

Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer's work-from-home memo is from bygone era

Marissa Mayer shows she knows little about managing people with this offensive memo to Yahoo employees



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guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 26 February 2013 16.30 GMT



Marissa Mayer, the first female engineer at Google and now the first female CEO of Yahoo. Photograph: Darcy Padilla/Redux/Eyevine

I'm sitting writing this in my home office at 7.42am. I started planning the piece in my head at 7am when I took my dogs for a walk. I emailed three editors at the Guardian about it 15 minutes ago and heard back immediately. On the desk next to me are this month's bills, waiting to be paid once I've finished writing. At work, I have a reputation for being productive and fast. I also pride myself on how I manage my time. I get paid a certain amount of money from the Guardian. I divide that into a rate per hour I think I'm worth, and I give my bosses those hours. The company doesn't need to pay my travel costs because I don't travel. I don't need to add that time into the equation.

When I have finished my assignments, I am free to do other work, pay my bills, get a haircut, exercise, be a parent, or just go to a movie or museum. Occasionally, I'll go into

the office and attend meetings or grab a desk and work. It's all very grown-up. Yet Marissa Mayer at Yahoo doesn't see it this way. In a statement released to employees at Yahoo on Friday, head of Human Resources Jackie Reses wrote:

"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. Speed and quality are often sacrificed when we work from home. We need to be one Yahoo!, and that starts with physically being together."

This is an odd way forward, not just in the world of work in general where telecommuting is rapidly on the rise, but particularly in computer, engineering, and science fields where home-based work has risen 69% between 2000 and 2010. That makes it the fastest growing telecommuting industry (pdf) in the country, according the Census Bureau.

Marissa Mayer is clearly an all-or-nothing person, used to working on her terms. She is a talented woman, and we all appreciate daily what she did at Google. She seems to be having the same attractive effect on Yahoo. But does this make her a good manager? Not if that means being in touch with the goodwill of her employees. Step one in this process is to show you value other people's time. We've already learned how Mayer is chronically late for meetings, making her subordinates wait for an hour or more for her to show up.

Now, she wants more of their time – for free. Her decision is a costly one, whatever the payoff in cafeteria chat and brainstorming on the bus. Will she underwrite the commuting time and expense? Will there be a gas allowance? Parking? Will employees have their own desks? That's expensive real estate right there. Whatever flexibility Yahoo employees previously enjoyed will completely vanish, as this patronizing line in the memo points out:

"And, for the rest of us who occasionally have to stay home for the cable guy, please use your best judgment in the spirit of collaboration."

OK, so none of us has to stay at home for the cable guy in an era of 4G, municipal WiFi, FIOS and satellite TV. So that was a clunky and weirdly out-of-date detail from an up-to-the-minute tech company. But then, the whole policy is clunky and out-of-date. There is absolutely no concession made for those with families. Yes, I know this is unsurprising from a woman who skipped her own maternity leave. But forget the expense of finding childcare to cover this new work situation, what happens when someone gets, you know, sick?

Over at the Huffington Post, where contributors often toil for nothing, Arianna Huffington has a policy that "anybody starting a new book must either leave employment or take a sabbatical." She's referring to her paid employees, of course. This

policy recently forced her executive editor Tim O'Brien out of the company. He had a multi-book contract to honor and wasn't allowed to do both. Huffington founded the Huffington Post in 2005. Since then, she has written three books herself, without taking a sabbatical or leaving the company.

In her 2007 book, *On Becoming Fearless – in Love, Work and Life*, she wrote about how good it was to write a book while running her 24/7 website because she could "post excerpts from the chapters I was working on, which produced immediate feedback and led to some great comments". So it's OK for her, then.

Two companies, two women at the top, two sets of unbending rules. We've come a long way, baby.

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