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Conversations with the Experts

Working Off-Site: The New Norm



Arlene Johnson

Bio: Arlene A. Johnson, Vice President of WFD Consulting, has over 20 years of experience working with business organizations to identify and address workforce and workplace issues and assist in the development of strategies for effective change. Prior to joining WFD, she held positions as Vice President of Families and Work Institute, Director of Workforce Research for the Conference Board, and Vice President of Catalyst. In these roles, she has worked with dozens of companies in the U.S. and around the world and has chronicled leading edge workplace issues over the past two decades. Arlene has appeared widely in print, on radio and on television as an expert commentator. Her special areas of expertise are work-life strategy, women's advancement, and flexible work arrangements. She has degrees, with high honors, from Mt. Holyoke College, Union Theological Seminary, and Rutgers Graduate School of Management.

Editors Note: The following interview was conducted with Arlene Johnson, who responded to questions about a study about off-site work conducted by WFD Consulting.

The Study: The Everywhere Workplace

In 2001, WFD surveyed a nationally representative sample (2,057 respondents) of employees who work for medium to large companies [500+ employees]. The sample was identified by Harris Interactive.

This study gathered information about on-site workers, remote workers, regular tele-workers, ad hoc tele-workers, mobile workers, and customer site workers. The investigation was commissioned by the American Business Collaboration (ABC) for Quality Dependent Care.

Click here to obtain a free copy of the Executive Summary, "When the Workplace is Many Places," authored by Amy Richman, Karen Noble, and Arlene Johnson.

The ABC Collaboration for Quality Dependent Care recently commissioned a companion study of mobile workers who travel extensively. This study will focus on who employees work routinely from many different places – such as on planes, on trains, and from the lobbies of buildings – as they move from place to place.

An interview with Arlene Johnson, Vice President of WFD Consulting.

Pitt-Catsoupes: The WFD study, "The Everywhere Workplace," is an important, comprehensive examination of the telecommuting experience, from the perspectives of the telecommuters, their coworkers and their supervisors. What were some of the unanticipated results?

Johnson: First, it is important to appreciate the diversity of different types of off-site workers, which include not only regular tele-workers but also *ad hoc* tele-workers, remote workers, mobile workers, and customer site workers. We found that the experiences and impacts of the off-site work experience vary significantly for these different groups.

Perhaps the most striking discovery was the sheer extent of off-site work. I think work/life leaders used to think that the normative work arrangement was working full-time at the office. Even today, there is the perception that

off-site work may be “jazzy,” but that only a small percentage of people actually work that way.

In fact, WFD found that half (51%) of all employees have work arrangements where they work off-site some or all of the time. When you also consider the number of supervisors and co-workers of the off-site workers who are also affected by off-site work, it is very significant that 8 of every 10 employees at medium/large workplaces either work away from the worksite on a regular basis or they work with someone else who works off-site.

Pitt-Catsoupes: Why is this change in the “places” where we work important?

Johnson: The findings of the study encourage us to update our thinking about “the” workplace. Until recently, we thought about “the” workplace as a single location which served as the hub of work activities. That is, employees would come to “the” workplace and, perhaps, occasionally leave for meetings or for specific interactions with customers. The data from our study suggest that we need to consider the workplace as a web of locations rather than the center of work. That is why we have started to talk about “the everywhere workplace” because work is, in fact, likely to take place anywhere and everywhere.

Those of us interested in work/life issues need to understand that the everywhere workplace has important implications for work/life. If the workplace is everywhere, we need to be creative about the policies we create and the interventions we implement. We need to be sure that these policies and programs do not reflect an assumption that work is conducted only in one place.

If off-site work is the future of work, we need to shift our conversations so that we focus more on work relationships rather than on any single location of work.

Fundamentally, this study underscores the importance of making a distinction between connection and connectivity. Usually, when people talk about off-site work arrangements, they focus on the technical aspects such as getting the ergonomics right, addressing safety issues, and installing the most appropriate computer lines. In fact, the success of off-site work also requires that we plan for human connections. We need to plan for communication, design work processes to promote inclusion, and consider ways to help off-site and on-site employees feel involved.

Pitt-Catsoupes: It would seem that new strategies are needed to nurture and maintain the relationships between off-site and on-site workers. What did your respondents have to say about this?

Johnson: In general, co-workers and supervisors – as well as the off-site workers themselves – offered favorable reports about their experiences with distance work. However, about 4 of every 10 onsite workers reported that it was more difficult for them to stay in touch with off-site employees.

Maintaining the person-to-person connections is an important responsibility for the off-site worker, the supervisor, and on-site colleagues.

Pitt-Catsoupes: Given some of the challenges that off-site work can pose to work relationships, I was surprised that a minority of managers – only 1 of every 8 – indicated that they had received any training focused on the supervision of off-site employees. What do you think about that?

Johnson: Our survey did discover that companies currently offer only modest preparations and training either to their off-site workers or to the managers who supervise these employees.

There are many indicators of the importance and impact of training. Managers who have received training develop the skills they need to make off-site work a positive experience. Those who have received training are, in general, more positive about the off-site work experience than those who have not. Managers who have received training do not feel it is more work, they see the benefits of this alternative way to work, and they express less resistance to off-site work. In fact, there seems to be evidence that managing over distance can strengthen important management skills, such as managing by results.

Given the importance of training, the ABC Collaborative for Quality Dependent Care has asked WFD to develop an e-learning module, which will become available in 2005.

Pitt-Catsoupes: Managers might worry that off-site work could have deleterious consequences for “getting the work done.” On the contrary, your study has found that off-site workers’ productivity, concentration and job satisfaction are similar to that of their on-site colleagues – or even better. What factors are related to these positive outcomes?

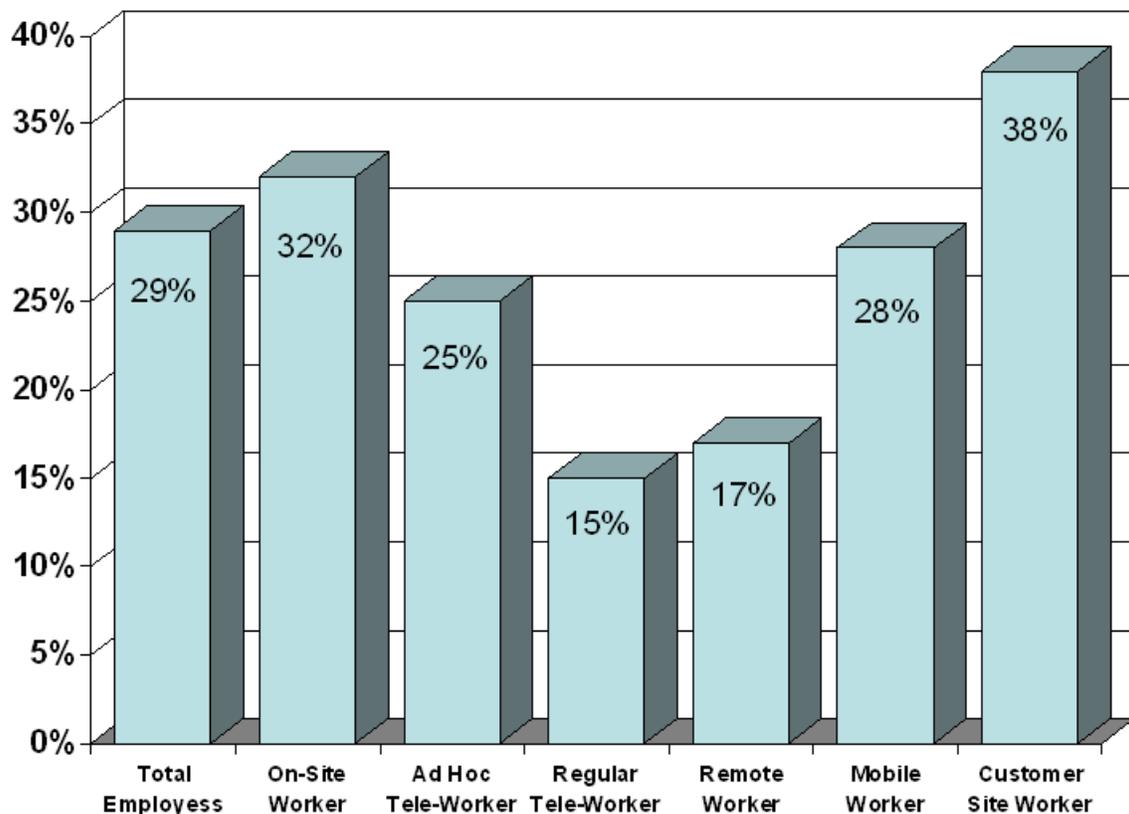
Johnson: One thing that seems to improve the productivity of off-site workers is that they experience fewer interruptions when they are working so that they can focus better on their tasks.

On the whole, remote workers also work longer hours. It is interesting to note, however, that they report lower stress levels, in part because they have more control over the scheduling of those hours.

To contact Arlene, please e-mail WFD at info@wfd.com or call 800-447-0543.

Editors Note: The full research report, "When the Workplace is Many Places," includes discussion about the outcomes associated with off-site work, both for employees and for their businesses. For example, many employers attempt to reduce unwanted turnover and findings of the WFD study suggest that options for off-site work arrangements can help employers to achieve this objective. The following table indicates that on-site employees are more likely to think that they will work for their current employer for two years or less than workers with certain types of off-site arrangements, such as regular tele-workers.

Percentage of Employees Who Predict They Will Work for Company for Two Years or Less



[Click Here to zoom in.](#)

How to Obtain a Copy of the Study

Click here to obtain a free copy of the Executive Summary, "When the Workplace is Many Places," authored by Amy Richman, Karen Noble, and Arlene Johnson

Special Offer: Affiliates of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network can also request a copy of the full research report at the **special discount** rate of \$15.00 [which includes shipping and handling] and \$10 a piece for 3 or more copies of the full research report.

All orders for the report, "When the Workplace is Many Places," must be prepaid, with check [\$15.00 for one report; \$10 per report if ordering 3 or more reports] made out to WFD Consulting. Send the request to:

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Please identify yourself as an affiliate of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. For more information about this important study, email WFD at everywherework@wfd.com or visit the website at www.wfd.com

Additional Resources: Related to Off-Site Work, Telecommuting and Telework

Global Perspectives - Canadian Telework Association: The Canadian Telework Association provides telework information related to business, government, and academics.

- Click here to go to website.
- For information designed for employers and managers regarding telework, click here.
- To view global telework statistics and studies, please visit <http://www.ivc.ca/studies/>

Economic Policy Foundation: The purpose of this organization is to inform policymakers and others about employment policies and research covering a wide range of topics.

- Visit the homepage at <http://www.epf.org>
- Click here to view fact sheets, reports, and other publications.

Global Perspectives - Euro-Telework: Coordinated by the European Trade Union Confederation, this website presents information related to telecommuting legislation, reports, and materials that can be used at telecommuting training conferences/seminars.

- Visit their homepage at <http://www.telework-mirti.org/>
- To download the English version of the MIRTI (Models of Industrial Relations for Telework Innovation) Handbook titled "Implementing Telework", click here.
- Click here to download full reports about telework in Europe.
- For information about European case studies and telecommuting legislation, click here.

Interagency Telework Site: Designed for employees, managers and supervisors, this website is a collaboration of the Office of Personnel Management and the General Services Administration.

- Visit their homepage at <http://www.telework.gov/>
- Click here to download the Telework Manual, "Telework: A Management Priority. A Guide for Managers, Supervisors, and Telework Coordinators"
- To view information about telecommuting legislation, click here.

Global Perspectives - International Telework Association and Council: The International Telework Association and Council has publications, newsletters, and other telework materials on their site. For a fee, members have access to selected resources.

- Visit their website at: <http://www.telecommute.org/>

Global Perspectives - The Telework Association: For a fee, members of this association receive access to a teleworking magazine, handbook, and training information.

- Click to view their homepage: <http://www.tca.org.uk/index.php>

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