A perception of the advantages and challenges of remote-working

This article is about remote working. My experience is as an Associate (contractor) rather than a remote-working staff member. Before becoming an Associate I worked for Xodus as a full-time staff member for two and a half years. The article focuses on my perception of the advantages of remote working and some challenges and possible solutions.

My reason for remote-working is to maintain a work/life balance geared towards outdoor activities and sustainable living. I live in rural northern Spain, a substantial commute from my nearest office in London. I see many advantages for both myself and for Xodus Group in my remote working situation. For me, the advantages include:

- I can live wherever I want, without being limited by commuting distance;
- The freedom to live wherever I want and the elimination of travelling costs means I have increased disposable income;
- I can focus on my preferred work spheres of analysis and report writing without distractions; and
- My work schedule is very flexible, both in terms of when I work and how much work I take on.

For Xodus the advantages include:
- I only charge time that is billable to projects. These hours are charged on to Xodus’ clients, meaning any time I spend working generates profit for Xodus, and Xodus does not incur overhead when there is no work; and
- Flexibility and scalability - Xodus can choose to give me work or not dependent on availability.

There are a number of potential challenges to the situation; these are the ones I’ve identified:

- The individual must take responsibility for furthering their own knowledge and training if they aspire to develop professionally;
- Lack of job security means the individual may need to secure alternative income sources and take responsibility for business development;
- Because office interactions are missing, it is possible to become isolated from decision-making and general project developments. The remote worker and the Company must actively pursue good communication to ensure efficiency;
- It can be difficult to gauge performance and pursue continuous improvement since there are no scheduled performance reviews, and day-to-day interactions are limited. I feel this issue requires focused attention from companies if they are to sustainably engage remote workers. I suggest remote workers must be diligent in seeking feedback from project close-out meetings, and companies must recognise their own interest in providing constructive feedback to promote improved project performance;
- I prefer my remit and goals on a project to be clearly explained up-front. I am lucky that our ESIA Delivery Lead is well-organised and an extremely effective communicator, meaning I can focus on clearly defined tasks and quickly access data. When tasks are not clearly defined, or the co-ordinator does not have a comprehensive knowledge of the project and data, I waste time trying to find information, or focusing on the wrong things at the wrong time. This affects my motivation and performance on the project. While the remote worker must be self-motivated, the person managing a remote worker has a huge impact on their performance. Companies intending to use remote workers must appreciate that successful remote working requires effective management; and

- A fast, reliable data transfer system is required. I have the option to work on a remote desktop hosted on a server in London, however my web connection is too slow to make this practical. I download documents and work on a local machine, then upload completed work. Because our remote desktop application does not support direct file transfer between remote and local workstations I have to use a web-based intermediary (such as Dropbox), which is inefficient. Xodus’ IT department has acknowledged this problem and is working on a solution (a dedicated laptop in London which I can access remotely, which should resolve many of the current issues). This responsiveness is exactly what is required to make remote working accessible to more of the workforce.

My experience of remote working has been extremely positive.

It supports my aspiration to live in a rural environment whilst minimising commuting time and enjoying a healthy work/life balance. I am much more motivated now than I was working in the office. I feel that without the opportunity to work in this way, I probably would have left the field of Environmental Consultancy. Instead, I continue to work in my field of interest, and Xodus continues to leverage the experience and training that it initially provided me as a staff member, with increased flexibility and reduced overheads.

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