

The future of telecommuting

Corralling the Yahoos

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Technology allows millions of people to work from home. A big tech firm is trying to stop them

“YOU can't have everything you want, but you can have the things that really matter to you,” writes Marissa Mayer, the boss of Yahoo, in a blurb for a book called “Rebooting Work”. But not, it seems, if you are a Yahoo employee and working from home is really important to you. As part of her efforts to reboot the ailing internet firm, Ms Mayer has decreed that from June all the company's staff will be expected to come into its offices to do their jobs.

The news of Ms Mayer's ban on telecommuting surfaced in the form of a memo to employees sent by Yahoo's head of human resources. It was promptly leaked to *All Things D*, a technology-industry blog, and unleashed a fevered debate in the blogosphere and on Twitter. Supporters saw it as the brave act of a boss determined to rid the company of slackers. Critics lambasted the firm for an antediluvian attitude towards the workplace.

Among the latter was Sir Richard Branson, a British entrepreneur who wrote in a blog post that the decision was “a backwards step in an age when remote working is easier and more effective than ever”. “Yours truly has never worked out of an office,” added the bearded boss of the Virgin Group, “and never will.” On the other side, Donald Trump, an American television showman and property magnate, tweeted that Ms Mayer was “right to expect Yahoo employees to come to the workplace vs.

working at home.”

The decision touched a raw nerve in Silicon Valley because it is in the midst of a bout of soul-searching about the workplace. Why, many people are asking, have so few women risen to the top of the tech world? (Ms Mayer herself is a rare exception.) The news has also triggered a broader discussion about how much freedom workers should be given to decide where to spend their working hours.

Fans of telecommuting point out that it is on the rise almost everywhere. A survey of over 11,000 workers in 24 countries published last year by Ipsos, a polling firm, found that almost a fifth of respondents who said they are connected online to their workplaces telecommute frequently; 7% of those polled said they worked from home every day.

That fridge looks tempting

Ipsos also discovered that telecommuting is more prevalent in emerging markets than in rich ones, but it is growing in the latter, too. According to figures published last October by the US Census Bureau, American workers who spend most of their time toiling from home rose from 3.6% of the workforce in 2005 to 4.3% in 2010. The bureau also noted that home-based work in computer, engineering and science is rising particularly fast, growing almost 70% between 2000 and 2010. Given

that many technology firms produce the devices and software that make working from home a breeze, it seems sensible to let their employees use them.

Why, then, has Ms Mayer put telecommuting on hold at Yahoo? The leaked memo said the habit has slowed the firm down and made it harder to have serendipitous meetings that can give birth to new ideas. Yet plenty of innovative technology firms such as Facebook move pretty fast while allowing some people to work from home. Banning telecommuting outright punishes good employees as well as bad, says Joan Williams, a professor at the University of California Hastings College of the Law.

A growing body of evidence suggests it harms productivity, too. A recent study by academics at Stanford University and the University of Beijing reports the results of an experiment at Ctrip, an online travel company in China that is quoted on America's NASDAQ stockmarket. The firm split some of its call-centre workers into two teams. One team worked at home for nine months; the other in the company's offices. At the end of the period, the academics found the telecommuters had handled calls more efficiently, taken fewer breaks and had been 13% more productive than their peers. Job satisfaction was also much higher among the homeworkers.

Admittedly, Ms Mayer's staff are highly skilled people, such as programmers, who may need more face time with colleagues. They may also telecommute in exceptional circumstances. But insisting that everyone normally show up is risky at a time when tech firms are ruthlessly poaching talent from rivals. Since she took over at Yahoo last July, Ms Mayer has pushed her battered firm's share price up 35%. Her latest decision could put those gains in peril. ■

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