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## Technology

### How to Quit the Commute

Is telecommuting practical for your organization?

by Martin B. Schneiderman

With the availability of low-cost computers and broadband communications (see "[Brave New Broadband World](#)," *Foundation News & Commentary*, March/April 2001) it's easier than ever for grantmakers to telecommute and work from a home office. But is this a practical option for you and your organization? It's an issue that should be addressed by senior management and the human resources director—it's not primarily a technology issue.



The terms "telecommuting" and "teleworking" are synonymous and refer to staff working from geographically dispersed locations. It usually involves moving work to the worker's home using computers and telecommunications instead of the worker commuting to a central office in a high-rent district.

Cahners In-Stat Group reports that there are now about 30 million U.S. teleworkers and this number is growing—at a rate of 20 percent annually. A recent Telework America survey ([www.telecommute.org](http://www.telecommute.org)) reports that 60 percent of U.S. teleworkers are 30 to 49 years old and typically work one to two days per week from home. While working at home, they spend

- | 38 percent of their time on the computer
- | 17 percent on the phone
- | 24 percent reading, researching and analyzing
- | 9 percent in face-to-face meetings.

#### Teleworker Benefits and Costs

Benefits to the teleworker are substantial. Teleworking:

- | Eliminates or reduces travel time and costs

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- | Brings fewer distractions and greater productivity
- | Increases job satisfaction
- | Reduces stress
- | Enhances morale
- | Provides a better balance of work and family life
- | Improves quality of life
- | Improves work opportunities

Working from a home office requires some start-up and ongoing costs. These typically include office and computer equipment, Internet access and phone charges, and larger utility bills. Some foundations provide an allocation for office furniture, and then, only business-related long-distance phone calls.

Teleworking is clearly not for everyone. There is a tendency to get disconnected from coworkers and become out of touch with day-to-day office operations, which can lead to lower professional visibility. Some people experience problems with distractions and loneliness, while colleagues who still commute to the office may be resentful of those with "special" arrangements.

### **Organizational Benefits, Costs and Concerns**

Teleworking attracts and can help retain talented staff. According to the International Telework Association and Council (ITAC), telecommuting increases productivity by 22 percent, reduces absenteeism by 60 percent and reduces staff turnover by an average of 20 percent. This is in addition to the substantial decreased costs of rent, parking, utilities and taxes.

Another benefit is flexible staffing, which enables people to work beyond normal business hours and permits easy workforce expansion during times of peak demands.

Organizational costs lie in technological infrastructure. To realize the benefits of teleworking, an organization may incur increased costs of training and administration. But the costs most often come from acquiring additional hardware and software, expanding telecommunications, enhancing network security and providing a higher level of ongoing technical support for remote users.

Managerial concerns center around control of off-site staff. Managers may not know how to measure the quality and volume of work. And the issues of teamwork and establishing fair guidelines in selecting teleworkers must be addressed.

### **Assessing a Job's Potential**

To assess a job's teleworking potential, list all of the tasks that can be done away from the workplace, and then answer the questions below to determine which are well suited for being done outside of the office:

- | How long does it take to do each task every week?
- | Are these tasks performed daily—or can they be grouped together for a day at home?
- | Does the employee have a suitable workspace and the proper equipment at home?
- | Can the employee work without interruptions?

Foundation tasks well-suited for teleworking include:

- | Conducting research
- | Analyzing data
- | Phone-intensive tasks
- | Reviewing proposals and reports
- | Writing reports and correspondence
- | E-mail communications
- | Creating spreadsheets and graphics
- | Data entry and computer programming

But some tasks are not a good fit for teleworking, especially if the following apply:

- | The employee needs face-to-face contact with the supervisor, other employees or the general public.
- | The employee needs frequent access to materials that cannot be moved from the regular office.
- | It would be too costly to duplicate the same level of security at the alternate workplace.

### **To Begin**

Determine how teleworking can work best for your organization by taking the following steps:

1. Begin with a pilot program.
2. Establish a trial period and set a date to evaluate it.
3. Start by teleworking just a few days per week.
4. Select only the jobs and tasks most conducive to teleworking.
5. Select the employees best suited to telecommute and managers best able to take advantage of teleworking.
6. Establish productivity standards.
7. Set up an efficient home work area.
8. Establish a teleworking handbook with policies that address the following:
  - | Hardware and software costs, plus upgrades
  - | Expense reimbursements (voice and data lines, plus usage charges and consumables)
  - | Hours of availability by phone
  - | Security, liability and safety
  - | Work plans, progress reporting, and performance expectations (A comprehensive resource is ITAC's *e-Work Guide* ([www.ce.org/eworkguide](http://www.ce.org/eworkguide).)
9. Make sure that everybody knows the terms of the arrangement.
10. Keep regular work hours.
11. Review and improve the program.

### **Connecting**

There are many different ways of connecting to the office, including:

- | Home and office PCs connected using point-to-point via remote control software-PCAnywhere, for example
- | Remote Access Services (RAS) using a modem dial-up connection
- | Virtual Private Network (VPN) providing a secure high-speed

connection over the Internet

- | Citrix MetaFrame or Microsoft Windows Terminal Server, which enables Windows applications to run inside a Web browser
- | Web-based applications hosted either at your site or by an application service provider

Technical considerations require an expert assessment. Each remote set-up has significant pros and cons that need to be carefully considered for performance, supportability, scalability and cost. Get expert professional help when choosing, installing and supporting a remote-access solution. It's critical to install firewalls and high network security that encrypts all data transmissions. Ensure reliable, redundant high-speed remote access. And finally, develop a realistic plan for what to do when the Internet connection fails.

### **What we've learned**

Mary Ellen Craig, director, American Express Foundation:

- | *"Support by my foundation's senior management is critical to the success of my teleworking arrangement."*
- | *"At the outset I needed to set ground rules for my colleagues, family members and friends."*
- | *"I now work from my home office two days a week-that eliminates eight hours of commuting. I actually work longer hours and it's much more productive for me and my company."*

Mike Sutton, conservation program officer, David and Lucile Packard Foundation:

- | *"Telecommuting is a huge issue for staff productivity, morale and retention."*
- | *"Most of our program officers work from home a couple of days each week."*
- | *"Security has been a major concern of our IT department. The foundation installed a hardware firewall in my home office."*

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