

Telecommuting—No Longer the Way of the Future?

Article By:

McBrayer, McGinnis, Leslie & Kirkland, PLLC

Marissa Mayer is making news. She may also be single-handedly changing employer policies across the country. As Yahoo's new CEO, Mayer already made headlines as the youngest female CEO in a Fortune 500 company. But now she is becoming known for what she does and not just who she is. Mayer recently instituted a ban on telecommuting for all Yahoo employees. The decision was a massive shock to company employees who routinely worked from remote locations. After all, it seems paradoxical that a tech giant like Yahoo requires employees to be physically present in the office for work when technology permits otherwise.

The internal memorandum from Yahoo's human resources department which announced the change cited a "spirit of collaboration" that can only be achieved when employees are physically together. In addition, Mayer wants to increase productivity for the struggling company and this, in her opinion, is best done when employees are in the actual workplace.

To many, flexible work schedules, condensed work weeks, and telecommuting is the way of the future. Such workplace flexibility, though, can leave employers and HR departments wondering if their policies reflect the best practices for these conditions. If your business decides to offer a telecommuting policy, there are some issues that must be addressed.

First, who will be eligible? You should define eligibility based on positions, and not individuals. For example, you may think Bob is too unmotivated to work from home, but Rhonda would have no problem with efficiency. Yet distinguishing between the two could lead to a discrimination claim. A better policy may read, for example, "Non-support staff that have been with the business for at least two years are qualified to telecommute."

Establish clear hours as to when the telecommuter should be working and reachable. The Fair Labor Standards Act and similar state laws apply to home-based worker, so employers need a system for tracking employee hours, including overtime.

Consider safety. While OSHA does not hold employers responsible for the safety of home offices, workers' compensation laws do still apply. Employers will need coverage for employees who may never step foot in the office. There should also be reporting and investigation procedures in place, just as there are for workplace injuries. Claims arising from telecommute employees should be carefully scrutinized to determine if the injury is work-related.

One of the biggest concerns with flexible work schedules is how to achieve effective oversight. For that reason, consider what measurements you will use to measure success before allowing for telecommuting. Keep communication open. For instance, require telecommuters to send in a daily email detailing projects or assignments they are tackling for the day. Insist on a consistent schedule. Be certain that you are providing the same compensation, benefits, and opportunities for promotion to telecommuters that you give to non-telecommuters.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, consider the needs of your business. Mayer decided telecommuting no longer worked for Yahoo. Start-ups or businesses dependent on customer face time may take the same approach. For others, it can be a valuable program. Either way, it is important to address the issues discussed herein in your company policies and procedures. Regardless of the size of your business, do not just assume your employees understand.

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