

“Tele-Transforming” Our Way Into the Workplace of the Future

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The changing landscape of the workplace is not so different from the evolution our industry finds itself in. Unless your company has a median age of 56, you recognize this 24/7/365 era we call work-life integration. As a result, our people strategies are constantly changing and evolving. A workplace of choice can no longer hang its hat on comprehensive health benefits and a lucrative 401(k) program. This is where the generation born between 1981 and 1996—Millennials—have challenged companies of all shapes and sizes to rethink 20th Century people practices.

At Gongos, a healthy portion (forty-three percent) of our Michigan-based workforce are Millennials, and because of this we have committed to researching who they are, how they work and live, and what they need to thrive in the workplace. Not surprisingly, flexibility and work-life integration are at the top of their list. To support our findings, Forbes.com and The Intelligence Group cited that seventy-four percent value flexible work schedules and eighty-eight percent choose work-life integration.



Simply speaking, work-life integration moves beyond “work-life balance” in supporting the notion of a reciprocal relationship between one’s personal life and professional life. Embracing and acting on these emerging “values” positively impacts the Millennial mindset when it comes to retention. In fact just this year, CNBC reported that, according to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics, Millennials stay in jobs less than three years. Yet, we feel it’s our calling—if not our duty—to cultivate a work environment that inspires tenure.

Enter the worlds of Telecommuting and Teleworking.

If there ever was a holy grail of work-life integration, it just may lie in our ability to offer freedom and flexibility to our people through telecommuting and teleworking. But first, let’s clarify the differences:

Telecommuting is working as a full-time employee from a home base or home office, often out-of-state or beyond a reasonable in-state commute; whereas **Teleworking** can be classified as more of a perk, granting any employee

who customarily works from the company's office(s) the opportunity to work from home, one or more days per week.

While Gongos embraced its first telecommuter in 1998, we piloted our teleworking program in the summer of 2012. We actually did it because we were running out of parking space at headquarters, and we had to get creative. Much to our delight, our people really embraced it—while honoring the parameters. Swiftly, yet steadily, we developed policies and best practices around them. And where, you ask, has employee productivity and engagement netted out? It's **increased**. Voluntary turnover? You guessed it, it's **decreased**.

We realize such a proactive approach to institutionalizing telecommuting and teleworking may not be suited for every organization or employee. But it can work, provided there is a strong commitment, and a steady organizational strategy on multiple levels:

Enterprise:

- Embrace the risks and rewards from the top down
- Support through 24/7 tech support (video conferencing, webcams, instant messaging)
- Financially commit to telecommuters regularly traveling to headquarters; not only for work, but company wide activities, too
- Reinforce best practices with managers and employees

Team:

- Be aware of the potential of changing team dynamics and be quick to course-correct if alignment and cohesion seem to be slipping
- Whenever possible, interactions with teleworkers/commuters should utilize video capabilities to bring

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teleworker/commuters
“into” meetings

Manager:

- Support managers in developing a meaningful “digital relationship” with their direct reports (IM, email, phone, webcam)
- Become more attuned to employee's tone of voice, environmental and body language through video/camera interactions

Employee:

- Identify the “right” employees. A self-motivated mindset and willingness to embrace their “work day” in their personal space (i.e. disciplined hours, responsiveness to others' needs) is key
- Outline appropriate expectations on the front end: Employees must commit to traveling to enterprise headquarters regularly, and invest in relationship-building when in office (i.e. flex seating and face-time with coworkers at lunches/dinners)
- Embrace flexibility in accommodating travel when the organization or team ideally need you there in-person
- Define the importance of visibility and encourage this through the use of video whether it is simple conversation or lengthy team meetings, employees must listen, be heard and seen, even when working from home

We have found that the biggest drawbacks telecommuters may face are feelings of isolation, and difficulty with turning work off at the close of their work day. Naturally, there is also risk in detachment from the company's culture and subtleties of bonding that inevitably occur at “the water cooler” and in the hallways of any workplace.

At Gongos, while our “little pilot program that could”

quickly gained traction, we've learned that telecommuting and teleworking have empowered employees at all ages... not just Millennials. These strategies are now embedded in our culture; and the freedom and flexibility has

transformed into a need rather than a want. So, as we integrate the best of both worlds— work and life— so too can every workplace of the future.



About the Authors

Chris Carmean

Chris believes in banking on the “human” in HR. Encouraging the growth of her fellow colleagues, she continually arms people of all levels within the Gongos Enterprise with the resources, tools and opportunity to become better colleagues and managers. Her warmth shines through every day through her approachable and accountable demeanor—that...and the large basket of candy in her office! Recruiting and talent retention are everything to Chris, as evidenced through her career path, which includes human resource and talent roles at ePrize and Compuware in Metro Detroit. Chris is also a devoted wife and mom to a teenage daughter and Bubba, the Labrador—and is a self-proclaimed zombie fanatic.



Cheryl Halverson

Cheryl's natural strength in managing people and developing their skills has guided her success as a former Research Group Leader, and in her current role. She believes in leveraging people's passions and talents to support the Gongos enterprise strategy, with focus and discipline as her guiding principles.

She encourages her colleagues to balance a strong consultative mindset with empathy toward their clients' business objectives. Only then, she believes, can they develop enduring, strategic relationships.

Working from her Milwaukee home base, Cheryl paved the path for our growing team of telecommuters. And while her two children—years apart in age—keep her on her toes, she also continually challenges her endurance through triathlons and marathons.