Yahoo! For Going Back to Work

By Robert Smithson

When Yahoo! issued a memo telling employees they'd be expected to work at the workplace rather than from home, a firestorm of commentary broke out.

"To become the absolute best place to work, communication and collaboration will be important, so we need to be working side-by-side. That is why it is critical that we are all present in our offices. Some of the best decisions and insights come from hallway and cafeteria discussions, meeting new people, and impromptu team meetings. Speed and quality are often sacrificed when we work from home. We need to be one Yahoo!, and that starts with physically being together.

Beginning in June, we're asking all employees with work-from-home arrangements to work in Yahoo! offices. If this impacts you, your management has already been in touch with next steps. And, for the rest of us who occasionally have to stay home for the cable guy, please use your best judgment in the spirit of collaboration. Being a Yahoo isn't just about your day-to-day job, it is about the interactions and experiences that are only possible in our offices."

With that, work-from-home arrangements at Yahoo! were brought to an end. And the public commentary, much of it critical, got started.

Yahoo! CEO, Marissa Mayer was pretty much vilified for the decision. Commentary addressed the need for trust between management and employees, the fact that (due to technological advances) the work-from-home arrangement is just the way it is today, the risk that Yahoo! would lose valuable talent as a result of this change, the negative impact employees with young families would suffer, the possibility that employees will be less productive at work, and a hundred other criticisms. Who's to say who is right and who is wrong?

This whole episode was of particular interest to me because, for the last half-year, I've been working from home every second week. One week I'm in my firm's offices in Kelowna and the second I'm working from my condo in downtown Vancouver.

Looking back, I can see many of the positives – and negatives – of working from home. And, from where I'm sitting, I think Ms. Mayer may have a point. However, I'll preface my comments by saying that I think the wisdom of allowing employees to work at home – or of requiring them to attend at the office – probably depends

heavily upon the particular industry.

The predominant thought I've had as I've experienced the work-at-home arrangement is how many distractions there are. Whether it's the television (there's a lot of European soccer to catch up on during day-time hours!), the telephone, the need to hit the gym, that growing pile of laundry, or a sunny day just waiting to be appreciated, there are limitless reasons to be doing things other than work.

I've also found that I don't take advantage of "normal office hours" the way I do when I'm actually at the office. I roll out of bed later and often attend to things like showering and eating breakfast as (time consuming) breaks between work tasks. I invariably quit working earlier, and I never make up that time during evening hours or on the weekend.

Being as productive from home as I am at the office has been a real struggle for me. And, as I work in a business in which we record every productive minute of our working time, I have figures to back that up.

I don't even have young children needing my care or pets demanding to be walked. My life is about as streamlined as it gets and I still find my at-home work day is chipped away at by endless distractions.

As a business owner, you might think I would fall at the high end of the scale for nose-to-the-grindstone motivation. So, if I was an hourly or salaried employee working for someone else, I wonder if I would get anything productive done at home.

I absolutely recognize that working from home is an unavoidable necessity for some employees with young families. For them, not being able to work from home may, due to the impact of daycare costs (as an example), mean it is simply not feasible to work at all.

But, for the rest of us, my own experience suggests the work-at-home arrangement may be a perquisite which is highly desirable to the employee but may not be of much (or any) benefit to the employer. I have more to say on the subject, but I really must get back to catching up on yesterday's European soccer matches.

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Robert Smithson is a labour and employment lawyer, and operates Smithson Employment Law in Kelowna. For more information about his practice, or to subscribe to ***You Work Here****, visit www.smithsonlaw.ca. This subject matter is provided for general informational purposes only and is not intended as legal advice.*

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