

Top 10 Reasons Why I Like Telecommuting

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ABSTRACT

This is the first in a series of two papers/posters to be presented in regards to issues, ideas and experiences with telecommuting as a primary means of doing one's job. More and more computer based professionals and the businesses that employ them are turning to the potential of telecommuting as an alternative to additional office space, congested highways and wasted time. In addition, the growing 'Information Highways' provide businesses with a greater region from which they can build their workforce. In the next few years, more and more users of the SAS® System of Software (researchers, analysts and programmers) could very well find themselves as being likely candidates for telecommuting based employment (indeed, many probably already have two offices: one at work and one at home). This paper provides a general overview of telecommuting, it's benefits to the individual and the organization, some philosophy, a little history, personal experiences and an entertaining (hopefully) David Letterman style conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

For those employed in information intensive occupations, the technologies that will enable them to perform much of their work related activities from their own homes (and thereby avoiding the costs and frustrations of daily highway commuter trafficking) has begun to arrive. Information workers are particularly benefited by these advances in that many of their daily tasks require no more than the proper computer hardware/software equipment and the right telecommunications tools that fit their job (phone, fax and/or electronic mail). The current costs and capabilities of these technologies have come to a point where they can justify the cost/benefits aspects of decentralizing some (or more) of an information based workforce. Though not quite there yet, video telecommunications technology will soon offer the capabilities for "face-to-face" (actually video-to-video) interactions between members of a decentralized workforce (3-5 years is my guess for when the cost/benefit curve swings the right direction for this technology). As all good businesses should, companies have begun to employ or consider some form of "telecommuting" in their workforce. Pressures for doing

this are coming from social and environmental based concerns, government regulations, a desire to widen the effective area from which to hire employees, the ever increasing cost of office space, frustrated and tired commuting employees and, ultimately, "the bottom line".

A QUICK DEFINITION

There are two means by which a business can decentralize some or more of their workforce. One way is by the creation of TeleWork Centers. These are setup remote from the central office in areas close to where enough employees live. The second way is to allow select employees to volunteer (notice the words "select" and "volunteer") to work at home one or more of the normal weekly workdays. Both the selection of the right jobs/employees and the volunteering nature of the implementation are very important to the success of telecommuting.

Recently, the IRS ruled that unless most of your income is generated from the work done in the home office, you can't take a deduction for the cost of having that office at home. Though there is effort under way to get this changed, we will assume/define a "telecommuter" in these two papers as a full time employee that works out of their home for most of their "working days" and who has no office at the normal business facility. It is this type of telecommuting that can bring the greatest benefit to all parties (employer, employees and the community).

SOME HISTORY

Working at home really isn't a new idea (anyone who has put in their 9 to 5 and then gone home to dial into the computer systems back at the business site to do more work could attest to that reality). In fact, it could be one of the oldest of places for gainful employment (do farmers work at home?..... if you live where you work, like a sailor, are you working at home? what is home? what is work?.....). But to keep all this in perspective (and the author from getting totally carried away), view the idea of telecommuting in light of work and life over the passed few hundred years. This period of time has come to be known (among other things) as

the Industrial Age (a result of the Industrial Revolution). Built upon the foundations of the Agricultural Age, this period of time has been characterized by the accelerated growth of inventions and technology, their use for the creation of marketplace goods and services, the rise of factories and corresponding changes in the way many people live, work and play.

In the Industrial Age, the most effective implementations of technology in "industry" (a place where goods and services are created) required a great deal of centralization. This included the centralization of energy sources, raw materials, manufacturing sites, distribution facilities and employees. Around these Industrial Centers cities grew, the urban sprawl spread, roads and highways were expanded and modern suburbs were created. The workplace in the Industrial Age is the hub of daily activity. Commuter traffic jams in the highly urbanized areas are the result of the daily massive effort to move the workers to the job (telecommuting can be viewed as a means to move the work to the worker).

With the "factory" way of life, a "factory" mentally has consequently evolved. It is recognizable in most of our social institutions (schools as education factories) and, as such, has shaped our daily habits in work and play. This is not to say that the Industrial Revolution was wrong (I say it was the right thing at the right time) but is meant to underscore the idea that telecommuting is, in many ways, a very new idea and a new way to work and live that requires the right jobs and employees. The centralized workplace and workforce is the current "norm" and successful implementation of workforce telecommuting in the "Information Age" depends upon upon this understanding by managers and non-managers and telecommuters and non-telecommuters alike.

PHILOSOPHY AND WORKING-STYLES

Centralization means a certain amount of control and simplicity. For employers there's the sense of having all your resources (things and people) within reach, easily managed and observed. For employees, there's the sense of assuming responsibility for your employer's business goals and expectations when you get there and, then, letting go of it all when you leave. In the Industrial Age of thinking, an employer has no concern (and has no right of knowing) what the employee is doing and thinking when they are not at work (at the worksite). Yet, it is the basis of the "American Way of Life" that each individual is entitled to privacy in their own home ("... life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"). So what does that mean for employment in the Information Age when employees work at home? For managers, it

means new ways to manage their employees and for employees it means new ways of managing your own work, time and working environment.

Employers essentially "rent" an employee's behavior for a specified period of time. The manager is the guardian, director and coach of the collective behavior of those that fall within their managerial realm. Communication and reward are the primary tools that the manager uses to motivate the employee to behave in a manner that would be most beneficial to meeting business goals. As a multifaceted medium, communications not only has verbal and written forms but can also includes body language, gestures, facial expression and other forms of non-verbal communications. Since they are mostly not available for face-to-face communications, an employee that is telecommuting to work requires more effective verbal and written forms of communications from the manager because non-verbal forms of are generally not possible. Plus, managers that have become accustomed to 'managing by wandering' no longer can use this technique to check up and 'manage' the behavior of their employees (maybe they will be able to wander in the virtual reality world yet to come). In the traditional way of working, if you're not 'on-site' (in sight) then you must not be working (for a number of years the author had an arrangement where he worked at home on Wednesdays which were frequently referred to as his 'day off'!!).

The problem with managing employee behavior as a means to obtain business goals is that it lacks in terms of trusting the employee to make the proper decisions on how to behave to get the desired results. A manager of a telecommuting employee will need to focus on effectively communicating the desired results and trusting that the employee will be able to independently select and perform the proper behaviors to achieve those results. With this need for trust and independence, it is generally recommended that telecommuting be implemented for employees that have been with the company for at least 6 months. Hopefully, within this period, communication styles and trust have been well established in the manager-employee relationship (if not, telecommuting by the employee is probably not a viable alternative). This is why it is important that telecommuters are selected.

IT'S NOT FOR EVERYONE

There are two basic components for identifying potential employees for telecommuting: the work they do and their working-styles. Identifying jobs that would be good for telecommuting is a matter of looking at all the tasks that are a part of that job and determining how much/many of those tasks requires face to face interaction with others

(or local interaction with things not feasible to have at the employee's home). When identifying tasks that require face to face contact with others, it's important to question whether that kind of interaction is truly required (or has it just always been done that way). A job whose task content is such that it is highly direct contact independent, information work intensive and whose resource requirements for equipment and facilities can be cost effectively provided at an employee's home is a likely telecommuting candidate.

The person doing the job and their working style is the other most important aspect of selecting a potential telecommuter. Someone who would most likely be successful at telecommuting generally needs to be an independent self-starter who has shown that they can "get the job done" with minimal supervision. They should be capable of communicating well in writing and verbally and should have a good understanding of the technical aspects of the hardware and software that they will be using in their home office (though support is just a phone call away, the telecommuter will likely do more 'fixing it themselves' than if they were onsite at the business site).

The traditional workplace can be a source of personal fulfillment in a variety of non-job related ways. This includes social (being around others), professional (getting on the company fast-track), learning (casual coworker based information exchange) and supportive (smokers smoke less at the work site, there are weight watcher programs, less chance of problems with drugs or alcohol, more encouragement for physical fitness, ect). The telecommuting employee would be more remote (but not totally) from these resources. In addition, the motivational influence of the "normal work routine" being done by others around them would not be directly available to the telecommuter. So a good potential telecommuter is someone who is capable of performing well without as much of the above personal fulfillment resources and who can establish their own work routine.

But just as importantly, the employee must understand how their job and working environment will be different and must be willing to make that change. Someone whose job and working-style might otherwise be perfect for telecommuting may not wish to telecommute for a variety of reasons (uncertainty as to how this might effect their status at work, conditions at home not conducive to effective working, other personal reasons, ect.). This is why the potential telecommuter should "volunteer" for this new form of "going to work" and that it should be understood that both parties (employer and employee) have the option for changing the telecommuting status of that employee anytime in the future after a reasonable trial period and with sufficient notice.

SO WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

Any important business or personal decision comes down to this bottom line: do the benefits outweigh the costs, do the positives outweigh the negatives, does the good outweigh the bad? Both the employer and the employee must concur in this matter. The employer (embodied by the manager with executive management support) would be unwise to embark upon a telecommuting arrangement without a sense of potentially improving the company bottom line. It would also be equally unwise for an employee to agree upon such an arrangement if it seemed like it would not improve their "personal bottom line".

Assuming that the right people/jobs have been selected for telecommuting, a typical business can expect a number of benefits for their "investment":

- Increased productivity. The various interruptions that can occur in the business tend to slow down information workers. Without these interruptions, a telecommuter can often show increase productivity of 10-20%.
- Decreased costs for office space. Any business can probably figure out the average cost for providing, furnishing and supporting (restrooms, maintenance, heating/cooling, parking, ect.) office space per employee. Some costs (such as computer and communications equipment) may be the same or more for a telecommuter. But it's likely that there will be savings in total.
- Governmental regulations compliance. In some parts of the country (such as Southern California), there are increasing pressures for businesses to meet certain requirements in support of reducing pollution caused by auto emissions. Though ultimately the benefit is to the community at large, business can increase their goodwill in the community and, in some cases, avoid fines and fees that might otherwise be levied for non-compliance.
- A greater employment region. Sometimes the best person for a job is unwilling to accept it because they do not want to move closer to the business site and they are unwilling to make the commute. With a telecommuting alternative, the business effectively increases the region from which it can attract potential employees.

For the employee, there are also a number of potential benefits for their role as a telecommuter:

- Greater productivity. I know that I like to be productive and I think that many people feel that way about their work. There is a real 'good' feeling about having a 'good' day and a real frustration to 'working hard at spinning

your wheels'. The sense of success feeds more success.

- Decreased costs. There is the obvious likely reduction in the cost of gasoline, maintenance and auto insurance. In addition, the telecommuter is likely to spend less money on clothes/meals over the long run and be able to take some tax deductions for working mostly at home.

- Time Savings. Anyone who has spent much time commuting 1-2 hours per working day can easily count the amount of time that they would gain by not having to make that commute. There will also be less time needed for getting ready for and started with work.

- Greater closeness to the family. A telecommuter is basically (by proximity) more available to the family. Though they need to work (and the family needs to understand and support this), they have greater flexibility and opportunity to "be there" when necessary.

These are some of the potential benefits to employers and employees when telecommuting is successfully applied. The author (more elusive than I), being blinded by the goodness of telecommuting, is unwilling to commit to any potential negatives to telecommuting but in reality they are there: feelings of remoteness and isolation, jealousy by peers unable to telecommute, boondoggling, communications startup costs, family/friend/neighbor interruptions when trying to work and more. There are several recent books referenced at the end of this paper that review the pros and cons and the hows and whys of telecommuting in much greater detail than has been done in this overview and they are highly recommended to any individual or business that is seriously considering the potential of the "telecommuting workstyle".

WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO W/SAS?

The SAS System of Software is a tool for data processing, management, analysis and reporting that is available on a wide variety of computer platforms. It has components for the uploading and downloading of data and other files and supports cooperative processing between host and remote computer systems where each are running the SAS System. Having been in the large computing arena for many years, the SAS System has a base of users that do many of the kinds of jobs that could likely be good candidates for successful telecommuting. Large, data and information intensive organizations that could really reap the benefits of telecommuting on a grand scale most likely already license SAS and have a solid base of employees that use it. The companion paper to this paper provides some helpful hints (tips and techniques) for the telecommuting SAS software user.

CONCLUSION

Technology is making it possible to successfully implement telecommuting as a modern work style. Many workers in the Information Industry are likely to be candidates for telecommuting in the near future. There are many now who work at home to some degree already. This paper has presented a very brief overview of the issues and benefits of telecommuting for both employers and employees. A companion paper to this covers helpful hints for the telecommuting SAS user and a list of recent books that deal with telecommuting in much greater detail follows. May the road be true to you along the ever expanding Information Highway.

References

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TOP 10 REASONS WHY I LIKE TELECOMMUTING

10. Traffic reports have become a new form of morning and evening entertainment.
9. There's no one looking over my shoulder (at least I don't think there is?).
8. "Power programming" immediately after a heavy workout (without first hitting the showers).
7. I have been able to come to a mutual understanding with the "cafeteria" staff on what I want, what I am willing to pay and how it should be fixed.
6. Wearing a tux to work and no one noticing.
5. Calling in sick ("Hi....I won't be in today?").
4. Figuring out what to do with all that "spare" time.
3. Debugging other programmers' complex SAS macros to the sound of Led Zeppelin IV at loud volumes!
2. The feel of shag rug between bare toes
1. Because there's always something better to do!!