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Apart But Together: Making Telecommuting Work

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Teleworking is becoming more prevalent for various reasons. Advances in technology have made this more feasible than ever, but a successful teleworking relationship also requires a strong interpersonal skill set. To explore what has made teleworking work for them, the author interviewed a teleworker, Annie Xue, and her manager, Seb Kleber.

Jennie McGinnis: Annie, what led you to consider teleworking?

Annie: My husband found a job in a city where the company does not have a local office. I really enjoyed my job and was not looking to change what I was doing. It would have been difficult to live so far away from my husband, especially since we have young kids.

Jennie: What was the organization's response to your request to telework?

Annie: I was absolutely amazed with how much support I received from management.

I first approached Seb to share that my husband had accepted the position. We were not sure of all the options, so he encouraged me to raise my concerns with our department head. She immediately asked if I had considered teleworking, which until then I had not.

Seb and I discussed the prospect of working remotely and he was very supportive. I formally applied to be a teleworker through the human resources (HR) department. After a week I received the official approvals and I started teleworking a month later.

Seb: Overall everyone was very receptive of Annie's request to telework, especially as a means to keep Annie on the team. Along with having support from senior management, HR has a formal teleworking policy in place. This was very helpful because it highlighted potential issues which we were able to discuss upfront.

Jennie: What were your initial concerns with the arrangement?

Annie: I was worried that I would not be aware of opportunities as they arose. I was also a bit concerned that we would not be able to communicate as effectively.

Seb: Sitting next to each other facilitated our informal communication, which made it easy to be on the same page with each other and move things forward quickly. A big piece of our effectiveness and productivity was our teamwork and easy communication. If that effectiveness started to slip, would it be as fun and productive to work together?

Another concern was having Annie maintain local relationships. With Annie being out of the office I thought there was a risk of her being "out of sight and out of mind." I was also concerned with Annie's emotional well-being, and that she might become lonely.

Jennie: How do you feel the transition went?

Annie: My initial concern of being out of the loop went away quickly. Seb actively watches for opportunities I might be interested in. Before becoming a teleworker I had been in my specific role for over a year. That helped a lot because people knew my strengths and expertise and therefore continued to come to me when they knew I would be a good fit.

Seb: I learned early on that it was important to call Annie every day to keep the communication open and to provide Annie with human interaction. I was surprised at how well we were able to transition our informal discussions to more formal communication through email and instant messaging. There were still some issues—for example, we saved over each other's work a couple of times—but engaging in open communication stopped it from becoming a big issue.

Jennie: Now more than a year in, how have any concerns with the arrangement changed?

Annie: In the past year I have worked on a lot of new, challenging and interactive projects, and received great feedback from management. I have deep faith that I can be successful in my role while being a teleworker.

Seb: I am still focused on providing human interaction for Annie and providing a variety of work with different people in the organization. We agreed that Annie would visit the office every quarter to maintain relationships, but this has been more difficult than originally expected. However, it does not seem to be a significant issue and it makes her visits even more special.

Jennie: What has been the best thing about teleworking/having a teleworker?

Annie: Teleworking makes it possible for me to keep a job that I love and live with my family. I am so thankful that with teleworking I did not have to choose between the two.

Seb: Teleworking has enabled Annie to still work with us! From the business perspective, teleworking has also required us to formalize processes and have more documentation. Annie is able to focus on the work without the normal office distractions, which is very helpful when trying to meet tight deadlines. From a personal perspective, I believe that I've become a better manager by working through the business and human considerations of teleworking.

Jennie: What advice do you have for those considering teleworking?

Seb: Be sure to discuss concerns upfront and develop plans to alleviate those concerns. Talk to others who have teleworked to gain additional perspectives. It may be more difficult to get it set up, but being able to provide the additional flexibility to people pays off in the long run.

Annie: It worked best to be very open and honest with management upfront. You never know exactly what your options are until you discuss them with your manager.

Also consider building a strong relationship with your co-workers before switching to teleworking. Even with new technology such as video conferencing, it is helpful to know your co-workers in person.

Jennie: What advice would you offer to those currently teleworking, in order to make it work better for them?

Annie: If there are certain types of opportunities you are looking for, such as an interesting project or a job rotation, it is better to let the relevant people know before the opportunity even becomes available. It is unavoidable that some decisions will be made in a hallway discussion that you just cannot participate in if working remotely. If someone in that discussion knows of your interests, he or she is able to speak up for you.

I also try to make the most out of my visits to the office by having as much interpersonal contact as possible. I schedule meetings, lunches, dinners, and even board game nights. In between meetings I walk around the office building to talk to as many people as I can.

Jennie: Thank you, Annie and Seb! ●

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