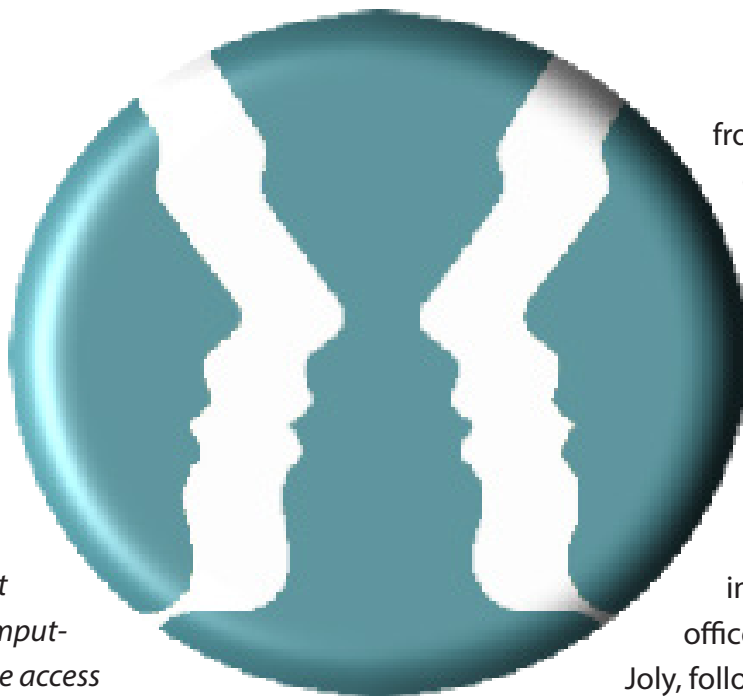# A Look at Telecommuting and the Need for Face-to-Face Interaction

by Jennifer L. Williams

My alarm goes off at 6:30 A.M. on a Monday morning. I wake up, put on my warm sweatpants and sweatshirt, and pad upstairs towards my desk in my home office. I rouse my sleeping daughter in the adjacent room and then sit at my desk, turn on my computer, log into my Citrix remote access software, and open my applications to begin my workday at 6:35 A.M. The short commute to work is a perk of my job; I am a remote employee.

Seven years ago I became the second employee ever to work from home (not including our sales reps in the field); my company currently employs over 200 remote workers. This trend does not stop with my progressive company. A move that was once considered progressive is quickly becoming mainstream. Corporate America, with the advancement of technology, has embraced the culture of telecommuting. According to Global Workplace Analytics and the Telework Research Network, "Regular telecommuting grew by 73% between 2005 and 2011 compared to only 4.3% growth of the overall workforce (not including the self-employed). Based on current trends, with no growth acceleration, regular telecommuters will total 4.9 million by 2016, a 69% increase from the current level." It is clear that telecommuting is here to stay for the foreseeable future. And yet, in a controversial move, new Yahoo! CEO Marissa Mayer recently received criticism in the mainstream media for calling her telecommuting employees back into the office. Best Buy CEO, Hubert Joly, followed suit just a week later by reining in his telecommuting policy as well. Is this a sign of the pendulum swinging back the other way to a more traditional work environment, or are these special cases of CEOs using drastic measures to turn around flailing companies? Time will tell. The bigger question is whether or not the trend of the modern workplace *should* shift back to a more face-to-face collaborative environment, or does technology allow a remote experience that is just as, if not more, effective as if employees were face-to-face? The actions of Mayer and Joly have sparked debate on this topic as the economy attempts to make its own shift back into the black. The answer to this question, however, is not so black and white.

Face-to-face interaction is vital to job satisfaction and, in turn, productivity. The longer someone works remotely, without a conscious effort for intermittent face-to-face interactions, the more like-

ly that job satisfaction will decrease. I will present three studies that promote the need for face-to-face interaction. The first study will look at organizational identity, the second study addresses the issue of job satisfaction, and the third study takes a look at team empowerment. I will then address other factors that impact the job satisfaction and overall success of a telecommuter, including the lengthened workday and how telecommuting affects assimilation into the workplace. Lastly, I will address the issue of justice within the workplace and present some generalizations I noticed in my own survey results of current telecommuters. Ultimately, business owners need to know the factors at play in determining the best course of action for their employees, whether they choose to work at corporate headquarters or venture out into the world of telecommuting.

Martin Chuck, a best-selling writer and lecturer on business issues, addresses the importance of face-to-face interaction in an article written for *CIO* entitled, "The Importance of Face-to-Face Communications at Work." Martin makes the point that we are falling back on technology to do our communicating rather than having honest and up-front communication in person. He also points out a fundamental strategy of technical communicators: It is so important to match the audience and purpose

> *"We must understand the artifactual nature of familiar communication like face-to-face in order to prevent prejudice about new media."*

of communication with the appropriate medium. Sometimes this is, in fact, email or a text message. But oftentimes the appropriate communication should include face-to-face or video conferencing at the very least if face-to-face is not an option.

Ronald E. Rice, from the School of Communication, Information and Library Studies at Rutgers University in Newark, furthers this idea by positioning face-to-face communication as an artifact of traditional media, and he shows that it is simply one aspect of our evolution of communication and media distribution. Face-to-face communication isn't thought of in that respect because it has been largely immune from the kinds of critiques applied to new media. Perhaps it is because the social practices of interpersonal communication are so much more firmly embedded in our socialization and culture, but some writers still project onto face-to-face communication a sort of romantic, mythic, idealized notion. Thus, interpersonal communication is still privileged and much of its artifactual nature has yet to be uncovered (26)

We must understand the artifactual nature of familiar communication like face-to-face in order to prevent prejudice about new media. In other words, there is a time and place for effectiveness of face-to-face in the same way that there is a time and place for effectiveness for email, texting, or video-conferencing. For telecommuters, it must be determined how much face-to-face time they need not only to do their jobs effectively, but also to be motivated and satisfied in doing their jobs at all.

Our identities are formed by what we do in our every day lives. We identify as a doctor, a salesman, a cosmetologist, or a financial advisor. Whatever our occupation, our identities are fully invested in our line of work. We further define our identities by our roles within our workplace and how we contribute to that organization. These roles are known as organizational-related identities. It is important to understand the role identity plays in deciding to allow an employee to telecommute. How we perceive our work and our contribution to our organization can have positive and negative ramifications on our productivity and, ultimately, our own wellbeing. In other words, if I feel very satisfied with my contributions

and output within my role at my company, I have a very positive identity construct that further motivates my continued success within that organization. If I am not satisfied with my role in the

of identity research are fundamentally connected, yet each has a distinct focus and contributes uniquely to our understanding of identity" (1077-1078). Telecommuting affects these identities

Table 1: Types of Identity

Identity	Definition
Social	Social identity operates when one is assimilated into social units whereby "I" becomes "we," and it incorporates the characteristics of the social unit into one's self-concept.
Self-Verification	Posits that individuals have a fundamental need for others to see them as they see themselves and that individuals actively seek to bring others' appraisal in line with their self views.
Habitual Routines	Identity is not just an abstract perception of the individual one thinks oneself to be but, rather, a continual process of habitual activities that confers a sense of structure and a sense of coherence on one's daily life.

Source: Thatcher & Zhu, 1077-1078

organization for any reason, it will directly impact my future productivity within the organization.

Sherry M.B. Thatcher and Xiumei Zhu discuss identity within the changing landscape of the workplace, particularly telecommuting, in their journal article, "Changing Identities in a Changing Workplace: Identification, Identity Enactment, Self-Verification, and Telecommuting." Thatcher and Zhu discuss three types of identity theory research that contribute to the discussion of identity in the workplace, also known as organizational identity.

Social identity incorporates a sense of belonging to a group; self-verification is important because it reassures individuals that they are perceived accurately and expectations are set accordingly; and habitual routines further solidify identity by the actions taken on a daily basis. "The three streams

because it changes the context of work socially, physically, and psychologically. Not only does it affect the connectedness (i.e. feeling isolated or irrelevant) of an employee with their coworkers and manager, but it also affects their other-related identities, specifically related to home where they may need to set clear boundaries dividing work from home life. This identity shift causes a greater need for telecommuters to re-establish their identities in other ways to ensure success within their organizations. "Telecommuters are likely to be more productive and satisfied with their job when they are able to obtain or sustain high levels of verification of organization-related identities" (1082).

So what is the solution to this problem of identity for telecommuters? Within the current framework, organizational identification must be sustained and strengthened; however, Thatcher and Zhu of-

Table 2: Types of Alternative Identities

Identity	Concept/Definition	Examples
Professional	Identification with a professional aligns the objectives of the nontraditional worker with those of the employer. These individuals work for their client or are temporarily employed by one or more organizations, without identifying with them, yet they have a strong stake in excellent performance.	Traveling nurse, Consultant
Personal Career	An individual with a "boundaryless" career path focuses on accumulating skills and experiences that ensure success in the labor market rather than secure long-term membership in a single organization.	Person with no one company; wants to acquire skills for the next job.
Identity Balance	This identity creates a balance between work-life and home-life. Organizations that are able to promote a balance of organization-related and other-related identities may be able to effectively align the goals of the employee with the productivity goals of the organization.	Popular with employees who have families and want more flexibility and time to be at home tending to family needs.

Source: Thatcher & Zhu, 1083

fer three alternative identities to achieve success as a telecommuter as shown in Table 2.

The implications of these changing identities must be understood. "Managers must provide psychological and structural support for telecommuters" (1086). Furthermore, "individuals who demonstrate certain personality traits, such as a strong desire for self-verification and a heavy reliance on external coordination and guidance, should not telecommute. Individuals who are relatively indifferent to having their identities verified and who have strong self-guidance may make better telecommuters, being less prone to anxiety or frustration when supervisors or colleagues do not verify their identities, and being able to work without immediate feedback and guidance" (1086). Simply stated, not everybody is cut out to be a remote worker. One of the subjects of a survey I conducted, a remote worker herself, commented on this very issue. She said, "Even if the position can be done remotely, sometimes the people themselves are simply not cut out for being remote workers. They just don't have the traits necessary to hold themselves accountable. It truly is a privilege, not a right, to work remotely." I received this sentiment from more than one individual in the survey I conducted, but more on that later.

It is 9:00 in the morning, and I am on a conference call with managers and decision-makers from multiple departments within my company. There is a discussion about what angle we should take on a promotional piece for a price increase in our product. I hear a rustling of papers that muffles over the words of the Director of Development. I am pretty sure the Public Relations Specialist is joking when he makes a sarcastic remark, but it is difficult to determine without seeing his facial expression. I am doing my best to stay with the conversation, but my lack of physical presence in the room causes my eye to wander to my email inbox where I proceed to answer an email that has just come into the queue. This distraction pulls me out of the conversation for a minute, and when I re-enter the conversation, I am lost. I am trying to get up to speed with the meeting when my phone line is disconnected, and nobody is aware that I am no longer on the line. Once they figure out that I am no longer there, I've missed over ten minutes of the conversation.

In 2010, I was promoted to Product Manager and held that position for two years within my company as a telecommuter. It was a challenging role in which I had virtually no experience. Upon accepting that offer, I requested a mentor who could guide me in my transition and ensure my success. Instead, I was put under the guidance of someone who was not only NOT a leader or a mentor, but she was not knowledgeable in my role or what it should entail. Without that proper guidance, my experience in this position resulted in very poor social identity, self-verification, and a lack of understanding about what my habitual routines should be. My lack of identity as a product manager and my manager's lack of ability to support me created anxiety, stress, and feelings of inadequacy that could have been avoided with appropriate management and location. Many of my hardships within that position could have been avoided if I had been working in-house, under a normal sense of organizational identity. My phys-

ical presence and face-to-face interactions (as my role demanded me to work with various departments and hold many meetings), not to mention my ability to learn while on the job, would have greatly increased my success rate in that position. When I moved into a sales role, the negative effects of being remote were lessened because my understanding of my role was greater, and my need for contact with other departments became almost non-existent. My changing identity was a huge factor in my lack of success in the product manager role, but there were other factors at play as well, which I will address later.

Timothy D. Golden expands on the issue of job satisfaction related to telecommuting in his study as explained in "The Role of Relationships in Understanding Telecommuter Satisfaction." This study hypothesizes that the relationship between job satisfaction and telecommuting is curvilinear. The study focuses on three relationships as shown in Table 3 on the following page.

Overall, Golden suggests that managers promote telecommuting with caution and suggest having telecommuters

> *"Golden suggests that managers promote telecommuting with caution and suggests having telecommuters only do so on either a temporary basis or on a part-time basis."*

only do so on either a temporary basis or on a part-time basis so as not to decrease the quality of the relationship between the leader and member as well as the coworkers or team members. However, leaders should also understand that telecommuting improves the family relationships of the employee, which also increases job satisfaction.

Another study focused on the performance of virtual teams (teams of telecommuters) and

Table 3: Relationship between Work Relationships and Job Satisfaction Over Time

Relationship	Job Satisfaction: Shorter Period of Time	Job Satisfaction: Longer Period of Time
Leader-member exchange (LMX)	Little or no impact	Decreases
Team-member exchange (TMX)	Little or no impact	Decreases
Work-family	Increased	Increased

Source: Golden, 321-4

their effectiveness in comparison to colocated (in-house) teams. The article argues that team empowerment may be more important for those virtual teams who do not meet face-to-face regularly. The article further argues, "the extent to which virtual team members assemble for intact face-to-face meetings is an important process factor that likely changes fundamental features of task accomplishment" (Kirkman 179). What this is saying is that telecommuters will have increased amounts of intrinsic motivations and relational connections, which in turn leads to a higher level of team empowerment, the more they meet face-to-face. "Teams with few opportunities to meet face-to-face are highly vulnerable to process losses and performance problems" (Kirkman 180). This article is especially beneficial in instructing managers to determine how many face-to-face meetings should be arranged to further encourage team empowerment, and if they don't have control over the number of face-to-face meetings, they then need to focus their team-building efforts on increasing team empowerment.

With each of the studies presented, there is a clear theme. Face-to-face interaction still holds as a valuable, and oftentimes, necessary form of communication among workers within an organization. Telecommuters lack the ability to meet face-to-face, which poses challenges that must be overcome through today's technology as well as rethinking the structure of management, accountability, and workplace identity. Beyond that, however, are other challenges that telecommuters face on a day-to-day basis.

It is 5:00 P.M. and I still have four emails to answer and two proposals to write. Meanwhile, I am getting a phone call from an employee on the west coast who needs to update me on the outcome of a meeting. With the flexibility of working from home, at five o'clock I have nowhere else to be; I am already home. It is expected that I should be able to take an extra hour to finish up my tasks before ending my workday. This is a normal occurrence for me as a remote worker. Five o'clock does not mark the end of my day. It is an arbitrary number with little significance due to my "flexible" work schedule. Later that

night around 9:00 P.M. while relaxing after putting my daughter to bed for the evening, I hear my phone ding. It is an email alert coming in. I check my phone and discover a request for another proposal. Rather than putting it off until morning, I go back up to my office and address the issue at once.

I have discussed identity, job satisfaction, and team empowerment as important factors that affect the success of a telecommuter. There are other factors that come into play related to telecommuting. In the book *Alone Together,* Sherry Turkle addresses some of the issues that advancements in technology and new media are creating. Turkle writes, "Connectivity technologies once promised to give us more time. But as the cell phone and smartphone eroded the boundaries between work and leisure, all the time in the world was not enough. Even when we are not 'at work,' we experience ourselves as 'on call'; pressed, we want to edit out complexity and 'cut to the chase'" (13). Turkle is not alone in this type of thinking. Mary C. Noonan and Jennifer L. Glass present a similar sentiment in their article published in the *Monthly Labor Review,* "The Hard Truth About Telecommuting." In this article, Noonan and Glass show how telecommuting, though positioned to give employees more freedom and autonomy, is actually doing the opposite. "Instead, telecommuting appears to have become instrumental in the general expansion of work time beyond the standard workweek and/or the ability of employers to increase or intensify work demands among their salaried employees" (39). As employees look for more flexibility and/or more time with family within their workday, they might want to consider the drawbacks.

"Connectivity technologies once promised to give us more time. But as the cell phone and smartphone eroded the boundaries between work and leisure, all the time in the world was not enough."

Noonan and Glass continue to give statistics to back up their claims. The study they conducted stated, "Most notably, telecommuters worked between five and seven total hours more per week than non-telecommuters" (40). Furthermore, Noonan and Glass claim that "while telecommuting may in theory be a solution to the dilemmas of combining work and family, telecommuting in practice does not unequivocally meet the needs of workers with significant caregiving responsibilities" (44-45). This claim supports my own thoughts on using telecommuting as a reason to be home more with the kids. Although telecommuting frees up time that would otherwise be used to commute to and from work, it should not be assumed that mothers and/or fathers are able to supervise or spend time with their kids while working from home. I could not do my job at home if my daughter was with me. My focus is on my work when I am working. Telecommuting is not necessarily the answer to some of the problems posed by those desiring to work from home, specifically those looking to be home with their kids at the same time.

An issue of telecommuting not widely discussed is the process of assimilation into an organization without time spent face-to-face within the organization. Jennifer H. Waldeck, David R. Seibold, and Andrew J. Flanagin did a study on the perceived effectiveness of assimilation using face-to-face communication, traditional media (i.e. handbooks, memos, other written materials, and telephone conversations), and Advanced Communication and Information Technologies (ACIT). "Results indicate that face-to-face communication is the most important predictor of assimilation effectiveness, followed by ACIT use. Least important are traditional technologies" (161). The article

speaks to the fact that face-to-face communication is the richest medium for organizational communication but that ACITs enhance the assimilation process.

The article also addresses the idea that social influence within an organization will show behavior for or against a particular thought process related to an issue. For example, my company is very pro-telecommuting and supports the practice for many of its workers. Because it is so commonplace there, the majority of people at the company supports it and views it positively. The article states, "[We] found that the opinions of supervisors and co-workers were an important predictor of employee attitudes regarding video-conferencing technology" (169). Further, "Face-to-face communication appears to be the most important predictor of effective assimilation, and traditional technologies are the least predictive of assimilation effectiveness. Thus ACITs fall between face-to-face communication and traditional technologies as sources of assimilation-related information and uncertainty-reducing interaction" (177). These findings serve to enhance my assertion that face-to-face interaction is still a necessary form of communication within an organization. Another survey recipient agreed with this assertion during the assimilation process when she said, "I think it's important that people do get time face-to-face even if it's coming to the office for a week to have relationship-building time." The majority of my survey recipients agreed that *some* face-to-face time was a positive and oftentimes necessary aspect of successfully telecommuting.

Finally, Waldeck, Seibold, and Flanagin assert that assimilation into an organization requires a great deal of "on-the-job learning" that one can only get from within the physical space of the organization. They state, "Although many members receive some formal training for their jobs, they find that a great deal of learning takes place on the job.

They often 'learn from the inside' as they interact with one another, and as they observe and practice the norms of their organizations and learn the subtle nuances of their jobs" (162).

Corey Wick expands on this argument in his article, "Knowledge Management and Leadership Opportunities for Technical Communicators." Wick supports the idea that learning and knowing is a collaborative process that depends on the social construct of community, shared values and beliefs, language, and dialogue. Wick discusses the different levels of knowledge management and how each level builds upon the next: document-centered, technology-centered, and socio-centered. All three build to form a knowledge organization. A huge part of that knowledge building within an organization is *tacit* knowledge, or those things that we know but cannot tell, which can only be achieved through social interaction (518). What Wick is asserting is that there is value in learning in the presence of others and collaborating to form connections and knowledge. An example of this is learning by listening to those around us. We pick up knowledge in non-explicit ways by observing, listening, and mimicking our coworkers. This is invaluable knowledge that cannot be learned through telecommuting.
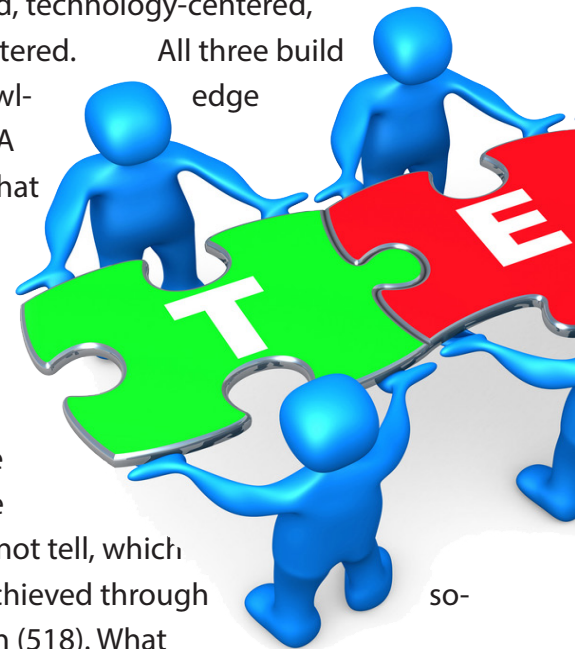
I am sitting in the CEO's boardroom. He is restructuring the Sales Department, and we are meeting to discuss my prior experience and potential future at our company. I have recognized the opportunity of a promotion due to a change in leadership, and I

am using the opportunity as leverage to further my career within the organization. This meeting and opportunity did not simply present itself. I requested the meeting, I did my homework, I laid out my strengths and weaknesses, and I presented my case for creating this position within our organization. I am being proactive. At the end of this meeting, I am promoted within the division I currently work.

Remote workers need to be not only proactive but consistently mindful of their position and value within the organization. Many remote workers speak to the privilege they feel of being able to telecommute. Many others speak to the worry that a promotion is less likely due to their location, being out-of-sight and, therefore, out-of-mind. Justice perceptions among employees are an important factor within a functional organization. Nancy B. Kurland and Terri D. Egan studied this aspect of organizational science in their article, "Telecommuting: Justice and Control in the Virtual Organization. Kurland and Egan identified three types of justice that could positively or negatively affect their performance within an organization.

Like non-telecommuting employees, telecommuters seek to ensure that they receive outcomes they believe they deserve (distributive justice), have a voice in the process by which these outcomes are determined (procedural justice), and receive fair treatment and respect from their supervisors (interactional justice). Yet, unlike nontelecommuting employees, telecommuters are physically absent from the traditional office at least part-time, and sometimes full-time, and this absence may impede their opportunity for organizational justice (502)

After surveying and collecting results from a study of 11 organizations and 258 active telecommuters, Kurland and Egan summarized that telecommuting related positively to both procedural and interactional justice perceptions but didn't relate at all to distributive justice perceptions.

Distributive justice focuses on employees' perceptions regarding whether they receive the outcomes they believe they deserve (503)… Where distributive justice focuses on outcomes received, procedural justice diagnoses the process by which these outcomes are distributed: Is the process fair? Does it ensure that I will receive the outcomes I believe I deserve? Was my input requested and valued? (503)…Formal organizational structures are set up to administer and yield outcomes such as compensation, performance ratings, and promotions, as well as to resolve disputes related to the administration of such outcomes. The formal nature of organization outcomes is recognized by both distributive and procedural theories of organizational justice. Yet, valued individual outcomes also result from relationships with supervisors and coworkers in organizations (504)

This is where interactional justice plays a role. Ultimately, the study finds that telecommuting does not affect the overall perception that these workers are treated fairly and with respect and have input and a voice in the processes that affect them.

Although this study puts telecommuting in a positive light related to organizational justice, Kurland and Egan have a few recommendations to enhance justice perception among telecommuters. The study showed some interesting
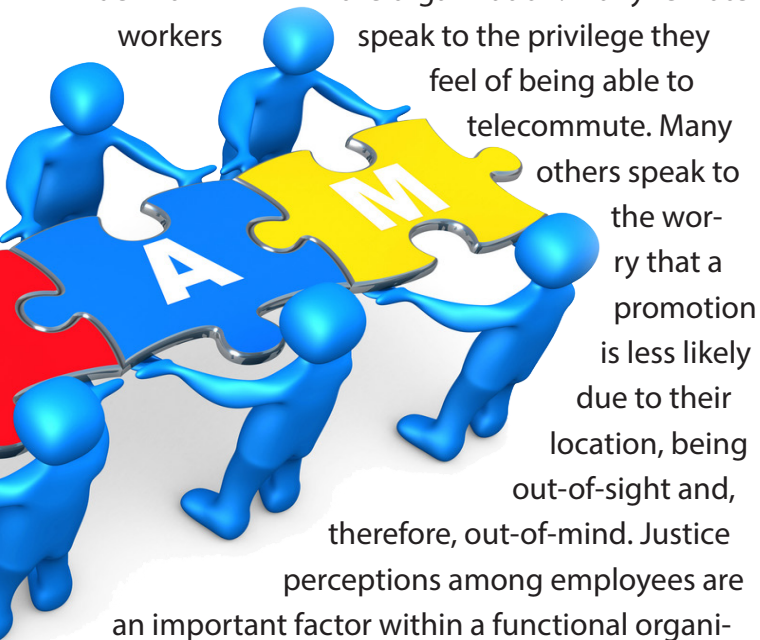
outcomes related to the percentage of time tele-commuting. They found that active telecommuters (employees who telecommute at least 30% in a given week) seemed more satisfied with their supervisors than those who telecommuted less or not at all and that active telecommuters communicated to supervisors about a wider range of topics and spent more time

"Face-to-face interaction still holds as a valuable, and oftentimes, necessary form of communication among workers within an organization."

communicating with their supervisors about personal, non-work-related topics than did less active telecommuters. By interpretation, the time spent on informal communication further builds trust between supervisor and employee and further enhances the perception of interactional justice.

Kurland and Egan also suggest building a corporate culture that enhances integration and a feeling of inclusion because, the further an employee feels isolated, the less loyal they will be to that organization. Creating a culture of inclusion and connectedness will build up that sense of loyalty.

Face-to-face interaction still holds as a valuable, and oftentimes, necessary form of communication among workers within an organization. I am not suggesting we get rid of remote workers altogether. I am a remote worker and have been for over eight years. I am only able to work for my company because I can work remotely. However, my company goes to great lengths to support us. They find ways to make us feel involved as one community whether we are corporate or remote. They also provide opportunities for us to meet face-to-face. My particular department, the sales department, meets twice a year to develop camaraderie and build that team empowerment. The point is my company does it right.

I surveyed some of my coworkers as well as a few telecommuters outside my company about their experiences with telecommuting. The survey summary as well as the survey itself can be reviewed in appendices A and B of this article. The majority of the results were fairly consistent. The first seven statements were rated from strongly disagree to strongly agree on a five-point scale. Most respondents agreed that working remotely allowed them to be more productive, to have effective communication, and to work remotely positively affected their personal life. Consistent with Golden's study of relationships and work satisfaction, the responses were varied in the category of telecommuting positively affecting their professional careers. Although the average was still a 4.0 on the scale, some were neutral on the topic. The biggest discrepancy came on the topic of camaraderie. When asked if respondents felt a sense of camaraderie within the company as a remote worker, the responses were all over the board. The average response came out to a 2.9. Many respondents felt developing a sense of camaraderie was a challenge and required additional effort and attention. Although all respondents favored telecommuting overall, the camaraderie aspect confirms the study on team empowerment that some face-to-face may be necessary to keep morale up. Although the survey is not scientific, it is an interesting snapshot of opinions from people who telecommute every day.

Within my survey group, telecommuting was positively reviewed, but there are times when telecommuting may not be the route to take. In Yahoo! and Best Buy's situations, with their documented low performance, they have developed low morale and intrinsic motivation to go along with it. It might just be a smart move bringing everyone back into the office for face-to-face interaction and examination of their identities within the workplace, rediscovering how they can effectively contribute and finding that common

motivation and passion again for the mission and vision of their respective companies.

James Surowiecke also supports Mayer and Joly's decision to rein in telecommuters in his article, "The Case Against Telecommuting," which appeared in *The New Yorker* on March 18, 2013. Surowiecke brings up the point that there is very little discussion on how telecommuting affects the employer (such as CEOs, Mayer and Joly), and he supports Corey Wick's point that a lot of crucial knowledge and interaction takes place within the walls of a company such as in the hallways and within defined spaces that are just as crucial to the collaborative work environment as planned meetings. These interactions are invaluable to the collaborative process within communities of practice. Surowiecke states, "The fundamental point is that much of the value that gets created in a company comes from the ways in which workers teach and learn from each other. If telecommuters do less of that, the organizations will be weaker." Arguably the strongest point Suroweicke makes for face-to-face interaction is that Google, one of the leading tech companies promoting and shaping our digital world, is actually investing a lot of money to create state-of-the-art campuses with perks to preserve the office environment, which I can only speculate is driven to promote collaboration within the walls of a company. However, on the other end of that pendulum swing is an

observation from author, Daniel B. Wood of the *Christian Science Monitor,* who observed that one of the government's initiatives is to increase its telecommuting program for the purpose of emergency planning. In case of a terrorist attack, many government workers will be dispersed and not centrally located. I had never considered this as a reason to telecommute. Regardless of the reasons, telecommuting is here to stay. But it is important to be thoughtful and informed about the decisions that are made on either end of the spectrum. The case for or against telecommuting is complex and sometimes difficult to navigate, and the research continues to further provide guidance on both sides of the issue.

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