

## **Mayer's memo ending telecommuting puts Yahoo in good company**

Chris Warner, Executive Editor



Marissa Mayer created quite a hornet's nest when she issued a memo effectively ending the work-at-home option for Yahoo employees. In the memo, obtained by AllThingsD, Mayer writes, "To become the absolute best place to work, communication and collaboration will be important, so we need to be working side-by-side. That is why it is critical that we are all present in our offices. Some of the best decisions and insights come from hallway and cafeteria discussions, meeting new people, and impromptu team meetings."

A lot of the outrage in blogs and accompanying reader comments seems to miss the point. To many of the critics, Mayer's move appears to be a giant step backward – to a time when all employees were seemingly chained to their desks from nine until five within easy oversight of some controlling "theory X" manager. The memo also was seen as a setback for working moms who have unique scheduling needs or difficult commutes tied to day-care arrangements and as a regressive policy to those who believe work-at-home arrangements boost worker productivity.

But Mayer's directive is a matter of innovation and not necessarily productivity. In Mayer's original memo to employees in July of last year (also obtained by AllThingsD), she said "we need to continue Yahoo!'s tradition of bold innovation, (and) encourage creativity..." Mayer set out to foster innovation, and her more recent memo ending work-at-home arrangements is evidence that she is following a longstanding strategy. Some of the world's most innovative companies have taken bold steps to ensure spontaneous, face-to-face collaboration and communication in order to foster and nurture ideas.

In my June 2012 column, I summarized a book about Bell Laboratories -- *The Idea Factory: Bell Labs and the Great Age of American Innovation* (2012; The Penguin Press; ISBN 978-1-59420-328-2; price \$29.95). The company was famous for interdisciplinary collaboration and even more famous for its tremendous contributions to modern communications technology. The hallways in its Murray Hill,

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New Jersey campus were intentionally built exceptionally long. Writing about one long corridor, author Jon Gertner said, "travelling its great length without encountering a number of acquaintances, problems, diversions and ideas would be almost impossible. Then again, that was the point.... A scientist on his way to lunch...was like a magnet rolling past iron filings."

To be sure, Mayer's strategy is time-tested, but one blogger amazingly labeled it "antiquated."

([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lisa-belkin/marissa-mayer-work-from-home-yahoo-rule\\_b\\_2750256.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lisa-belkin/marissa-mayer-work-from-home-yahoo-rule_b_2750256.html) [1]) Remember that Mayer was brought in because of her years of experience at Google - the twentieth person hired there. We're always hearing stories about the Googleplex, with its company-supplied meals, on-campus gym, game rooms, laundry facilities, and dry cleaning to help ensure as many people are on site for collaborative efforts. Earlier this month, Google CFO Patrick Pichette, while speaking in Sydney Australia said, "The surprising question we get is: 'How many people telecommute at Google?' " ... "And our answer is: 'As few as possible'.

(<http://www.smh.com.au/it-pro/business-it/do-as-we-say-not-as-we-do-googlers-dont-telecommute-20130219-2eo8w.html#ixzz2MIZPilm> [2]). You can call Google a lot of things, but the last thing I associate with the company is antiquity.

While I agree that losing work-at-home arrangements is going to be a hardship for moms and those with long commutes - a privilege (most workers don't have a work-at-home option) that a lot of Silicon Valley and other tech workers enjoy and may fear losing -- Mayer's responsibility is to the entire company - moms and all. And if she believes she should create an environment similar to cutting-edge Google and previous tech giants such as Bell Labs (which fell apart due to it being legally ruled as part of a monopoly - not the result of an antiquated work environment), then she has the responsibility to see it through.

I suspect there will be many Googleplex-like creature comforts at Yahoo offices, and (if only because of bad publicity), likely better nursery facilities than what's available now. But tech giants have always thrived on communal and collaborative physical work environments and parents, people with telecommuting envy, or those who simply like throwing stones at Yahoo will continue to make comparisons to the stone age.

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