing information, writing the report, wordsmithing and producing a high-

quality Power Point presentation. To do this, they made use of NotesBuddy instant message software developed by Alpha Works. The toolbox for this program shows who is available and tracks individual participation. The need for her team to practice high-level communication is project-driven.

The right amount of accessibility. Marvin is perpetually logged onto his email account when he is working. His company notifies him when a client like Qwest, Sprint or Verizon has a problem with a high-speed data transmission cable. It's then his job to hire and dispatch a sub-contractor to the problem location, which could be anywhere in the world. Marvin supervises on-site cable testing as well as remote circuit testing until the problem is diagnosed – all from his cell phone. He stays in touch with the technician until the problem is fixed or his shift ends. In addition, Marvin enters every call and every action into his company's database. If he's working, Marvin is highly accessible.

In a very different scenario, Craig's team specializes in expert analysis of intelligence information. They produce multi-media presentations on intelligence issues for congressional briefings. Typically, Craig has day-to-day communication with four to five people including his superior, direct reports over his 215 staff members and current customers and sub-contractors. Team members sometimes contact him for information they could easily find themselves. To protect himself from this, Craig has learned to limit his accessibility by sometimes delaying responses to voicemails and emails.

Know your people and adapt to their style. The success Karolyn has had in leading her space launch team has a lot to do with the effort she puts into her communication with them. She makes it her responsibility to know the communication needs and style preferences of each person and then adapts to him or her. Superior communication skills were evident in all the virtual team leaders I interviewed.

Team Structure

Not every group is a team. A team works together for a specific purpose on a common product and shares accountability for the collective results (Hackman & Johnson, 2000).

Craig believes the best leader in a virtual environment is an entrepreneurial type person who is used to making things happen. "The best followers are people who think for themselves and take initiative" (Hackman & Johnson, 2000, p. 51). Great teams consist of both effective leaders and effective followers.

When hiring new employees, Karolyn looks for self-starters who are highly skilled in their area of expertise and who exhibit courage and honesty. It's important to pick the right people for a tele-work team. Not everyone is suitable for that environment. "Those employees who are highly focused, self-sufficient, flexible, have great organizational skills and enjoy the solitude of working at home may be the most adaptable to teleworking" (VIACK Corporation, p. 3).

Interdependence. I found some degree of interdependence built into the job requirements of all my interviewees. Interdependence means, "The success of any one member of the group depends on everyone doing his or her part" (Hackman & Johnson, 2000, p. 195). Often this was due to the complex nature of the projects. It also works well as a management strategy. Multiple layers of accountability are created when team members are dependent on other team members to provide critical information for their part of the project

Collaboration. Most of the virtual employees I interviewed contributed to a shared database provided by their company. Sophisticated collaboration software, such as NotesBuddy by Alpha Works and SharePoint by Microsoft are used by some of the larger companies. An appropriate collaboration tool can be a great help to a virtual team. VIACK Corporation lists ten questions on their website to help customers select an appropriate solution. Some programs provide instant messaging, real-time document editing as well as audio and video connections for as many "seats" as the customer wishes to purchase. Team interdependence is greatly enhanced when team members are contributing to a shared database.

Accountability. As team leader, Jennifer spends a lot of her time setting team goals, then assigning individual tasks and creating a calendar for deliverables. Once everyone is aware of the entire plan, that is all the accountability that is needed. Productivity is measured by individual contributions to a database. Instant messaging and time-stamped emails allow team members to observe what others are doing.

One of the keys to servant leadership is to provide definition, structure and motivation to followers (Miller, 1995). Servant leaders provide accountability by clearly communicating to employees what is expected of them and when it must be delivered.

Trusting Relationships

"How do you manage people whom you do not see? The simple answer is, by trusting them" (Handy, 1995, p. 1). The seven cardinal rules for trust acknowledge, "Trust is not blind. It is unwise to trust people whom you do not know well." Rule six states, "Trust requires leaders. At their best, the units in good trust-based organizations hardly have to be managed, but they do need a multiplicity of leaders" (Handy, 1995, pp. 4-5).

Trust is huge. Marvin's present employer hired him because he already had a good relationship with him and knew he could trust him. Craig believes some companies are reluctant to allow telecommuting because they do not trust their employees. Every person I interviewed pointed to trust as a key factor in managing virtual teams. Trust may or may not have to be earned at the outset, but it has to be maintained through competency and frequent communication.

Interpersonal connectivity. Leader-member exchange theory (LMX) explains the development of relationships between leaders and their followers in organizations. Over time, multiple interactions result in increasing or decreasing commitment and loyalty between a leader and a member (Yukl, 2006). High exchange relationships result in trust while low exchange relationships retain some level of suspicion.

My interviews indicate that virtual teams move to high exchange relationships quickly. When trust is broken, violators are quickly replaced. The virtual team cannot survive without trust.

I Want That Job!

None of my interviewees received any training specific to tele-work. All are highly competent in their industry. However, their personal qualities distinguish them for their positions as virtual team leaders. The Christian values that have shaped them, also give them an edge among their peers. Peter goes the extra mile by personally meeting new hires at their office on their first day. He was never asked to do this, but he knows it means a lot to them. When Marvin gets a technician that is unfamiliar with the high-speed circuits his company uses, he patiently stays on the phone to walk the technician through each step.

Peter, Marvin, Karolyn, Jennifer and Craig are all honest, hard-working people who care about those with whom they work. They have learned and incorporate the values Jesus taught in the Beatitudes (Winston, 2002). In the workplace, these leaders demonstrate love through openness, trust and concern for others. Living out the Beatitudes is great preparation for leading a virtual team.

About the Author

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