How Effective is Telecommuting (According to Scientists)?

Telecommuting arrangements *can* boost employee job satisfaction and productivity, but only when it's carefully implemented with specific individual and organizational factors in mind. Those are the conclusions of leading workplace psychology researchers Tammy D. Allen, Timothy D. Golden, and Kristen M. Shockley. In a new report published in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, a journal published by the Association for Psychological Science, the researchers provide a balanced view of what scientists know about telecommuting, what questions are ripe for further study, and what individuals, organizations, and public policy-makers should consider in shaping telecommuting practices.

Below are some typical questions that employers might ask when considering establishing or refining a telecommuting policy, with answers based on the scientific findings outlined in the report.

Are telecommuters better employees?
Studies show telecommuters generally have better relationships with their supervisors and score higher on performance and low on absenteeism compared to people who work on-site only. Employees who telecommute a modest amount of time during the week (15 hours or less) are more satisfied with their jobs than those who work fewer or more hours off site, research suggests. Other studies show that people who telecommute extensively show greater commitment to the organization and fewer intentions of quitting.

But telecommuting isn't ideal for everyone. One study, for example, showed that people who are prone to procrastination are more likely to cyberslack (scour the Internet for games and other non-work related amusements) and to rate their own job performance as lower when they work remotely.

Do teams work as effectively on a virtual basis as they do face to face?
The best-performing work teams are those in which members meet face to face, studies show, but they're closely followed by virtual teams that initially meet in-person for a period of time. Teams in which the members solely work geographically apart from each other show the lowest performance.

Is organizational performance enhanced or impeded when employees are allowed to telecommute?
Research indicates that companies that offer telecommuting arrangements for employees score high on profitability and other performance measures. A study of U.S. companies found that the more employees participate in in work-from-home programs, the higher profits rise. Data from Spanish companies has suggested that organizations with the largest proportions of telecommuting employees exhibited the greatest innovation and the highest financial and relational performance (product and process innovation and labor, customer, and supplier relations).

What are caveats to consider with telecommuting?
 While people who telecommute the most tend to have better relationship quality with their bosses, they demonstrate weaker relationships with co-workers. Telecommuters may generally be more productive, but they also risk working prolonged hours because they lack the standard demarcation between work and home. And contrary to widespread assumptions, the growing prevalence of telecommuting appears to have spurred no effective reductions in traffic and carbon output. Surveys indicate that telecommuters travel significantly more vehicle miles than non-telecommuters. Some researchers theorize that telecommuters offset their lack of travel to a work location by using their vehicles for other errands and activities that would otherwise be conducted on the way to or from work.

What factors increase telecommuters' success?
Telecommuters with generous amounts of autonomy tend to experience the greatest job satisfaction and the least work-family conflict. Additionally, those whose jobs require less input and support from co-workers are found to be more productive and satisfied with their jobs than those whose jobs involve a great deal of interdependence. Other important factors for success and job satisfaction include sufficient technical and human resources support from the organization, trust from managers, and minimal distractions from family members during working hours.