

Paper 239-27

Telecommuting: the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Nancy K. Patton, GE Capital, Raleigh, NC

ABSTRACT

Doesn't the thought of telecommuting sound GREAT? You wouldn't have to get up so early; you wouldn't have to sit in traffic –what advantages! You wouldn't have to worry about being late for work, because you'd *Always Be At Work*. Does telecommuting still sound so good?

There are some wonderful benefits for telecommuting and remote workers, but there are some disadvantages as well. The isolated environment for remote employees is not for everyone. One must consider the telephone lines, connectivity to corporate systems (and speed of access), FAX machines, copy machines, and technical support. On the days you work from home how do you get phone calls? Can you forward your office phone, or do you have to give out your home phone number?

Before putting the bumper sticker: "Telecommuters are at home now" on your car, consider the pros and cons. This presentation will give you some of the issues to consider and questions to bring back to your employer.

INTRODUCTION

No longer does the phrase 'working from home' bring to mind the dining room table covered with paperwork in the evening. Telecommuters perform the regular duties of a job from a remote location (like home), via computer and modems, rather than being at the office. Telecommuting and remote employment are all becoming more common as companies are supporting their employees in these efforts. If you think you'd like to telecommute from home, here are some things to think about and discuss with your employer.

WHAT IS TELECOMMUTING TO YOU?

First, consider what you're wishing for. Would you like to give up your office and work 'remotely' on a permanent basis? Or are you looking to telecommute a few days a week from home and still go to the office the rest of the week? There are ups and down to both. When setting up permanent remote work, the technology you have for computer access and back-up are more important. After all, when you're down, you can't work. As a telecommuter, you'll have TWO places for documents. Hopefully, you'll have a laptop, but what about the paper folders? Will you carry them back and forth – how do you choose which to carry?

FIRST THOUGHTS: WHY DO YOU WANT THIS?

Identify the reasons you'd like to work form home. The list might contain some of the following:

1. Spend 2+ stressful hours commuting a day
2. Spend most of my time on the computer
3. I am moving and would like to not have to change jobs
4. I won't have to spend as much money at the dry cleaners, for lunch, for commuting expenses
5. I'll be at home when the kid(s) get home from school
6. I can start dinner early for the family
7. I can get more done, with fewer interruptions from co-workers stopping in my office

Now, consider why your employer would support your working form home. Reasons may include:

1. Saving office space – I could share an office, or give up my office
2. I could be at the office earlier and later, since I won't be commuting
3. I can get more done, with fewer interruptions from co-workers stopping in my office
4. I am a valuable resource they need.
5. I'd be happier.

DON'T FORGET THE DOWNSIDES:

There are downsides to everything, and you must consider them. Ask yourself these questions.

1. I won't be getting out much; will I get lonely?
2. I won't have the opportunity for 'face-to-face' discussions; is this a problem?
3. I won't be able to drop-in on a co-worker for help or advice; is this a problem?
4. Will my family be interrupting me?
5. Will it be harder to get technical support from the 'help-desk'?
6. How will I get my phone calls, and who will pay my long-distance bill?
7. Will I be overlooked or forgotten for meetings?
8. I won't have the opportunity for informal discussions to keep up-to-date with office happenings- is this a problem?
9. Do I have the right computer access, speed for connections, and back-up capabilities?
10. Am I organized enough?

Telecommuting and working remotely both require excellent communication and time management skills. You'll be relying on email and telephone calls for all your communication needs.

Many companies would resist putting a remote employee into a management position, so be sure your long-term goals are clear.

Working from home is NOT an alternative to child-care.

GET STARTED:

If you're still interested in pursuing telecommuting as an option for your job, your first step should be to convince your management. Check with your HR department, study any policies or guidelines currently in place, and write a proposal outlining exactly how you plan to do your work from home.

YOUR PROPOSAL:

In your proposal, clearly define your job responsibilities. Describe the deliverables of your job, and how, at evaluation time, you and your manager will be able to assess your performance. How do you plan to deliver your piece of a project, and how do you plan to get feedback?

Define your scheduled work hours, and your hours of availability. Discuss how flexible you will be with short notice on coming to the office to meet with clients, or attend meetings. Will you have a pager or cell phone for emergencies?

Discuss how you will keep in touch with your colleagues in the brick and mortar hub, challenges with this and how you propose to overcome the challenges.

It is very important for your manager to know that you're aware of the challenges you will face and that you've considered them and have proposed solutions.

HARDWARE/ SOFTWARE:

Describe the hardware and software you propose to use. In your remote location, will you need: a computer, printer, FAX machine, copy machine, telephone, answering machine, etc.? Do you have compatible versions of office software?

Would you use a company computer you already have, or would you need an additional computer? Describe how you would remotely connect to company servers, if necessary, and if any additional equipment would be necessary for this. Would you use a cable provider or DSL – who would pay for this?

Will you need to add additional phone lines at your home– who would pay for these? (Check with your local phone company to see if extra lines are even possible.) Would you need to purchase a phone with a MUTE button? Can you forward you office line to your home, or leave your remote phone number on voice mail? How often will you check voice mail? Will you need call-waiting, caller-id?

TIPS FOR WORKING REMOTELY:**TRY A TEST RUN:**

Propose a trial. After three to six months, meet with your manager to review your performance and ability to meet expectations. Decide if the telecommuting option is for you! Have solid evaluation criteria, and don't give up too easily. It may be that telecommuting is more anxiety producing than time saving. You may find that working from home is not the ideal situation due to constant family interruptions.

There's also the danger of someone else taking the credit for your work. Even though you will not be physically in the office, there's no reason why you cannot join meetings via a conference call link, and Internet screen sharing services. Make sure you're able to depend on co-workers to keep you on target with daily updates.

MINIMIZE INTERRUPTIONS

Learn to keep interruptions to a minimum. Clearly distinguish your workspace by using a separate room or area, so that it is clear where home stops and your office begins. Have a signal that makes it clear when you do not want to be interrupted- for example when your door is closed or you've hung a 'Do Not Disturb' sign.

KEEP ORGANIZED

Organize your workspace so you can keep office materials and equipment in clearly defined places.

AVOID TEMPTATIONS

Although you may look forward to long quiet stretches of work at home, don't become a workaholic. Schedule yourself breaks. On the other hand, don't allow yourself to be caught-up in household chores. Manage the expectations of your family: even though they think of you as "at home", you're really "at work".

KEEP A JOURNAL

Keep track of your daily accomplishments and shortfalls. This will help you replicate your successes and diminish nonproductive work.

MAINTAIN SOCIAL INTERACTION

Avoid Isolation. Frequent communication by telephone, voice mail, or email will help diminish the feeling of isolation and keep in touch with the office. Consider scheduling lunches with co-workers (over the phone) in order to stay in touch.

CONCLUSION

Telecommuting is a wonderful option – but it is not for everyone. If you're ready to try it, give it a fair chance- three months at least, before discarding the idea. Search the internet for articles and web sites, and do an informal survey with your friends and coworkers. You'd be surprised how many people are doing it!

CONTACT INFORMATION

Your comments and questions are valued and encouraged. Contact the author at:

Nancy Patton
 GE Capital
 919-771-2775
 Nancy.Patton@GECapital.com