



Who Controls the Remote?

A STUDY ON HOW THE MOBILE WORKFORCE WORKS

There's no debating the growth of the mobile workforce. Right now, up to one-quarter of U.S. employees actively participate in it, according to Global Workforce Analytics research. And that number is quickly on the rise. By 2020, the mobile workforce is projected to comprise roughly three-quarters of our country's employees, according to an IDC forecast. As 2020 approaches, the move to mobilize is spreading across industry verticals, and businesses of all types are preparing to meet the challenges and transformative benefits of a decentralized workforce.

Though it's well-established that the mobile workforce is rapidly expanding, there's less clarity about who these workers are, how they work, and how they feel about remote work. To address these questions, West Unified Communications carried out a survey of more than 300 full-time workers. The research revealed that while today's employees enjoy the convenience of mobility, they also want to ensure that workplace elements like office culture, face-to-face communication and career advancement remain a part of their working experience. Employers must keep these concerns in mind when designing a telecommuting policy.



WHO ARE TODAY'S REMOTE WORKERS?

You can't put an age on today's remote worker. As our survey found, more than 90 percent of millennials, Gen Xers and baby boomers take advantage of their company's remote work policy. While it's true that a larger proportion of millennials currently work for companies that offer remote work capabilities – 69 percent versus 40 percent of boomers – actual use of a policy isn't age-dependent. In fact, when you look at just boomers, 95 percent use their company's remote work policy — slightly more than the 93 percent of millennials who do the same.

There are two distinct camps within the active mobile workforce: Those who use all of the remote work time that's available to them and those who only use some of it. The breakdown of these two groups varies by age, tenure and company policy.

We found that younger workers are much more likely to use all their available remote work time. According to the survey, more than 60 percent of millennials fall into the “all” category, compared to only one-third of baby boomers.

Tenure also appears to play a role in whether employees maximize their remote work time. Among employees who've been at their company less than six months, two-thirds choose to use all available remote work time. That number drops as tenure increases, with fewer than 40 percent of employees with five or more years on the job falling into the “all” category. It's possible, however, that this drop off may be a product of new hires enduring a probationary period in which they're allowed a limited amount of remote work days to begin with.

Finally, the more time a company's policy allows its employees to work remotely, the more likely they are to take advantage of all the available time. At companies that permit employees to work remotely every day, 81 percent of employees use all of that time. This figure drops sharply to 43 percent at companies where employees may only remote work several days a week, and further sinks to 16 percent at businesses where employees are only allowed several remote work days a month.

HOW THEY WORK

The vast majority of respondents who work remotely do so from home. Those who venture outside of the house for remote work tend to be in the younger crowd. One-fifth of millennials, for instance, say they regularly work from coffee-shops, compared to only 10 percent of boomers. Cars, bars and client offices are also remote work destinations frequented by millennials but almost no boomers. One notable remote work spot among the younger generation is co-working spaces, which 16 percent of millennial respondents say they post up in regularly. While this may seem like an ironic choice – working outside of the office only to work in another office – co-working spaces have been found to offer a unique blend of autonomy and community that for younger workers often yields better work than a traditional office.

While most survey respondents pointed to practical reasons for working remotely – such as taking care of a sick child, dodging that morning commute and avoiding office distractions – a smaller group cited more suspect reasons, including having an interview for another job (9% of respondents), “working” from a vacation spot (17%) and being hungover (6%). But this “hardly working” group is smaller than remote work critics would have businesses believe; as the survey results indicate, most employees take advantage of remote capabilities because they want to work better and more efficiently.

Employees' top 5 reasons for working remotely

1. Sick child (35%)
2. Transportation issues (34%)
3. To avoid the long commute (30%)
4. Improve productivity (30%)
5. To avoid distractions of working in office (28%)

So what types of tools do mobile employees use to stay in touch with their colleagues and supervisors throughout the workday? While email and phone are the most popular collaboration technologies – used by three-quarters of surveyed remote workers – tools like instant messaging, web conferencing, video conferencing and audio conferencing are also popular; each one is used by more than one-quarter of respondents. Collaboration applications are also making their mark, particularly for middle-aged employees. Roughly one-quarter of Gen X remote workers use collaboration apps, compared to 18 percent of millennials and only 10 percent of boomers.]

Top collaboration technologies used by the remote workforce

- Email (76%)
- Phone (74%)
- Instant messaging (31%)
- Video conferencing (30%)
- Web conferencing (28%)
- Audio conferencing (26%)
- Collaboration apps (19%)

HOW THEY FEEL

Will the rise of remote work lead to a future without offices? Not necessarily. Employees enjoy the flexibility and benefits of working remotely, but they also don't want mobile work to come at the expense of traditional workplace staples like office culture, colleague relationships and career advancement:

- **Workplace culture:** Among employees who only use some of their office's remote work policy, 47 percent said it was because they prefer the culture of an office. As the growing popularity of co-working spaces indicates, mobile employees – particularly younger ones – aren't necessarily looking for an isolated remote work experience, but instead one that offers autonomy while retaining a sense of communal culture.
- **Colleague communications:** More than one-quarter of mobile workers surveyed feel their remote work can lead to misinterpreted communication with colleagues. This percentage is notably higher for millennials than baby boomers (31% vs. 20%), which is surprising given that millennials have grown up with an unprecedented range of digital communication options at their fingertips.
- **Career advancement:** If your boss isn't near your desk to actually see you work, will that hold you back from promotions? It's something mobile workers think about, particularly millennials – nearly a quarter of whom are worried their remote work may cause them to miss out on career opportunities. These concerns persist despite the fact that nearly 60 percent of mobile workers communicate with their supervisor multiple times a day, with the majority characterizing those interactions as "direct and transparent."

MEETING MOBILE WORK CONCERNS WITH A STRATEGIC POLICY

As the mobile workforce gains momentum, employers must confront the concerns and opportunities it presents. Here's how employers can design a mobile work policy that addresses these issues:

CONCERN	SOLUTION
"I still want the culture of an office."	Continue to prioritize office culture. A remote work policy doesn't mean jettisoning office culture. With nearly half of mobile employees regularly punching into the office because they enjoy the workplace environment, it's important for businesses to continue to foster in-office culture. Business leaders, for example, can glean tips for modernizing this culture by looking to the model of co-working spaces, which offer a unique working environment that's increasingly popular among the rising generation of employees.
"I worry about fragmented communication with colleagues when I work remotely."	Implement video communication. Perhaps you sent an email to a colleague and haven't heard back in a few hours. Or maybe you pinged them via IM and are now questioning how your tone came off. These are just two of the examples that illustrate why more than one-quarter of remote workers are concerned about disconnected communications with colleagues. To alleviate this problem, employers should implement video conferencing, which provides a platform for clear and direct communication between remote colleagues.
"I'm nervous remote work will hinder my career advancement."	Augment existing communications. Of the mobile employees surveyed, most communicate with their supervisors multiple times a day. And yet mobile worker anxiety about career advancement remains an issue. To allay these concerns, employers should implement communication measures that better allow them to qualitatively evaluate and acknowledge an employee's work. After all, if a mobile employee's communication with his or her supervisor mostly takes place over email, it can become difficult for the employee to convey overall progress in his or her role. But if supervisors regularly reach out to employees via modes that allow for more direct communication – such as video conferencing – this can provide a more personal channel for employees to share their career progress and ensure they're in good standing for promotions down the line.

By creating a mobile working environment that emphasizes communication, enables career advancement and retains office culture, companies can ensure their employees are productive and satisfied – no matter where they work. With the right tools and policies to stay collaborative and connected, companies can greet 2020 – and the possibility of a mostly mobile workforce – head on.