

Government Brain Drain and Telework: Does Social Networking help?

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Abstract

As the globalized economy presents organizations with increasingly difficult challenges, creative approaches for efficient and effective management of work processes becomes very important (Chafkin, 2010). Our human resources are our most valuable assets and without them it becomes difficult for organizations to achieve goals especially in the current economic state. Public and private organizations are faced with many challenging times such as: tight budgets, high material costs, and labor shortages.

One challenging area addressed in this study is brain drain, or the loss of valuable knowledge which is difficult to replace. This is particularly evident in public/government organizations as opposed to private organizations. There are many reasons for this brain drain. One possible approach which may help is the use of teleworkers and social networks. The use of social networks in a telework environment may help bridge the gap between newly hired and more senior, long-term workers. The more senior workers may leave without sharing their knowledge. The option of telework may encourage them to stay longer as well as share their information through the social networks.

Teleworkers are a steadily growing group of workers in the United States. Telework is growing in popularity. As telework continues to grow, there are many issues that have not been explored. One issue, addressed is how to secure, keep and share the valuable knowledge that will be lost if government workers leave. This research explores telework and social networks in relation to government environments experiencing brain drain. I seek to explore the use of social networks in a telework environment as a possible approach to help with brain drain issues. Workers that are (long-term employees) as well as newly hired can be connected to share knowledge/ideas or for training and retraining. I also seek to explore professional isolation as it relates to employees and their length of employment in relation to the degree of telework (full or part time)

I will ask questions relating to knowledge sharing, gathering and retention, best practices, professional and social isolation, advantages and disadvantages associated with using a Telework staffing strategy in conjunction with a social network in a government environment. I seek to shed light on factors that are important considerations when adopting or developing social networking for Teleworkers. This study will use a survey and interview approach to gather data on government teleworkers. This research can also help in the development and planning of social networks

Keywords

Brain Drain, Social Networks, Virtual organizations, telework, telecommunication, social identity theory

Introduction

As the globalized economy presents organizations with increasingly difficult challenges, creative approaches for efficient and effective management of work processes becomes very important (Chafkin, 2010). Our human resources are our most valuable assets and without them it becomes difficult for organizations to achieve goals especially in the current economic state. Public and private organizations are faced with many challenging times such as: tight budgets, high material costs, and labor shortages.

One challenging area addressed in this study is brain drain, or the loss of valuable knowledge which is difficult to replace. This is particularly evident in public/government organizations as opposed to private organizations. There are many reasons for this brain drain such as retiring baby boomers, loss of immigrant knowledge workers and loss of long-time workers with specific skills and many years of experience and expertise in government positions. Government employers as well as private industry employers are looking for creative ways of replacing this knowledge drain. One possible method for replacing loss knowledge is the use of telework and virtual organizations as a staffing strategy (Chafkin, 2010). Teleworkers is a steadily growing group of workers in the United States. One report from Gartner Dataquest reported an increase from 11 million in 1999 to 34 million Americans who are currently working from home. As virtual organizations and telework continue in popularity, there is a need to address telework issues that may impact the telework experience. This research seeks to understand telework and social networks in relation to government environments experiencing brain drain. This research will explore the use of social networks in a telework environment as a possible approach to alleviate brain drain. Social networking may provide a way to help train, share, retain and gather knowledge. I also seek to explore professional isolation as it relates to employees and their length of employment in relation to the degree of telework (full or part time)

This research may help organizations in terms of training, recruitment and retention of teleworkers in general but in environments facing situations where they are losing large numbers of valuable, skilled workers. Disabled or retired workers as well as other workers associated with brain drain may be more inclined to continue working for a firm if the telework environment is satisfying and rewarding. The paper is outlined in the following manner. First a literature review is presented. Second, the theories used to support the research are presented. Third a discussion of telework and social isolation is presented. Fourth, the methodology section is discussed, followed by the conclusion.

Literature review

Brain Drain:

The loss of brain power may have a significant effect on the ability to compete (Webber, 2004). I suggest that social networks may help to retain this knowledge through interaction and knowledge training and sharing through the social network. Brain drain involves the loss of valuable knowledge that is not being replaced in this country. This is particularly evident in public/government organizations as opposed to private organizations. There are several contributing factors to the brain drain problem. The retiring baby boomers are contributing to this phenomenon, but it is not the only contributing factor. For one, outsourcing knowledge to foreign countries which discourages domestic workers to go into fields where the work is sent to other countries for lower wages. Another is the poor educational systems that are not training workers with needed skills. Another factor is the loss of talent, skills and knowledge from foreign workers living in the U.S. but deciding to go back to their countries (Webber, 2004). Many foreign workers are leaving and choosing to go home as the rules for H-1b visas are becoming more restrictive. Another factor involves the level of experience over time for larger percentages of workers. Statistics show that government employees tend to stay at their jobs much longer than private workers. One report from the Employee Benefit Research Institute (EBRI) indicates that over the past twenty five years, the “median tenure” (worker’s length of employment in a current job) has remained steady for private sector workers at 3.9 years. In contrast, public workers median tenure increased from 6 years in 1983 to 7.0 years in 2008. According to EBRI, federal workers stay in their jobs for an average of 14.7 years and 20% of the federal workers stay at their jobs for 25 years. The workers tend to stay much longer and when they leave it has a much stronger impact on the government organization. I suggest that social networks can help by allowing for sharing of knowledge and training by older workers who may be more willing to work in a flexible environment such as telecommuting, thereby retaining knowledge within the organization as well as spreading knowledge through training, sharing and collaborating through the social network.

Social Identity theory

As organizations embrace virtual organizations and telework, more employees may experience feelings of isolation and not being connected to the rest of the organization. Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) helps in understanding how people feel when they think they are discriminated against within a group because of lack of social identity with the group. When individuals feel they are not part of the group socially, they feel their development can be hindered. In the case of teleworkers working in a virtual organization, their feelings of social and professional isolation may lead them to feel they are missing out on job promotions and career opportunities.

Furthermore, since virtual organizations and teleworkers involve remote work, away from a traditional office the issues associated with social identity may be a consideration in managing and working in a telework environment. Virtual organizations are organizations where all employees perform work-related jobs outside the office and there is not a brick and mortar office building for employees to physically access. Virtual organizations involve use of telework, telecommunications and computer systems in interacting with others inside and outside of the organization.

As organizations become more distant and globally dispersed (Reich, 2001), the challenges and issues associated with telework and virtual organizations will become more important. Employees and their online interactions and telework relationships will become important considerations. Will the employees be less happy and less productive in the telework environment? Will employees feel less connected and more isolated and therefore dissatisfied with the telework environment?

As such, employees may or may not be receptive to working in a partial or full telework situation depending on their perceptions of this environment in terms of their ability to stay connected and to communicate with other employees, customers or vendors. In addition they may miss the face-to-face interaction. They may feel the technology-enabled interactions may be insufficient and leave them feeling that they are isolated from others in the company such as their managers and co-workers and therefore are missing important information or passed over for promotions or other job-enhancing opportunities.

Previous research findings indicate that teleworkers are concerned about professional isolation in public and private organizations (Cooper & Kurland, 2002). Our research questions focus on the telework environment and teleworkers and the relationship between social networks, and professional isolation. Is professional isolation a concern of teleworkers? Does social networking help reduce the perceptions of professional isolation?

Telework/telecommuting

Teleworkers are described as one of the fastest growing groups in the commercial sector (WorldatWork, 2007). One report indicates that more than 28 million people in the U.S. work at least one day a week outside the office. Telecommuting has been defined in many ways. The term Telework/telecommuting was first introduced in 1975 by Nilles (1975) and became very popular in the 1980's with the rise of oil prices and other economic problems. Telecommuting has been described as any work done outside of the workplace where telecommunication and/or computer-based technologies are used (Bailey and Kurland, 2002). Another definition by the Office of Personnel Management (2008) defines telework as the process by which employees conduct formally designated tasks at their place of residence or at a nearby worksite.

Telework has been around for awhile but with the need to be agile, efficient and competitive, telework is enjoying renewed interest. One reason for the renewed interest is the continuous improvements and advancements in information and communication technologies. Some organizations are adopting a combination of telework and in-office work where they are allowing some employees to work at home while other firms are going totally virtual, where all employees work outside the office and there is no brick-and-mortar office building.

Government has shown support for telework by passing Telework-related Acts such as the Telework Improvements Act of 2008 and the Telework Enhancement Act.

Telework may help employees by reducing interruptions and allowing them to focus on one task. It can reduce commuting time and save gas and reduce traffic and traffic accidents, employers save on office space and equipment, flexibility with work and family schedules (Bailey and Kurland, 2002).

Telework environments may help reduce brain drain by giving flexible work options to employees who are planning to leave. This could also help employees with specific skills that live in different states or regions.

Social/Professional Isolation

However, even though telework has many benefits, there can be some possible challenges such as social and professional isolation. I suggest that social networks may help to alleviate feelings of social/professional isolation. Many employees may feel disconnected from the organization due to lack of human contact. Findings from previous studies indicate many teleworkers

experience feelings of social and professional isolation, (Tomaskovic-Devey & Risman, 1993; Bailey and Kurland, 2002). Social isolation is when workers feel disconnected from the informal, day-to-day contact and information from co-workers. Professional isolation, which is associated with employee development (Bailey and Kurland, 2002) is when workers feel they are out of sight and forgotten by managers and others and feel their chances for career growth and development such as promotions and job opportunities suffer.

Drawing on previous work from (Bailey and Kurland, 2002) I focus on three areas of professional isolation which can impact formal and informal (day-to-day) development. Three areas of development include: interpersonal networking, informal learning and mentoring.

Interpersonal networking - informal interactions such as office and work-related gossip, impromptu discussions which help establish relationships and office politics. Informal learning – impromptu skill building or informal knowledge sharing that can occur in the office

Mentoring – experienced workers work with less experienced workers to help in career and skill development.

Social Networking

Therefore, professional isolation may leave employees unhappy with their telework environment. The use of social networking may help as a way to encourage a richer level of interaction and connection with co-workers and other work-related individuals.

As social networking continues to grow in popularity, more varied uses of social networks are being explored by businesses as well as individuals (Hempel, 2009). For example social networks are being used more to communicate with employees to encourage organizational interaction and information sharing such sharing human resource information; training and development virtual teams, and group collaboration.

Social networking may help reduce feelings of isolation which lead people to feel they will be left out and may miss out on important knowledge as well as opportunities for promotion because they are no longer in the in-group because they are working outside of the traditional office environment.

Methodology

In this study I plan to evaluate the telework environment regarding professional isolation and social networks by first interviewing teleworkers to help in understanding teleworker concerns.

After the interviewing process, a survey instrument will be used to gather data. This study will use both a survey and interview approach to gather data on government teleworkers. This research can help in the development and planning of social networks

Summary

In conclusion, as telework continues in popularity, telework maybe an efficient and cost-effective way to retain valuable knowledge, train new and existing workers. It may also help in addressing feelings of isolation that may arise as a result of telecommuting. This research seeks to explore telework in the government environment. The use of social networks in a telework environment may help bridge the gap between newly hired and more senior, long-term workers. The more senior workers may leave without sharing their knowledge. The option of telework may encourage them to stay longer as well as share their information through the social networks. I will use comparative analysis and regression analysis to look at associations between teleworkers and social and professional isolation. This research can be valuable to organizations seeking to increase or improve telework environments. It can also be useful for people working in virtual teams or in the development of organizational social networks that will be used for outside workers.

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