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### **Virtually Mobile Companies!**

Technology has indeed transformed organizational working. Who could have ever imagined working from a coffee shop sipping on a coffee or working while sun bathing on a beach? Yes we are talking about serious, official work!

With the advent of technological tools like the Internet, email, personal productivity software and PDAs, the nature of knowledge work has undergone a revolution of sorts. Knowledge workers comprise a major chunk of today's workforce and mobile working is a common practice among this clan of workers. Though almost a decade old, mobile and virtual workplaces are still fraught with challenges. Companies are thus increasingly experiencing the need to devise strategies that could have a positive impact on the productivity of their mobile workforce. A common cause of concern between both the knowledge workers and their employers is to maximize productivity while working away from office. Apart from providing portable technologies and updating them continuously are there any workplace ecological and environmental factors that could resolve the issue?

#### **The issues and challenges**

Technology is the founder and single most influential factor determining the success of a mobile workforce. However, it is not the only determinant of success. When some corporate giants embarked on virtual workplaces, they introduced ergonomically suitable home offices, hotel rooms with adequate facilities and coaching for effective use of software and other technical tools. Despite such attempts, companies still fail to tap the potential of knowledge workers. There is something amiss. Some of the pitfalls that companies have succumbed to include:

- Inability to control work deviations
- Mobile workers have been considered less serious about work (hampering their career progression)
- Difficulty in delivering work as expected. Mobile workers who work from home have little access to support systems like office documents, library and other in-office equipment
- Mobile workers operate more as individuals than as employees

Having felt the pinch of staying out of the corporate loop, an increasing number of companies and knowledge workers are opting to use the option on a weekly feature. They are now beginning to split their time between office and home evenly. Further, the nature of their jobs determines their choice. While certain jobs do not require in-office support systems, some need employees to be physically present at the workplace. Therefore, companies need to segment their mobile workforce according to the job requirements. The degree of mobility that a job offers is critical here. For instance, one company designed a framework for categorizing its mobile workforce on the basis of technology,

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attitudes and behaviors. The framework includes the following categories of knowledge workers:

*Emerging techs*-Their knowledge of IT is limited. Nevertheless, they are willingly beginning their trust with technology.

*Functionalists*- They are employees belonging to different functional areas like manufacturing, finance, and HR with limited use of IT tools.

*Cube captains*-‘In-office’ employees, they operate in the mainstream making extensive use of IT tools.

*Nomads*-As the name suggests they are heavily dependent on technology and need access to information even when they are out of office.

*Global collaborators*-These people need to be in constant touch with their counterparts in different time zones. Unlike nomads global collaborators are more of globe trotters requiring round-the-clock access to information.

*Tech individualists*- Being technology enthusiasts, they are constantly on the look out for new and innovative IT tools.

Segmentation is based on the requirements of its workforce. There can be other schemes of segmentation based on technology and employee preferences. Despite clear cut segmentation schemes, companies cannot ignore the social implications of having a mobile workforce. Companies are an intricately knit web of people with a significant social bonding. A mobile workforce threatens the very basis of organizational existence. It weakens the social bonding between employees and customers. Moreover, it affects knowledge sharing since knowledge can best be shared if people work at one location.

Technologies like email and the Internet have conquered all barriers and boundaries. Nevertheless, the impact of physical proximity on workforce productivity remains undoubted. Some corporate giants design their furniture and office cubicles such that people of a certain work group are placed in close proximity.

### **Strategies and measures**

The hurdles and barriers notwithstanding, companies can maximize the productivity of their mobile workforce by

- Focusing on work output and quality
- Effectively assessing job requirements in terms of social and functional needs
- Instituting a policy for communicating through electronic messaging systems
- Encouraging employees to strike the right work-life balance

The issue of a mobile workforce goes beyond technology. It includes the right methods of implementing a virtual office and the human issues thereof. Companies therefore have to focus on all aspects of business to maximize the potential of their mobile workforce.