

A Case for Remote CDI:

WHITE PAPER

The positives and negatives of a distributed workforce for employers and staff members

When considering productivity, evidence reveals many positives and few negatives for employers and staff when CDI programs are conducted remotely.

For many professionals engaged in the burgeoning field of clinical documentation integrity (CDI), ensuring CDI program productivity can be a challenge. Intellis Vice President of Clinical and Quality Services Allison Van Doren, RN BSN CCDS CDIP CRC, and Clinical Documentation Improvement Specialist Paige Lowe, RN, BSN, CCDS, CRC, examined — from employer and staff perspectives — the productivity pros and cons of working remotely.

While examining the distributed workforce methodology, Van Doren sought definitive insight from trusted sources regarding the advantages and disadvantages of managing remote CDI specialists. She noted that questions regarding employee productivity caused reluctance for some employers to commit to telecommuting. Skepticism swirled as to whether a potential upside exists for employers and clients.

Upon exploring the body of knowledge regarding the remote workforce, Van Doren discovered a two-year study by Stanford Professor of Economics Nicholas Bloom, Ph.D. Bloom quantified the benefits realized by on-site and remote work environments and established a link between telecommuting and an unexpected boost in productivity. Bloom's comprehensive research nullified employer productivity concerns when engaging a distributed workforce.

STUDY OVERVIEW

Professor Bloom and his research team conducted an experiment in which he divided 500 of 16,000 employees of China's largest travel agency into two groups. One group of employees continued working from the company's headquarters while the other group volunteered to work from home after having met specific productivity criteria. Due to the exorbitant cost of office space for such a large workforce, as well as daunting commutes that resulted in high employee turnover, the travel agency's CEO had considered a work-from-home option for employees. However, he was uneasy about the prospect of lost productivity.



Bloom's study showed that workers were more likely to generate a full day's work when working from the comfort of their own homes. The remote experience eliminated time lost due to arriving late, leaving early for childcare or other reasons, or the distractions and interruptions associated with the traditional workplace. He also found that those working remotely took shorter breaks, had fewer sick days, and spent less time off in general. Overall turnover was reduced by 50%.

Over time, however, many of Bloom's study participants identified one significant downside to working from home: the sense of isolation. Isolation caused many in the telecommuting group to decide not to continue working remotely 100% of the time. Therefore, Professor Bloom concluded the most successful model for telecommuting might include some combination of days working from home and others at the workplace. In the final analysis, he determined that flexibility is critical when implementing a remote work option.

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In Lowe's examination of the distributed workforce, she referenced Scott Mautz's article "4 Reasons a Remote Workforce is Better for Business" that appeared in *Forbes* magazine. Mautz's article found:

- Remote workers are more productive.
- Employers access a larger talent pool because of their ability to hire telecommuters from outside the confines of their localities.
- Employers realize cost savings from the reduction in office space, furniture, and supplies, making telecommuting fiscally advantageous.
- Remote workers are healthier, do not suffer the adverse effects associated with commuting and workplace stress, and use fewer sick days.

Van Doren's and Lowe's experiences working remotely as CDI leader and specialist respectively, validate many of the findings of Bloom's experiment and the *Forbes* article. Lowe pointed out the results of a FLEXJOBS survey of 3000 workers, "Seventy-seven percent of those surveyed said they would be healthier if they had a flexible job, and eighty-six percent felt that they would be less stressed."

Speaking from her experience, Lowe said she lost no time to sickness in the past year and attributed her wellness to the reduced stress from working from home and lack of exposure to flu and other illnesses associated with the workplace. Van Doren echoes the claims of health benefits. From a manager's point of view, she anecdotally notes that unexpected sick days from remote employees are noted to be substantially less than their on-site counterparts. She also speculated, "It's harder when people are not feeling well to get motivated to go into an office. When working from home, they can take their medicine, make themselves comfortable, pick up their laptops, and continue working. There seems to be a lot more flexibility to be able to work even when you're feeling under the weather when you work from home."

Lowe noted that higher productivity of remote workers is well-documented and supported by CDI-specific statistics. According to a 2017 CDI Journal article[iii], only 4.5% of CDI programs at that time were wholly remote. However, those working 100% remotely averaged 11-20 new reviews daily compared to an average of 6-15 on-site. Van Doren acknowledged the

difference is substantial. "The difference in productivity is a huge metric that the financial side of a hospital takes into consideration" As a manager, she added, "When you're being held responsible for making sure productivity rates go up, there's something to be said for letting your staff work from home."

Since 2017, both agreed there has been an increase in CDI programs moving to a distributed workforce model. Lowe said, "I concentrate better and accomplish more when working from home, hence the higher review rate. I like the autonomy of it. I think it gives me the ability to prove that I can meet and exceed expectations without direct supervision".

CHALLENGES FACED; CHALLENGES MET

While there are benefits from utilizing a remote workforce, there are also challenges. Van Doren consulted a 2018 ACDIS white paper[iv] and 2017 CDI Journal article[v], that identified issues to consider when deciding whether to implement a work-from-home program. The ACDIS research revealed that remote environments present obstacles to relationship building and effective communication that must be overcome to achieve success.

ACDIS stressed that it is essential for remote CDI managers to establish structured policies and agreements with staff and ensure policy adherence. "It's imperative for remote CDI specialists to understand the expectations of their CDI manager. When you're working in the remote world, [you] don't have the opportunity to see each other on a regular basis," says Van Doren. She points out that a "micro-manager" may find it difficult to adjust in this setting. "You must be able to let go and trust that you've hired the right people to do the job." She adds the time spent building relationships with staff develops trust and makes them comfortable coming forward to share concerns. From her observation as a CDI specialist, Lowe says it is essential for her to adhere to a manager's policies and procedures. "I think it builds a relationship of trust and confidence and positions me as a valuable employee."

In addition to learning to communicate effectively with fellow remote staff, CDI professionals must adapt to new ways of communicating with providers. Most CDI specialists started working with physicians in the hospital setting. However, working remotely doesn't facilitate face-to-face interaction. While the communication dynamics are different, the remote connection can be just as productive. Lowe says, "One of the things I found truly distasteful was having to interrupt the doctor while he or she was busy writing notes or working on the unit." She finds it quicker to send

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a specific text or email since the provider's communication workflow has become more digital. Electronic queries alleviate the mutually undesirable stress of interrupting doctors at inconvenient times and allows them to respond to queries at opportune times.

The isolation described by some telecommuters in Professor Bloom's study highlights yet another aspect in the gamut of communication challenges to be overcome. Within Intellis, Lowe acknowledges several efforts made to foster a sense of connection among the remote workforce. She utilizes email and text messaging to stay in contact with coworkers. Also, she takes advantage of Yammer, a company-wide social media platform that allows remote workers to interact. Yammer facilitates both professional and lighthearted communication. Employees ask each other medical coding and CDI questions, respond to human resources requirement, get computer/tech help, and address other issues. Intellis promotes integration through the Yammer "Book Club," contests, employee "shout outs" and other posts of interest. Finally, Intellis leadership conducts quarterly "Town Hall" meetings to update remote workers about company news, and managers use the forum to congratulate success and publicly praise exemplary work.

Working remotely requires requisite self-discipline and motivation. Evidence and experience show the distributed workforce model established by Intellis often surpasses on-site staff for productivity and reduces cost and employee turnover. With care and precision, Intellis provides CDI program outsourcing for facilities as well as remote working opportunities for skilled and motivated employ-

ees. Guided by experienced leaders, Intellis leverages technology to overcome social and business interaction challenges. Client and employee engagement using the Intellis workforce strategy ensures that communication with physicians, managers and co-workers is no longer an obstacle to satisfaction and success.

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