

The U.Va. Telecommunity: A Research Pilot

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Abstract

Telecommuting provides U.Va. with a unique means of addressing recruitment and retention issues associated with dual-career families in a way that respects the “career agency” of dual-career partners. Advances in communications and information technology have made telecommuting a viable employment option, but logistical, cultural, and other barriers have prevented telecommuting from capturing more than a tiny sliver of the labor market. The U.Va. “Telecommunity” project described in this proposal seeks to leverage the university’s research capacity to develop insights into the challenges associated with telecommuting. Based on that research, U.Va. can carry out cost-effective interventions to assist dual-career partners in advancing their own career opportunities through telecommuting. Those interventions can then be assessed for their effectiveness in promoting university goals, and appropriate adjustments to the program can be carried out.

Introduction

In many modern dual-career families, both partners lead fully autonomous professional lives. Although university support services can enhance opportunities for dual-career partners, those services may come at the expense of the real or perceived independence of those partners. This raises the problem/issue of “career agency.” The issue of career agency may especially affect women faculty to the extent that there are asymmetric gender-based preferences concerning either partner’s willingness to sacrifice career prospects or autonomy. At the same time, career agency may also be particularly important to some subset of female dual-career partners.

A university hiring model, which revolves around U.Va. extending positions to dual-career partners, has some attractions, given the small size of the Charlottesville labor market. However, this model is ill-suited to facilitating career agency; cannot supply a sufficient number of total positions; does not fit the reality of modern relationships (which are more flexible); raises concerns about shoehorning people into positions for which they are under-, over-, or mis-qualified; and does not support individuals who are not interested in working in a university environment. U.Va. is a dynamic place that hosts talented people of all stripes—but it should be just one of many options for dual-career partners to explore.

Luckily, we live in an age when, in theory, place no longer needs to be a major limitation on career opportunities. Advances in communications technology and changing workplace norms have expanded options for remote and telecommuting employment, which substantially increase the total number of positions that are available for Charlottesville residents. Although remote and telecommuting positions remain a small part of the overall economy, this employment model is growing (Bloom 2013). U.Va. has an opportunity to lead in this area.

Proposal: The U.Va. Telecommunity

Our proposal is based on the idea of empowering partners to pursue their own careers using their own talents, connections, and aspirations, with the support of a “U.Va. Telecommunity.” We propose a pilot research project on telecommuting, undertaken at an existing U.Va. center or institute. The test group would be partners in current and future U.Va. dual-career couples who are interesting in pursuing telecommuting opportunities. The research project would identify barriers to telecommuting and seek to address those barriers through cost-effective interventions that could include career counseling, creation of networking opportunities, and creation of “work space” options for telecommuters.

First Step

The first step in the U.Va. Telecommunity project is identifying the factors that impede successful telecommuting. The university would publish a request for proposals to solicit a research design to be undertaken by a qualified principal investigator. Methodologies may include literature reviews, surveys, in-depth interviews, or statistical analysis. Initial hypotheses that have some support in the existing literature include:

1. **Lack of geographically extensive personal/professional networks.** Many employment opportunities are identified through personal and professional networks that tend to map to geographic regions (Shevchuk and Strebkov 2012). Identifying work opportunities across the globe raises substantial networking challenges.
2. **Employee adjustment.** Without in-person access to fellow workers, employees can feel isolated and cut off from the rest of their industry. There is also the issue of work-life balance: boundaries between an employee's work and home lives blur when a home office is the only work space (Gold and Mustafa 2013).
3. **Productivity issues/employer hesitation.** Questions about performance remain, despite research showing that telecommuting increases productivity (Bloom 2013). Risks of data breaches and other security concerns are another issue that has hindered telecommuting opportunities (Green 2002).

Second Step

Once the research has been carried out, and a set of impediments to telecommuting have been identified, the U.Va. Telecommunity project will develop cost-effective interventions that are designed to reduce the barriers to telecommuting. For example, based on the hypotheses stated above, potential interventions could include:

1. **Create networking opportunities for dual-career partners.** Many schools and departments across the university already undertake extensive efforts to establish employer relationships to facilitate student employment opportunities upon graduation. These networks can serve as the foundation for a Telecommunity network that offers dual-career partners the opportunity to learn about employment prospects, and likewise provides employers with a "bank" of talented potential hires. It is unlikely that using this network will create competition for positions with students, since dual-career partners are often at a substantially more advanced stage in their careers than are recently minted graduates.

2. **Build relationships with other non-urban schools that face similar issues.** Many other universities and colleges in non-urban areas face recruitment issues associated with faculty/staff spousal careers. At some level, U.Va. is in a competitive relationship with these schools vis-à-vis hiring, but there is a broader competition between urban and non-urban schools wherein urban schools enjoy distinct advantages concerning spousal careers (while also facing disadvantages, such as cost of living). By teaming with other non-urban schools to establish a broader Telecommunity, U.Va. expands the bank of potential talent, creating network effects for potential employers (Easley and Kleinberg 2010).
3. **Establish a work center.** If the lack of work space is a significant barrier to telecommuting, U.Va. can provide support services that help address this concern. There is a small but growing business model of temporary/shared office space that has become popular in certain urban areas (*Wall Street Journal* 2011). Within Charlottesville, OpenSpace—a locally operated business—provided a collective work space for local residents. Although it presented a potentially promising model, OpenSpace closed in the summer of 2014, citing a lack of profit (Newsplex.com 2014). With U.Va.’s support, a similar local business could become viable, or the university could offer work space through its own facilities.
4. **Provide career counseling.** Many individuals transitioning to telecommuting from traditional employment may benefit from counseling services that can provide information on employment opportunities; match individuals to particular positions, industries, or position types; identify personal barriers as well as benefits of telecommuting; and generally provide information and support to make the transition to this new working style as seamless as possible.

Third Step

The final step in the U.Va. Telecommunity project is to determine the success of the interventions and decide whether they should be carried forward, revised, or abandoned. To facilitate this step, metrics should be established early; these may include total job placements, the richness of employment opportunities offered to dual-career couples, satisfaction with the support services, and effects on employee recruitment and retention.

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