

WFH: It's time, like it or not.



Working from home (WFH) has become increasingly less controversial over the last few decades but it still raises eyebrows among some managers who fear it risks employees wasting time and damaging productivity. This e-guide is an overview of the value of working from home, the issues it raises, the concerns that are frequently articulated about it, and basic implementation strategies.

If you have been in the workplace for a few decades, you may remember that the idea of telecommuting began to appear in the late 90's as Internet access from home began to become more common. Telecommuting was often poorly received, as it carried the onus of being a "trick" to avoid working a full 8 hours. Then, with the arrival of residential broadband access in the 2000s, successfully conducting a large majority of your work tasks in real-time, from home, began to become very realistic for a large swath of office workers. Managers finally had to face their own biases against WFH.

Work From Home, also commonly known as telecommuting, is a fairly general term that encompasses a range of workplace policies. Most generally, it refers to a policy permitting an employee to work from home (or any other approved remote location—the range of acceptable locations will differ depending on the organization's policies). Beyond that WFH may or not be restrictive regarding working hours, breaks, equipment used, etc. For example, some WFH policies may require that an employee work within the standard corporate-approved workday. Other policies may simply require tasks to be completed when required. In short, it is important to understand that WFH, at its core, refers to working from a remote location. More broadly, it will likely also incorporate additional policies and restraints on how the remote work is completed

Work from home: The good, the bad, or we have no choice but to allow it.

In the last several years, the concept of WFH has become increasingly more popular. Though some still remain skeptical, it has been gaining in popularity and become more widely accepted among management circles. That said, the pandemic event in 2020 essentially set the debate entirely aside, at least for the time being, because WFH became the only choice between working and shutting down.

Aside from mandatory quarantines, why have organizations been adopting WFH policies? There are several factors that are motivating companies to select WFH.

1. **Employee satisfaction:** Many, but not all, employees like the freedom to work from home at least part of the time. Offering WFH opportunities can increase levels of employee satisfaction. This ties in to the increasing concerns employees have about work/life balance. Most workers, especially younger ones, prefer organizations that allow a greater balance between life and work and they perceive WFH to be an important aspect of creating that balance.
2. **Productivity:** Worker productivity is a major driver for WFH policy adoption. In the end, increased productivity is a bottom line issue and studies have shown that in many cases productivity *improves* when employees work from home. It may seem one's house has many distractions, but the office may have more. Colleagues visiting, the hustle and bustle of a busy office space, and impromptu meetings can steal a lot of one's day. And anytime a person's focus is pulled away from a task, it takes several minutes for them to get back onto the level of engagement they had before the interruption.
3. **Less commuting time:** Anyone who sits in traffic or on public transportation each day sees the merit in this benefit.
4. **Recruitment and retention:** Recruiting top employees remains a serious challenge no matter what the state of the economy. Increasingly, studies by major consulting and recruitment firms are determining that the opportunity to WFH can be a key factor when selecting a new employer. The lack of a WFH opportunity has also been shown to be a reason for seeking alternative employment. Also, it can become a branding issue: employees and applicants, especially younger ones, may perceive office-bound companies as obsolete, less cutting edge, less competitive, and thus less desirable employers.
5. **Caregiving needs:** While some WFH policies restrict at-home workers from handling caregiving needs, others provide WFH for that very reason. Employees who have child, parental, or spouse care responsibilities require flexibility to handle these demands. WFH may be a way to accommodate these needs. When it works, it can decrease turnover, as a large percentage of workers, especially women, end up leaving their jobs to handle child or parental care. That means losing quality, productive employees.

6. **It may be greener:** Cutting down on daily commutes may have a net positive effect on energy savings. However, if nothing else, employees will see a cut in their weekly transportation costs.
7. **Real estate costs:** For companies and organizations who believe WFH will be their long-term model, this can mean eliminating office space, cutting considerable fixed-costs out of the bottom line equation.

So what are the concerns that some in management have about WFH?

1. **Decrease in productivity:** A common concern is that when at home, where there may be many domestic or entertainment distractions, workers will be unable to settle in and focus on their work. Kids, pets, laundry, Netflix, etc. may represent a strong magnetic pull from the work at hand.
2. **Oversight:** Many managers fear that without onsite management ensuring that work is getting done, employees will slack off. Accepting or not accepting WFH for this reason represents the basic conflicting managerial attitudes in the Theory Y vs. Theory X developed by Douglas McGregor in the 1950s and 60s. Without going into detail, it hinges on whether a manager feels employees can be sufficiently self-motivated to succeed or must rely on external rewards and penalties to successfully perform their jobs.
3. **Loss of collaboration:** There is also a concern that when people work alone, they miss the creative spark that comes from the unplanned and spontaneous discussion that comes about informally from mingling in the same space. Yahoo is an example of this concern. In 2013, the new CEO Marissa Mayer ended most work from home policies because she believed Yahoo needed the collaborative approach that she felt came only from sharing a common physical space.
4. **Planning:** Operating an organization partially with off-site employees takes careful planning. For one thing, your IT infrastructure has to be able to accommodate the added requirements of an entirely digital office space. It also means your IT department is responsible for developing protocols to maintain off-site devices as well and to support a uniform set of collaboration tools to ensure productivity is not lost because of technical problems or cumbersome work tools.

Once a business has determined that it wishes to explore a WFH policy, plans need to be put in place to roll out a new workplace telecommuting strategy.

Implementation: Some Considerations

Initial Note: Unless your firm is facing some unexpected risk event that requires you to quickly implement a WFH policy, the design and adoption of a policy should be carefully planned with forethought. There are many ways that well-intentioned WFH plans can stumble at the outset, setting everyone up for a failure that will be unfairly blamed on WFH.

1. **What jobs are eligible:** The first step is identifying which jobs are eligible to be completed from home. Some jobs clearly require a full time presence in the workplace. Others, with some ingenuity, may be able to be partially handled on-site. Other jobs may clearly be eligible. (Note: we refer to “jobs” here, not “employees.” There **is** a difference.)
2. **Which employees are eligible:** Once it has been determined which jobs are eligible for partial- or full-time WFH, then the decision must be made about which employees are the best candidates to successfully adopt WFH. For instance, employees may be eligible for WFH only after they have completed a probationary or training period. Or longer, if that seems appropriate. A second criteria may be a good performance record. Employees with performance or disciplinary issues may be not eligible for WFH.
3. **A slow, incremental rollout:** Adopting a WFH policy may represent a serious shift in company culture, management style, and operational processes. Doing it all at once is likely asking for trouble. Every project needs a beta stage, and WFH is no exception. Try adopting it with a few employees from one unit. Then do the same in another area. Then review and identify issues and concerns by talking with all involved.
4. **Set Parameters and Expectations:** Policies you may wish to consider
 - a) Availability window - Will it be necessary for them to be completely available during certain periods? For example, must they conduct their WFH within standard working hours, e.g. 9-5. Or will there be a flex-time approach, where availability is only required within a smaller window, e.g. 10-2.
 - b) Responsiveness - How responsive must they be to emails, phone calls, text, etc? One of the risks of the modern workplace is the feeling employees have that they must be available 24/7. Because WFH may have less structure, this perception may be exacerbated.
 - c) It is only about deadlines-just get your work done on time. The rest is up to you.
5. **Cancellation:** If the plan is partially or fully repealed, will employees be given sufficient notice to make plans to cover for child care, etc?
6. **Equipment:** It should be outlined what equipment and utilities employers and employees are responsible for providing and maintaining. Will bandwidth be a reimbursable expense? Will laptops, phones, etc. be provided by the business or will this be a BYOD project.
7. **Equipment maintenance:** If technology is provided by the employer, what is the employee’s responsibility to keep it maintained, upgrades installed, etc. Even if you have a BYOD policy, are employees required to bring their devices in for upgrades and security checks?
8. **Fair Labor Standards Act:** Just because an employee works from home, it doesn't mean overtime laws go out the window. The FLSA creates a framework for paying wages above the law’s definition of a 40 hour work week that includes overtime pay for work performed beyond that threshold. Under FLSA, two basic classes of workers are defined: those

employees who must be paid overtime when working in excess of forty hours (non-exempt employees), and those who are not required to be compensated for work done beyond the 40 hour limit (exempt employees)

The problem FLSA presents is that non-exempt employees must be paid for all work, including any work activity outside regular working hours. An example of the liability that is created for an employer are employees who respond to texts and emails from home outside “office hours.” This is compensable work and needs to be counted under the 40 hour threshold. Policies that protect you from any violation of FLSA should be articulated clearly in writing. Because they are not physically in the building, it becomes trickier to observe and limit their work activity.

9. **No Silos:** When developing a WFH policy, the above issue of FLSA points out that effective WFH planning and implementation requires collaboration, and not just between individual managers and employees. It is an IT issue—who is supporting all of this off-site technology and maintaining data security? It is a human resource issue—will performance measurements need to be tweaked? What about FLSA and similar laws? It is a legal issue—how is data governed by federal and state laws such as HIPAA and FERPA being handled? Is Wi-Fi permitted?

In summary, WFH is surely here to stay. Whether it succeeds depends on a careful and well-planned rollout. Additionally, because WFH depends very heavily on a solid IT infrastructure, it is important that your IT department and your Managed Service Provider are closely involved with the entire planning process.

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