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Kenexa HR Thought Leadership®: **TELEWORK**

By Nancy Delay, Ph.D.

HOST: Welcome to the Kenexa HR Thought Leadership Podcast series. This series was created to educate, inspire, and fuel the evolution of leadership in our organizations, our communities, and our world.

I'm your host Jace Bonsall.

In today's episode, we will listen to a presentation entitled Telework. This episode is presented by Dr. Nancy Delay. Dr. Delay is based in Lincoln Nebraska. She received her Ph.D. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from the Illinois Institute of Technology. The purpose of this discussion is to enlighten listeners on the relevance of telework as well as the characteristics of telework programs. What is telework, how is telework tied to corporate and social responsibility? Telework has become a hot topic as many employees are either being asked to work from home or are requesting to work from home, particularly in light of the current economic environment.

DR. NANCY DELAY: Hello, this is Dr. Nancy Delay, and today I'd like to take the opportunity to talk to you about the relevance of understanding telework and the characteristics of telework programs for you and your organization. So what I'd like to begin with is helping you understand why this is such a current and meaningful topic for your organization.

There are several things right now that make this a very relevant topic. First of all there was legislation introduced on Wednesday, March 25, which expand telework opportunities for federal employees. The 2009 Telework Improvement Act, offered by Representatives John Sarbanes, Frank Wolf and Gerald Connelly, would compel the Office of Personnel Management to develop a uniform, government-wide telework policy. In doing this, they would require agencies to allow eligible employees to use this alternative work arrangement for at least 20% of their hours during a two-week period. This is important, because as the government moves more and more in this direction, I think that we can expect private organizations also to be working more and more in this direction. And one of the interesting things about telework is one of the characteristics around telework, is whether a program is formal or informal. And this legislation being introduced really suggests that moving more toward formal types of a telework program is the wave of the future, and we do know from research that's out there that introducing formal telework programs can really lead to some great benefits that you don't see whenever you have informal programs in place.

Another thing that really makes this a relevant topic today is a movement toward corporate responsibility within organizations. And employees are really having an expectation at this point in time that the companies that they work for be socially responsible. And when we talk about corporate social responsibility, what we're really talking about is our organization's responsibilities to their communities, their societies, and the environment, and understanding how and why organizations weave particular aspects of delivering services and goods to their clients and customers in a socially responsible way. It has been suggested for many years that being socially responsible is really one of the things that is a benefit of telework. And this really dovetails and aligns very, very well with the third aspect that makes the relevance of this topic so timely, which is going green. In recent years, there has become a pervasive, wide-reaching focus on going green, emphasizing cognizant consumerism which supports living in harmony with one's environment. This has long been proposed as being one of the benefits of telework.

So as you can see, this is a very relevant topic, and understanding the characteristics of telework really will help you in thinking about how do you work as an organization. How do you implement telework? Are you already implementing telework? And how do you

leverage these programs so that you can really have the most efficient and effective types of telework programs.

So let's talk a little bit about the known characteristics of telework. One of the most important characteristics about telework is there being a continuum of where work is being done. So if you think about telework as a continuum with respect to the where, on one side of the continuum, you have people who work from a corporate-owned facility all the time. Then as you move to the right on the continuum and you get to the far right, you have individuals who never come into that corporate-owned facility, and they work from a variety of other places. It can either be that they are working from home 100% of the time or they can be what we refer to as a road warrior. And road warriors work from anywhere at any point in time. You also have another piece of this which is individuals who are client services folks and these are people who actually provide services at a client site 100% of the time and not with their corporate employer. So as you can see, understanding where one is working from is an important aspect and axis of telework.

Another aspect or characteristic of telework is how often one is teleworking. So as I talked to you just a moment ago about the continuum for telework, where on the left hand side you have somebody who is working from that corporate-owned facility 100% of the time all the way to the other side of it working 100% of their time not in that facility. The other is that piece of it, which is how often they are doing it. Is it something that is done occasionally? Do people do it maybe one or two times a month? Is it something that is done on a regular basis, but more often than that, say one or two days a week. Or is it all the way to the right where it is 100% of the time, and these individuals are away from the office all of the time.

The other characteristic of this is of importance I think for an organization to understand so they can figure out what is the best way to do this and how do you get efficient as an organization is understanding the type of work that is being done. Now understanding the type of work actually has to do with whether people are working independently. So, for example, is this someone who is a researcher and they are working from home because they need quiet space and they need to be away from interruptions in the office or away from meetings, and they really need some serious downtime in order to get their work done? Or are these individuals who really require the opportunity to collaborate with their team members in a real-time environment or via other ways so that they can actually come together as a group and do their work in that way? If you understand these three various characteristics of telework, that will lead you a long way toward understanding how to leverage telework in your organization.

So again, the three characteristics that are really of importance here are understanding the continuum of where the work is being done so that's all the way from being done in a corporate-owned facility all of the time through being away from that facility 100% of the time, that can either be via working from home which is commonly referred to as telecommuting. It can be working virtually, which is typically for people who are road warriors, where they are traveling a lot. They are working from airports, they are working from hotels, they are working from a local Starbucks, or it could be from satellite facilities that are not owned by the corporation, but are places that are designated where people can go, have the connectivity that they need in order to get aligned with their office and work from those facilities but it's not in their home. So there is a variety of ways where that work can happen. The second thing to remind you is that how often it's being done is of importance. There's a big difference between someone who occasionally works from home, say if they're not feeling well versus someone who's doing it 100% of the time, and really doesn't come into the office. Then the third characteristic is the type of work that's being done. Is this independent work versus collaborative work and where on the continuum might their work really fall in that. So understanding the characteristics of telework and putting those together in various ways is very important because it will help you understand how an organization can implement a telework program, and how your organization benefits from the efficiencies and effectiveness of this and can help to mitigate potential risks that you can run into when you're introducing telework programs into an organization.

So when you think about this, there are three levels that you need to be thinking about with respect to how you get efficiencies and effectiveness from implementing telework within an organization. The first level is the highest level and those are organizational benefits. There are a multitude of organizational benefits that can be seen when you're implementing a program if it's being done in the appropriate way.

One possible benefit is business continuity. So building telework into a business continuity plan can be a great way to help mitigate risk when disasters happen, and allowing people to be able to connect up and work remotely if there's some sort of a natural disaster or even a disaster that's not a natural disaster. Additionally to that, other kinds of organizational benefits that have been seen are facility cost savings. So rather than having physical buildings where people come into work, you can achieve some facility savings on an organizational level by implementing telework or possibly by implementing a phenomenon that's known as "hoteling," where individuals can go into a variety of offices that an organization owns, and not necessarily be connected to a specific facility.

The second level where benefits can be seen and efficiencies and effectiveness are required is around team and group benefits. The type of team and group benefits that have been talked about with telework that you can see, are things around productivity of a group in a team, reducing absenteeism and turnover within those groups. And really some of the very good benefits that can come out of this whenever it's done properly and can help make you more efficient and more effective as an organization.

And the final, more discreet level of benefits that you can see from telework, come at a very individual level, and there are many attitudinal outcomes that have been talked about in the research and in the implementation of programs that help people with respect to their job satisfaction, commitment to the organization, help with work/life balance, and the autonomy that an individual can achieve when they are teleworking. So it's very important to understand the characteristics of the way in which people within the organization are teleworking, so that you can see some of these benefits that we've talked about at the various levels within the organization, but also to mitigate some of the risks that you might see. Now what the research shows is that there are two things that can combine to really undermine the benefits you can receive from telework. One is the technology and the use of the technology, and the other is sometimes midlevel supervisors can be resistant to telework. So if you can think through the characteristics. That's the way in which telework is being used in organizations. And by the way, what we find is that the majority of organizations are typically teleworking, even though they may not be terming it as teleworking just because it's the nature of the way that work is in our current environment. So the advent of technology has really allowed people to be much more flexible about where they are whenever they are doing the work that they need to be doing for an organization.

One of the downsides from telework that's often been talked about is what we refer to as the lone wolf syndrome. And this is where individuals are teleworking, and oftentimes this is associated with people who telework on that continuum of how much they telework. This is associated with people who telework often, so if they are teleworking 4-5 days a week, it has been reported that there is some risk of them feeling isolated socially from their coworkers. So if you understand whether you have people doing that in your organization or not, and how often they're doing it, there are things that you can do to mitigate those risks if you're attending to the characteristics of a telework program. So in that example, the technology actually can be used in order to make them feel more included and ensure that good communication is occurring between the worker and the supervisor and the worker and their coworkers.

So that concludes my talk today about telework, the characteristics of a telework program and the levels at which you can see benefits from the telework program, and where you need to be attending to in order to mitigate the risks that you can run into whenever people begin teleworking in your organization. Now, having said that, one additional point about this is that oftentimes there's a lot of informal telework going on within an organization. And informal telework means that there are no policies and procedures, there is no training, there is a lack of accountability around teleworking and there is no designated funding around telework; for example, to ensure that they are getting the appropriate training that they need in order to be doing this in the most efficient way. So having a formal way of teleworking which is not necessarily having a formal telework program, but really formalizing the way in which people are working within the organization, allows you to address and leverage the benefits that you are going to get from doing that.

So thank you so much for listening today and I hope that helps you understand telework a little bit more and the things that you can do as an organization by understanding the characteristics of telework programs.

HOST: Thank you for joining us today for the Kenexa HR Thought Leadership Podcast series, where we seek to educate, inspire, and fuel the evolution of leadership in our organizations, our communities, and our world. If you have questions regarding today's episode, please feel free to email Dr. Delay at Nancy.Delay@kenexa.com. We also invite you to visit our website at Kenexapods.com to find the original transcripts of this episode, that's K-E-N-E-X-A pods.com. This episode was brought to you by Kenexa, a leader in building the world's greatest workforces.

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