

## The evolution of work: One company's story

Symantec's chief human-resources officer, Rebecca Ranninger, describes the security software company's transition to a virtual workplace while reflecting on the promise—and perils—of new ways of working.

**The physical part of work**—where and how it's done—is shifting in big ways. We all recognize the signs: you'll schedule a meeting and you're the only person sitting in the conference room, with 20 people on the phone. You'll hear dogs barking in the background, babies crying. Yet all of these people have, in their heads, what they need for the meeting.

It seems as if it was just a few years ago that we were taking people out of offices and putting them into cubicles. From there, the trend went to open work spaces, then hoteling, and then shared hoteling “cubes”—all driven by the need to keep real-estate costs low in a very acquisitions-oriented industry that's always streamlining. Now, more and more of our employees are working remotely.

In many ways, that's a good thing. It gives people a lot more flexibility and freedom, and makes them happier about the job because they're able to put their lives together in ways that matter to them. This is true for men and women both. I think the additional flexibility makes Symantec more attractive to *all* employees and helps us get better people. I remember having discussions, eight or nine years ago, with my boss at the time about somebody who was just the perfect candidate but didn't want to move to our headquarters, in Mountain View, California. The answer was, “Nope, we need him here.” That is much less likely to happen today.

But today's more virtual workplace also raises interesting psychological questions. I think it makes all of us less able to compartmentalize and separate the different elements of our lives as we used to. It's less linear—much more of a jumble—because we're always multi-tasking, we're always on. The technology enables that by taking away the limitations of time and space. I have seen people who stay up all night working with Europe, Australia, and India and then work the



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whole day in the United States. They burn themselves out because they're always available. It's a huge worry.

The new workplace also creates a very different ethos. Those 20 people in your phone meeting aren't sitting around a table together seeing the same presentation in front of them. The communal-experience piece of it—the camaraderie—is lost. These are concerns for us. How do we ensure that people have the same kind of experience they used to get sitting in a room when they're no longer even in the same hemisphere? We've got virtual teams all over the world, and I'm willing to bet there are many in which no team member has ever even met another team member. It's really easy to turn everybody into a voice on the phone and a line on a screen, and we don't want to do that.

Similarly, how do we make sure people learn from one another in a virtualized workplace? How do we make sure we're maintaining our company culture and values?

## A new way

These are the kinds of questions we've grappled with as we implemented a home-based work program called Ways 2 Work, which we initially launched in parts of the United States and are now rolling out more broadly. The program's goal is to focus on employees' contributions and results rather than when—or where—work is done. There's a big technological component, of course: things like VoIP phones, social-networking tools, and other technologies can help people work efficiently from wherever they happen to be. But the program also relies heavily on the ability of managers to make sure their colleagues stay connected to work in a human way. A good example of success is our sales support unit in Shannon, Ireland, where our managers and employees are significantly changing how they work (see sidebar, "Close-up: Shannon, Ireland").

Here in the United States, an important aspect of the program involves moving away from paid time off. We started about a year and a half ago at the top of the company and have been working our way down, expanding the change to more and more groups. It's a big jump.

Basically, we're saying, you don't have a set amount of time off. Take your time off when you can—we're not going to record it but you need to get the job done.

The program is certainly a positive for the company because it takes a lot of money off the balance sheet, but it's had a really interesting effect on how people think of work time as well. I think it causes most people to look at time in the same way they did when they were students. Nobody cared if you studied five minutes or ten hours for the quiz. All they cared about was that you did well on it. The new policy has been a challenge for some employees, and we obviously have to beware of the extremes—say, people watching soap operas all afternoon, at one end, and completely burning themselves out with overwork, at the other. But it's been very successful overall, and I think our people appreciate the move. Our employee satisfaction scores *did* go up after the change, though I'm always leery of confusing correlation with causation when it comes to any single measure.

## **What the program means for managers**

Ultimately, our managers have a lot of discretion in how they implement home-based work programs and define how work gets done in their own units. This is by necessity. Our products are so differentiated, and the types of work that our people do is so differentiated—and dispersed—that there can't be a "one size fits all" solution. We can tell our people what we want and what the outcome has to be, but the businesses need to have the autonomy to get that result in their own way.

This approach puts a lot of responsibility on our managers because it's really up to them to help their people determine the right balance. We spend a lot of time working with our managers on "remote management": training them in a whole gamut of skills and techniques to help bring together people from different cultures as a team. Those skills cover everything from the tactical, like clear and concise communication and follow-up skills, to those more in the realm of management philosophy, like the ability to base the evaluation of an employee on the fulfillment of a set of measurable deliverables, as opposed to putting in a certain number of hours a week. Remote management is now a core skill for managers—one reflected in our performance-management processes.

Yet even as these newer management skills grow in importance, I think it's more challenging than ever to ensure that our people have the general-management skills they need. In today's more

specialized work environment, you have to know a whole lot more about a whole lot less to do a good job. This is certainly true at Symantec, where, for example, in recent years we've disaggregated all the various human-resources activities into specialist and generalist roles. Similarly, recruiting used to be handled by one or



## Close-up: Shannon, Ireland

**Sree Ramaswamy**

The 50 or so employees of Symantec's sales support group in Shannon, Ireland, recently became the first of the company's international teams to "go virtual" as part of the Ways 2 Work program. By allowing employees to work from home, the unit supported the desire many of them had to strike a more satisfying balance between their work and personal lives. The company benefits too: in recent interviews with the local executives and managers responsible for the change, we learned that the group's productivity increased by 6 percent last year, with no employee attrition. A recent company survey found that 84 percent of the affected employees were happier working from home. What's more, the experience has prompted Symantec to develop a broader global strategy to consolidate its real estate and reduce the number of its physical offices. The company has even begun investigating more flexible work programs in functions such as product design.

Ensuring that technology was fully in place, on day one of the program, to support the changes was a key factor cited by managers explaining the program's success thus far. Another was acquiring a local executive suite where teammates can meet live once a week, which helps combat social isolation. "Managers need to make an extra effort to ensure that their employees feel connected and informed so that the team dynamic doesn't suffer," said Lloyd Nolan, senior director of support renewals. Finally, employees are advised to take frequent breaks, including exercise breaks, and to go out to lunch with coworkers whenever possible. And managers encourage their teams to disconnect completely when work is finished. "It's important," said Nolan, "that they walk away from their keyboard at day's end." ○

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two people; now there might be ten people contributing, but each of them handles specific tasks. I think that nearly all jobs are amenable to this trend, given the right talent and management skills.

Developing solid general-management skills requires helping people to think hard about what they want the map of their careers to look like. We also rotate people to give them more varied management opportunities. This is important because in a specialized world, people aren't as likely to get general-management skills the way they used to: by having responsibility for a whole bunch of things at once.

A more virtual and disaggregated workplace puts a lot of pressure on our senior leadership to connect the dots. The act of redefining jobs in a global company, for example, tends to highlight some of the age-old frictions about regional versus corporate-level control—and what you think about these issues often depends on where you sit. If you're in the corporate office, the push is always for more consistency, but if you're the head of Asia-Pacific, you're saying, "Wait a minute, what about India? We can't do it that way or we'll lose people." Talk of redefining jobs has sparked some big debates and serves as a great reminder to us that we have to be able to see multiple points of view simultaneously.

At the most basic level, working through these kinds of challenges comes down to building and strengthening trust. Ironically, perhaps, the act of building this kind of trust among senior managers is something I don't think we could have done virtually. There's a limit to virtualization in that respect. At some point, you have to get people together and sit around those tables and have those discussions. The meetings' content is important, but just as important is physically connecting in one place now and then, so you can work things out with each other. At the end of the day, we're still human beings. ○

This commentary is adapted from an interview with **Roxane Divol**, a principal in McKinsey's San Francisco office, and **Thomas Fleming**, a member of McKinsey Publishing who is based in the Chicago office.