Remote Access

Adapting business to the home-based worker

By Anne Papmehl

Contemporary business jargon is famous for turning nouns into verbs. When it comes to creating synonyms for the telecommuting trend, otherwise known as "working from home," this inclination is alive and well. Consider the following gems: alternative officing, homeworking, flex-working and teleworking.

Although these newly-coined terms may irritate linguistic purists, there is no denying that telework is an emerging global phenomenon, rapidly gaining momentum in both developed and developing countries. In Finland, an estimated 15% of the working population teleworks, about one fifth of what is possible. While the latest Statistics Canada figures were unavailable at press time, an earlier study from 1997 predicted that approximately 1.5 million Canadians would be involved in some sort of telework by the year 2001.
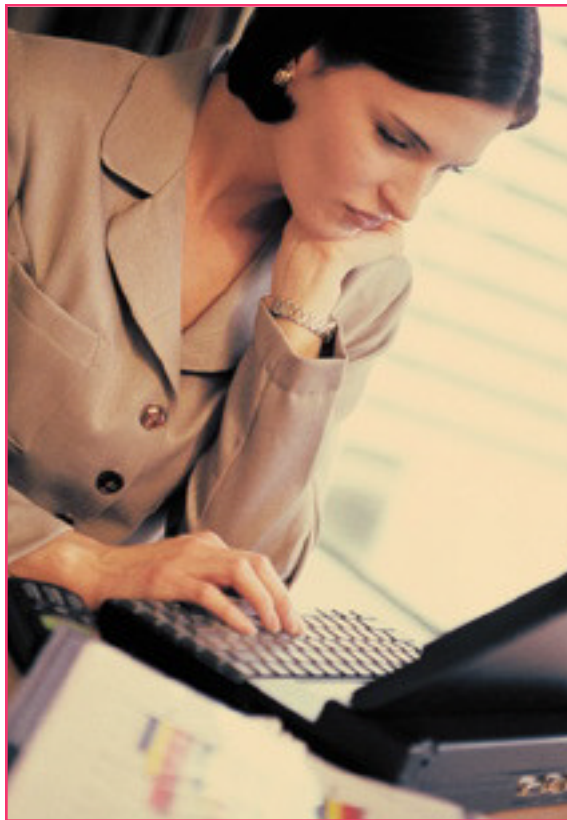
At its best, telework presents multiple opportunities and benefits to employer, employee and society: increased employee productivity and reduced stress; easement of clothing, dry cleaning and food expenses; less travel time, traffic congestion and pollution. It also enables the organization to accommodate disabled workers, deal with employee work and life balance issues, and attract and retain highly skilled individuals. A win-win solution? Not always.

At its worst, teleworking results in a loss of direct management of employees, concerns about public perception and potential for distraction leading to decline in work output. For the employee, it can also mean social isolation, reduced opportunities for career advancement and an increase in home costs. On a broader

level, there is loss of income to private sector firms in city cores such as restaurants, stores and parking lots.

Although technology has removed many of the practical obstacles to telework, "it is not one of those things that can be unilaterally applied," says management consultant Nick Shepherd, of Oakville, Ont.-based Eduvision Incorporated. There are a lot of misconceptions surrounding telework. While it can be helpful in dealing with work/life balance issues, for instance, it is not a substitute for childcare or elder care. Employees still need to get the work done.

Making an organizational success of telework is a matter of thoroughness in planning and implementation as well as on-going monitoring, feedback and fine-tuning. The operational feasibility of telework is fundamentally dependent on whether the organization has jobs that can be done from another location. Knowledge work — that which requires thinking, writing, research and analysis — is generally most suitable for telework, while work requiring face to face interaction with the public is not.

According to Shepherd, however, there is an additional dimension to factor in. "We have to remember that we are dealing with human beings. The suitability of telework depends not only on the type of work an individual is doing but on the type of personality the individual is." People who need to feel emotionally connected to their colleagues and team members may languish in an isolated environment. Conversely, an employee unconcerned with the emotional aspects of being connected with a group may thrive beyond expectation at a remote work location.

Similarly, not all managers are comfortable with or adept at managing an off-site team. Micro-managers or managers who require a lot of face time with their employees tend not to be the best fit for a telemanaging position. Ideal telemanagers are those who can delegate and follow up as well as step back and let the employee get the job done, concentrating on objectives and results as opposed to monitoring the processes used and hours put in.

Choosing the off-site team is perhaps the most crucial element to the success of a telework program. The selection should be made based on in-depth knowledge of the employees' work habits, personalities and

skills. For this reason, many companies restrict tele-working options to employees who have been with the company for at least one year.

Employees who perform well in the remote location tend to be well-organized, self-starters who can work independently. They are results-oriented, adaptable and have a history of reliable and responsible performance and trustworthiness. When those traits are placed in a work environment devoid of the stresses of commuting, the upside potential for performance is huge. But so is the downside potential.

Guidelines to establishing a telework program:

1. Select appropriate telework candidates and managers.
2. Train and prepare your teleworkers in working from a remote location.
3. Ensure teleworkers have the tools to do the job.
4. Have policies and systems for dealing with sensitive information.
5. Establish protocols on frequency of electronic contact.
6. Maintain some face-to-face contact.
7. Start on a part-time or pilot project basis.
8. Establish productivity standards.
9. Have a written contract with an escape clause.
10. Be sure everyone on staff knows the terms of the agreement.

With less structure and greater freedom and flexibility, the home working environment presents unique challenges from which even the most effective and trustworthy employees are not immune. According to Shepherd, the key issue here is not just trustworthiness of the employee but "trusting that employees have enough self-discipline that when you transfer them from a work environment to a home environment, they are actually going to work."

Explains Shepherd, "One of the realities is that you can have family members around engaged in social activities while you need to work. Certainly, pushing your employees into the remote work environment without any preparation is imprudent. Employees have to know what they are getting into. I think organizations really need to implement some sort of training to help employees manage their time effectively in a remote setting. Time management is one issue, but this is time management in a particular context."

This is a self-management issue for the individual to deal with. "For example, at the beginning of the week, setting yourself specific goals and objectives and tracking them and, if not achieving them, determining what got in the way and being prepared to deal with these issues," adds Shepherd. In certain cases, it may be necessary to hold a family conference or serious discussion with one's better half to resolve these issues; otherwise, the employee cannot add value to the organization as a teleworker.

Where the organization can help the teleworker add value is in ensuring that he or she has the appropriate tools for the job. A common complaint among many teleworkers has to do with connectivity. One third of the respondents to an AT&T survey in 2000, for example, reported that the lack of high-speed connections to the Internet and access to broadband were severe impediments to their work. Teleworkers must have access to information, manuals and databases, and must possess the computer knowledge to perform their work effectively from the remote location. That includes having access to confidential information.

Of course, having access to confidential material from an off-site location raises some security concerns. Says Shepherd, "If you are in an office and using a local area network to pull information from the company database, then essentially you have a firewall to a degree around the system you are accessing. As soon as you let people telework, there are scores of other security issues that surface from a data communications point of view." For this reason, it is crucial that companies institute clear policies, procedures and thorough training on the safe custody and control of sensitive information.

One organization that has done this successfully is the Bank of Montreal. Says Anne Remmel, senior manager, human resources, "We have a number of remote employees that have access to various bank systems, but all the security precautions are in place. No one else at the remote location other than the employee can access the software." However, Remmel believes "the issue is not so much one of confidentiality because, essentially, if you can trust your employees to work with confidential materials on site, you should be able to trust them off site. It's more an issue of learning to work in an electronic space."

In addition to using the electronic tools to help managers and off-site team members stay connected, "there needs to be a management system in place where people have access to each other and their knowledge," adds Remmel. "When employees all work in the same location, an employee can walk down the hall to ask another employee or manager a question. When people are dispersed, it gets a little more complicated, so you need to establish protocols on how quickly information gets exchanged. We find that a mixture of both electronic medium and scheduled face-to-face meetings works best."

Face-to-face meetings and general social interaction have more significance to knowledge exchange than many believe. Says Shepherd, "Most of the learning goes on when people come together informally. If you don't allow people to share the learning, then how does an organization move forward in terms of building its knowledge base?" From an organizational standpoint, Shepherd believes that while there are myriad risks associated with telework such as productivity, confidentiality and isolation, the fundamental question to the organization should be what it is doing to the learning. Recognizing this, many organizations use telework on a part-time basis, with employees dividing their work week between the office site and remote location.

Managing an off-site team presents some unique and perplexing challenges related to performance evaluation and tracking productivity. Managers can be helpful to their teleworkers in this regard by clarifying expectations, establishing benchmarks and drawing up guidelines before agreeing to the telework arrangement. Give the teleworkers a timeframe or deadline as to when work must be completed. In tracking productivity, some things to consider are: quality of work, customer satisfaction, ability to meet deadlines and the quantity of work completed. Managers should agree to a realistic time frame for responses to e-mails if supervising an entire team working on a project where being in constant contact is crucial. There also needs to be a backup plan for staying connected when network communications systems are down.

It is advisable to ease into the teleworking model slowly. Some organizations implement it on a pilot basis before making it an official policy. It also needs to be recognized that telework arrangements, for whatever reasons, do not always work out. To protect both parties, there should be some sort of written agreement, signed by both the employee and employer, with an escape clause. Finally, make

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sure the entire staff, both on site and off, know and understand the terms of the agreement.

Whether a teleworking program enhances or discredits the company's image depends largely on "how the organization positions teleworking and sells it," says Shepherd. "It can portray an organization as lax in managing its resources and lacking structure, and which can eventually result in customer dissatisfaction." On the other hand, if you look at the demographics of today's work force, progressive people tend to look at those sort of organizations with admiration, noting that they are adapting to the social needs of the day. The roads are clogged during rush hour and we're creating pollution. The organization is recognizing that it doesn't need some of its employees to physically come to work; it needs their skills, which employees can exercise at home, and that shows progressive thinking as well as environmental and social sensitivity."

While much research remains to be done in the area of working remotely, it is, in the meantime, an adaptive process, requiring constant observation and refinement as well as learning to work with the latest communication devices in an ever-changing world.

Anne Papmehl (ecostrat@cimtegration.com), M.A., is a management consultant and freelance writer based in Toronto.

Telework Sites

Organizations considering a telework program may find the following references helpful:

- AT&T (www.att.com/telework) contains research, practical ideas and anecdotal accounts of successful telework programs.

- Innovisions Canada (www.ivc.ca) is a telework and flexwork consulting organization. Web site contains links to other valuable information, including names of teleworking associations, case studies and legal issues. It also contains a link to the Canadian Telework Association, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting telework in Canada.

- Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (www.tbs-sct.gc.ca) produces a set of guidelines on implementing telework, which is especially useful for those working in the public sector and unionized environments.

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