

Telecommuting is not a right

The Globe and Mail by Shari Graydon 7 March 2013

Give Marissa Mayer a break – not to mention a little credit for showing leadership.

The Yahoo CEO has an unenviably challenging job made more difficult by the kind of criticism unlikely to ever be directed at her male peers, and not just because none of them are capable of earning a new corner office while seven months pregnant.

She was dissed for presuming to take on motherhood and the C-suite simultaneously, then criticized for returning to work two weeks after giving birth. Now she's taking it on the chin for deigning to ask telecommuting employees to return to the office while she figures out how to ensure the company has a profitable future?

Yes, her own work-life balance is made easier as a result of an in-office daycare arrangement not available to everyone else. But no one can doubt her work ethic.

And my guess is that whatever measures she undertakes to accommodate her own family issues may help pave the way for more widely available child-care solutions for others at Yahoo – male and female.

Although some critics have argued that Ms. Mayer's cancellation of the working-from-home option is punishing "the sisterhood," studies suggest that more men actually telecommute than women. (I suspect this is at least partly due to the fact that, for many mothers who juggle kids and domestic duties, the office offers the kind of escapist change that's almost as good as a rest.) And anyone who's ever tried to work from home with young children knows that genuine productivity requires some form of daycare.

Meantime, Bell Canada, Bank of America and Google (Ms. Mayer's previous employer) have all implemented restrictions on telecommuting and, although many of those affected are unhappy, no similar outrage has erupted.

Most days, my own commute is a yoga-togged shuffle down a short hallway. As a self-employed consultant and social entrepreneur, I've worked from home for most of my 30-year career.

But I know that not everyone is cut out for such independence. Dozens of office-bound friends and colleagues have asked me over the years how I manage to avoid being distracted by the temptations of daytime TV, my beckoning bed or online poker.

It's simple: If I don't work, I don't get paid. So the time sheet I keep tracks the work I complete every quarter hour, and whether I can defensibly bill it to a client or project. This discipline is an effective deterrent against aimless surfing or two-hour lunches.

The one colleague I employ is on salary. But because she meets assigned deadlines and maintains a similarly detailed time sheet, I trust her to split her time between our rented office and her home, as necessary. The arrangement allows her to run her daughter from daycare to the doctor in half an hour, avoid driving in snowstorms, and be home for the cable guy without wasting a vacation day. But we meet in person at least once a week, and Skype almost every day.

Ms. Mayer, as president of a large international high-tech company in an enormously competitive industry driven by creative collaboration, has much more incentive to encourage members of her team to congregate in the same space at least some of the time.

And if some of them manage to demonstrate their ability to more effectively deliver innovation and productivity while also saving Yahoo office space, I suspect she may be open to that.

Shari Graydon is an author and the founder of Informed Opinions, a social enterprise that builds women's leadership through media engagement.