



# UNIT-1

## The Virtual WorkPlace

### Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ How to Create a virtual workplace strategy.

## Unit 1

### The Virtual WorkPlace

#### The New Workplace

The International Data Corporation's Mobile Worker Population 2011–2015 Forecast estimates that by 2015, there will be 1.3 billion mobile workers on the planet, making up about 37% of the global workforce.

(This report is available in its entirety from <http://www.marketresearch.com/IDC-v2477/Worldwide-Mobile-Worker-Population-Forecast-7646772/>. Please note that we are not affiliated with this website or responsible for its contents.)

We define these **mobile workers** as employees who work outside of the office and stay connected via technology. (Think of salespeople who spend a lot of time on the road, computer programmers who work from home, and supervisors who move from plant to plant.) These mobile workers work in a **virtual workplace**, which can be defined as a company that uses technology to conduct business in a variety of locations. The terms **telework** and **telecommuting** are used to describe employees who work in an offsite location, usually from home.

Sometimes, traditional and/or mobile workers are brought together to form **virtual teams**: an interdependent group who works together towards a common goal but is not in the same physical location.

#### Advantages to Businesses

Making the transition to a virtual workplace can have big advantages for a business, such as

- Allowing employees to work from home can reduce overhead
- Having a wider operational area means a bigger pool of talent to source people from
- Having people from different backgrounds and regions can bring you closer to your market (depending on your industry)
- Mobile workers are more connected and more accessible
- Having several bases of operations makes a business more resilient in case of disaster

#### Advantages to Employees

Many people struggle to maintain a work-life balance. Being a mobile worker can offer employees the opportunity to create custom, flexible jobs. Reduced time spent commuting and increased scheduling freedom can reduce stress, increase employee happiness, and give the business a more committed, loyal workforce.

## There are Disadvantages!

Of course, the virtual workplace has its disadvantages, too. Without good leadership, mobile workers can feel isolated and disengaged, and become less productive. Distractions and time management can be a challenge for some people, too. If virtual workplace programs are not implemented and managed properly, they can be very costly for businesses.

For example, in 2013, a United States company discovered that one of its telecommuting software developers had outsourced his job to a development firm in China. Although the developer had excellent performance reviews and was considered the best in the company, a digital forensic analysis revealed that his work had been done by this outsourced firm for several years. This created a huge security risk for the company and raised questions about their management policies.

## Creating Virtual Workplace Programmes

### Building a Virtual Workplace Strategy

If your organization has decided to incorporate mobile elements into the workforce, it's important to develop clear guidelines and expectations. This organizational strategy can then be customized for each department and/or team.

The organizational strategy should include the following elements.

### Strategic Vision

Why is the organization incorporating mobile workers into the workforce? Some common reasons include:

- Larger geographic reach, so that the organization has a larger talent pool to draw from
- Better access to key markets
- Competitive advantage
- Improved employee work-life balance
- Preparation for disasters or crises

Overall targets can also be helpful, such as a particular department going entirely mobile or a certain percentage of the workforce reaching mobility by a particular date.

### Integration with Existing Policies

This section should answer the following questions:

- Will this be a new program, will it clarify existing policies, or will it fulfill both purposes?
- How will this virtual workplace plan integrate with existing policies, such as health and safety, security, and legal regulations?

Depending on your organization and your geographic area, you may need specialized policies and subject matter experts to help you with these elements.

## Telework Options

What will mobile work options look like for each segment of your business? For example, perhaps door-to-door salespeople will be allowed to flex their hours and telework for 100% of the work week, while personal assistants will be allowed to telework for one day of the week.

Core working hours can also be specified. For example, the employer may mandate core hours of 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., with all workers able to shift their day two hours in either direction. This works especially well for employees in different geographic regions.

This section of the policy should also describe how much authority managers and employees have to customize the program, and who special requests should be directed to.

## Costs and Reimbursements

Describe what costs employees will be reimbursed for (such as telephone, Internet, resources, etc.) and what costs they will have to cover. You should also outline what resources the employer will provide (such as cell phones, laptops, tablets, etc.) and who has responsibility for device maintenance.

## Responsibility and Accountability

Your plan should clearly outline the employee's responsibility for completing their job and ensure that they have the appropriate resources to complete their tasks while mobile. In most organizations, telework is a privilege and can be revoked at any time.

You should also outline what happens if the mobile worksite loses power, Internet, and/or telephone. Will the time be waived, or will the employee have to come to the office or make up the time later?

## Resources

In this section, outline what resources are available to employees, including technical support, policy questions, and human resource issues.

If a significant portion of the workforce will be telecommuting, your organization may want to appoint a virtual workplace coordinator who will help implement, maintain, and oversee your telework program.

## Setting up Employees for Telework

### Choosing Mobile Workers

Depending on your organization's mobile workforce plan, you may have some decisions to make. For example, you may be able to allow telework based on certain circumstances, for certain roles, or after a set period of time with the company. Or, some positions may be telework-only. In addition, you may also receive requests from employees to work virtually.

In any case, you should evaluate an employee's suitability for the mobile work program based on the policies and procedures laid out by your organization. The employee's approach to work should be considered, too. Mobile workers should be able to:

- Work independently
- Manage their time well
- Motivate themselves
- Complete projects on time
- Work well with others (in person and virtually)

Like any management decision, document decisions about mobile workers fully. Include what decision was reached, what information the employee was given, and what action items are to follow.

### **Setting Expectations**

Once the decision has been made for a worker to become mobile, have a meeting with them to discuss what this will entail. (The meeting should be face-to-face, either in person or via video conference.) Topics for discussion should include:

- Job responsibilities
- How tasks and projects will be communicated to the employee
- Employee's responsibilities in terms of communication (for example, status reports and meetings)
- Procedures for requesting vacation and sick time
- When and how the employee should be available to others and working hours (include the employee in this decision if possible)
- When resources are available (including your hours, co-workers' hours, technical support, and human resources)
- Full review of the organization's virtual workplace policy

### **Starting Slow**

If possible, mobile workers should be eased into the virtual workplace. Typically, this means being mobile one or two days a week, and then ramping up to full-time telework if everything goes well for both the employee and the employer. This is especially helpful if mobile workers are new for your organization, as it gives you a chance to evaluate and revise your program.

## **Managing Performance**

### **Staying on Top of Projects**

When you share the same space as the people you manage, a lot of leadership happens naturally. For example, when you see them in the break room, you might chat about how the weekend was. If they have a problem with a project, they might pop into your office for a moment to ask your advice.

When your employees are in a different location than you are, leadership can be a little bit more difficult. Typically, mobile workers are capable, independent self-starters who don't need a lot of hand-holding to complete their projects. However, you still need to be clear about projects, goals, deliverables, and processes.

To avoid constantly wondering (or asking) how things are going, set clear expectations for communicating progress and issues. Online project tracking tools are great for staying in touch: employees can update their progress, log activity, and report issues as things happen, rather than submitting a daily status report that might say the same thing over and over.

Although you don't want to micromanage, you also have a responsibility to ensure that things are getting done. Regular meetings can give you a forum to ask how things are and to ensure that everything is on track. If workers seem to be offline more than online, or late completing projects, don't be afraid to ask them for more frequent updates. Nipping problems in the bud is an important part of managing mobile workers.

### **Keeping in Touch**

Mobile workers may need more of a personal relationship with you and others in the organization. Make yourself and other key people available in real time via instant messaging, telephone, and/or videoconference. Check in with them to see how their weekend was, or just to say hi.

When possible, include mobile employees in social activities. For example, a mobile worker probably won't feel included when they're invited to a pizza lunch that's across the country, but maybe you could have pizza delivered to them instead. If events are taking place in their area, invite them along. Or, develop online spaces for people to hang out in. A little bit of creativity and thought can go a long way towards engaging mobile workers?