

# HR Examiner

*Examining practical HR issues business owners  
and managers encounter every day*

## Working from Home - New Questions Posed

Arlene Vernon

In February, Yahoo announced that they were eliminating telecommuting in order to bring employees back to the workplace to increase collaboration and productivity. It seems that more and more research is being done to evaluate the benefits of employees working from home.

So how productive are some telecommuting employees? [Workforce.Com](#) reported a survey conducted by CouponCabin stating that 69% of at-home workers reported that they shop online while on the clock compared to 54% of employees who shop online while in the office. 63% said they felt less distracted working at home and 61% said they were more productive.

I'm not sure which issue to discuss – the importance of the face-to-face experience in bringing together a team, the distractions in the workplace that diminish productivity, or the results that 54% of our employees are shopping online during the workday.

Interestingly, Best Buy also eliminated a large number of telecommuting employees one week after Yahoo's

announcement. Their approach was a little more balanced (my opinion) than a total ban, as they now allow management to decide who works from home. (It seems that previously employees could decide whether to telecommute without supervisor approval.)

So, what do we learn from these changes from two large, somewhat struggling organizations. I've listed some ideas, questions, and issues below for you to think about:

- It seems that both companies are taking back control of their employees. When employees are taking advantage of working at home by not working to their capacity (which was discovered at both companies), it makes sense to try a new approach. Unless systems are in place to evaluate the productivity of employees working at home, work-at-home flexibility may not necessarily benefit the company.
- I'm still a little in shock that Best Buy didn't not allow supervisors to determine whether their employees would be more effective working in the office. While it's important to trust our employees, not all employees have the company's best interest in mind. By giving away supervisors' power in this area means, for example, that your poorest performer and/or your absenteeism problem can determine where to work. The absence of a big-picture strategy for selecting telecommuters related to performance and effectiveness is worrisome.
- I'm also surprised that Yahoo is requiring all employees to return to the office. While there is some mention that some people will be allowed to telecommute, it's an interesting flip. Time will tell whether they're bringing everyone in to re-assess employee strengths, contribution, dedication, work ethic, etc. in addition to rebuilding their teams to increase productivity.
- I am very supportive of corporations pulling employees back in to help the organizations rediscover and recreate their brand, their talent and their teams. Monster reports that 50% of workers are dissatisfied or indifferent and 55-60% of workers search for a new job "all the time" or "frequently." With that in mind, employers must do everything possible to create loyalty to retain their top talent. Having all your workers together can certainly affect loyalty

– of course, so can requiring people to return to the workplace after having the freedom of independence.

And so the telecommuting pendulum swings. I predict the balanced position will prevail in both these organizations with a strategic rather than reactive approach to allowing and disallowing telecommuting.

What are you doing in your organization to balance loyalty, team-building and effective performance while offering employees an appropriate level of flexibility regarding where they can work?

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## About Arlene Vernon

Arlene has provided HR consulting and management training services to over 300 organizations since starting HRx, Inc. in 1992.

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