

# benefit fringe

## really remote work

Nearly 53% of public and corporate employers offer telecommuting or the ability to work from home, according to the 2018 International Foundation *Employee Benefits Survey*. Proponents of these arrangements cite the flexibility that many workers crave and the potential for increased productivity by avoiding the daily commute and dealing with fewer distractions.

But new research is raising two new and interesting questions: What if remote workers could be *really* remote—say, anywhere in the world—and could this provide an avenue for employers to benefit from the knowledge and experience of older workers?

Researchers at Harvard University and Northeastern University say a new form of remote work is emerging: *work from anywhere* (WFA). In a recent article in *Harvard Business Review*, the researchers define WFA as a “situation in which workers can live and work where they choose, typically within a specific country, but in some cases anywhere in the world with a reliable internet connection.”

Many companies are just starting to consider allowing employees to work from anywhere, but others have developed WFA programs, according to researchers Prithwiraj (Raj) Choudhury, Barbara Z. Larson and Cirrus Foroughi.

In a telephone interview, Choudhury, a Harvard Business School professor, explained: “There’s a lot of latent demand for this kind of policy because not everyone wants to live in one city in the world.” Other reasons that WFA might be attractive to workers are the high cost of living in some cities, elder- and child-care demands and couples whose careers require them to live in different cities.

The researchers studied the effects of a WFA program implemented for patent examiners

in 2012 at the U.S. Patent & Trade Office. They looked at productivity data for patent examiners who switched from work-from-home conditions to WFA.

They found that the examiners’ work output increased by 4.4%, with no significant increase in the need to redo their work. They also found that examiners who transitioned to WFA relocated to, on average, locations with significantly lower costs of living.

And examiners who had been on the job longer or who were closer to retirement were more likely to move to “retirement friendly” coastal areas of Florida, compared with those with shorter tenures. The results suggest that granting employees the ability to work from anywhere may encourage senior employees to remain in the productive workforce longer, the article stated.

“We have this aging workforce problem in the country, and I would argue that our study is just the first step in trying to understand whether or not people can extend their working careers if they are given geographic flexibility,” Choudhury said.

He cautioned that the study looked at only one organization and one kind of task. “We need to understand what other kinds of tasks might be amenable to a WFA arrangement,” he said.

Issues for further study include whether WFA can work for team-based tasks and whether newer employees can succeed as well as the senior employees studied in the patent office. Choudhury noted that the patent examiners had to work in the patent office for two years before they could qualify for a WFA arrangement.

But most organizations likely have roles that could be suitable for WFA, he said. “This would be a wonderful benefit that would distinguish organizations offering this benefit from their competitors.”

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