**Successful Telecommuting
Management & Telecommuter's Perspectives**

**Matthew Perdue
PO Box 460091
San Antonio TX 78246-0091
210-266-7377 nationwide digital pager
perdue@hillcountry.net**

A successful telecommuting program involves more than shuffling workers home with ISDN or DSL line access to the corporate network. Instituted properly, a telecommuting program can save the company thousands of dollars, increase productivity, reduce worker turnover, tap scarce resources and expertise and contribute significantly to worker, management and end-user satisfaction with application systems.

The successful telecommuting program can save many thousands of dollars by reducing the amount of real estate: desktop real estate, cube or office real estate and parking space real estate to name a few. Consider also the amounts spent on air conditioning, heating, lighting, phone systems, office furniture, office supplies, computer hardware, network wiring costs, liability insurance, water, toilet paper, etc. One company has calculated these costs to be $15,000 per year, per worker. Consider the impact to your organization's budgeting!

The successful telecommuting program can reduce the turnover rate, increase worker job satisfaction and even bring in outside expertise that would otherwise be unavailable. Workers that have the flexibility to manage their time and workspace have been shown to increase productivity and drastically reduce turnover. The job that allows telecommuting may be worth more to the worker than more money from another job that won't allow telecommuting. Some of the people with many years of experience on a platform or with a particular application system may only be available a few hours a day or a few days a week, and might not be able to travel extensively. Telecommuting provides a way for your company to make use of that expertise that would otherwise be unavailable.

Telecommuting can also increase the amount of available time a worker has to contribute to a project. By eliminating or significantly reducing the morning and afternoon "drive time" that time can be spent productively working on the assigned tasks.

A few of the benefits of telecommuting have been cited and following will be information you can use to implement a successful telecommuting program for your organization.

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Management Perspectives

Identify Eligible Tasks and Projects

Not all tasks and certainly not all projects (at least in their entirety) are suited to telecommuting. Almost every project will have periods where the work to be done can literally be done from anywhere, as long as the worker is connected to the resources needed to complete the work assigned. While not an exhaustive list, projects will generally include a design phase, systems analysis and specification, task assignment, programming, programmer testing, documentation (often overlooked) user acceptance and training, production and finally maintenance. Design, systems analysis and specification work generally does not lend itself well to telecommuting due to the high degree of interaction required during these phases. Once task assignment is completed and everyone is "on the same page" most often the work of programming, programmer testing and documentation can be accomplished by those assigned these tasks from any computer connected to the network. User acceptance and training usually will require more one-to-one contact with those creating the system and those testing and using the system and is better suited to on-site work. Once a project has reached maintenance phase it is ideal for telecommuting.

Programming, programmer testing and documentation are good candidates for telecommuting work as the requirements have been established and the tasks assigned. Programming is to the angst of many still somewhat of an art form and can at times require an extreme lack of interruptions, noises, motion and discomfort as all these can serve to distract concentration. Some phases of programming can best be served in a work space devoid of any outside intervention: from someone walking by, the phone ringing and subsequent conversation nearby, public address systems, general office noise, the office gossip, the "next assignment" or "rush job" dropped on the desk and a whole host of other distractions that prevent one from thinking in eleven dimensions. Programmer testing (that done by the programmer as opposed to that done by user-acceptance or quality assurance) is usually accomplished with test sets of data extracted specifically for the purpose and can require some interaction with others to build the test data sets. Again programmer testing is a phase that requires at times extreme concentration to resolve program problems that weren't supposed to be there. The worst and one that requires the most interruption free time is the intermittent problem, usually solved by the "Eureka!" method – so named for the shriek of joy

expressed by the programmer when finally locating the misplaced or forgotten period, put, get, subroutine or paragraph. Documentation work is also best done without interruption, but with input from others which can be accomplished with peer review and document sharing.

Maintenance work deals with systems that have been established and operating, may not be documented completely and will require some concentrated effort to find and correct the problem at hand. If given the resources to track down the problem including job streams, scripts, data sets and source code the maintenance programmer can best be served with a quiet work place and input from others as needed. Maintenance work can be accomplished from any computer connected to the network – witness the many times in the past of 3:00 A.M. calls from the operations center saying your program/job "blew up" and dialing in to research the problem. If it works well at 3:00 A.M. it also works well 9:00-5:00!

Tasks well suited to telecommuting include programming, programmer testing, documentation and maintenance programming. Additional tasks to consider for telecommuting would include data entry and validation. When considering tasks for telecommuting evaluate if the work can be done with little interaction and is best suited for a work space with minimal interruption.

Identify Prospective Telecommuters

Successful telecommuters must possess certain skill sets, attitudes and aptitudes. Planning, organization and time management skills are essential. The ability to work without close supervision, good to excellent communication skills both written and oral, self-motivation and discipline and the absence of the need for constant (or near-constant) interaction with others are of great benefit for the telecommuter. A high degree of technical proficiency and knowledge of the work and a demonstrated performance record are also major factors in the determination of telecommuting candidates. Additional factors for consideration are the home environment: work place suitability, spousal acceptance of the work arrangement, designation of working hours, lack of interruptions, etc.

Some considerations to place on a check-list when evaluating prospective telecommuters would be:

- Ability to self-motivate
- Ability to work alone
- Organizational skills
- Ability to multi-task
- Good knowledge and experience in software used
- Quickly adapt to changing scenarios
- Self discipline
- Ability to make independent decisions
- Good time management skills
- Ability to troubleshoot basic problems
- Ability to learn quickly and apply what they have learned
- Meet deadlines and can work well under pressure

Those usually not well suited to telecommuting are usually "social animals" that require a high degree of interaction with those around them, those that must be in a structured work environment, persons easily distracted from work, those that lack an agreeable and supportive attitude at home regarding working at home and/or the lack of reliable child care during working hours.

An example from a real life experience is the programmer analyst that programmed by consensus. After getting an assignment this person would proceed to ask, one by one, every programmer in the department how to do certain parts of the task. When round the office visits were complete, the programmer had been told by everyone else how to program the entire assignment and then would retreat to "do" the assignment. A conjecture could be made that the only task was to transcribe the notes into a program. Such a person is not a candidate for telecommuting and probably should not be a candidate to be a programmer at all!

A self-assessment that can be used by the prospective telecommuter is included in the last section.

Identify Eligible Telemanagers

Just as some people are better suited than others to telecommute, others are better suited to manage those telecommuting. Make no mistake, management of workers telecommuting can at times be a challenge and requires not more but more effective management. Certain luxuries will no longer be available such as casually dropping by to verbally update someone on a change in the specifications or a change in priorities. Stopping by to get a "quick update" is as well a thing of the past. A critical review of these methods mentioned will more often than not demonstrate that they were not effective management tools – neither supplying an adequate picture of the progress obtained nor preventing interruptions and changes to schedules that prolong the completion of assignments. Verbal communication of changes in specifications or priorities quite often results in forgotten or overlooked information and frustration. More effective for both on-site and telecommuting workers would be to institute an "NVO" policy – No Verbal Orders. Some workers in the health care industry would recognize the "NPO" designation which stands for Non-Pro-Oro or "nothing by mouth." For those that remember their Latin days, this translates to "nothing for speaking." Better communication contributes to greater success.

Just as there are qualities for a prospective telecommuter, the prospective telemanager should have some of the following traits and skills:

- Know requirements of their own position
- Results-based evaluations
- Agreeable to supervising remote workers
- Deals well with e-mails and phone calls from remote workers
- Anticipate problems and take corrective action
- Know and communicate telecommuter's job requirements
- Resist temptation to "micro-manage" every step
- Have an agenda for phone calls & conferences – stick to the point
- Make efficient use of all parties time
- Ability to delegate tasks and step back
- Availability

Monitoring Progress of Projects and Assignments

Care must be taken to not over-monitor the status of an assignment or project. One of the reasons for implementing a telecommuting project is to provide a work environment with fewer interruptions. Constantly providing the status of work in progress can prevent progress. While it may be necessary to provide regular updates on critical or high-profile projects it generally is better to receive those updates in the morning's e-mail. Reason: most telecommuters will put in many hours during the day and more at night, making progress that should be reported at the end of the work day instead of what constitutes the middle of the telecommuter's work day. Quite often the best work is done during periods without phone calls, e-mail to answer or send and teleconferences to attend. This period is usually at night when the rest of the "working world" has gone home – but the telecommuter is already at home! Through many years of experience the most productive working period is for those who would call themselves "night owls" generally from 8:00 P.M. until midnight or even later and for "early birds" from 4:00 A.M. until 9:00 A.M. This may seem completely opposite from the perception of the working day for most of the past century and indeed it is. Again the most productive work can be accomplished with the least amount of interruptions and this is most likely to take place when others are not concentrating on work. For those projects that are critical but not requiring a daily update it usually is best to receive the weekly update by e-mail after the weekend's work is done. More progress can sometimes be made in a Saturday or Sunday night working session than two days during the week.

For high-profile or critical projects it generally works best for the telecommuter to provide the status update after completing a day's (and night's) worth of work, as long as the telemanager or supervisor has that update in the e-mail in-box in the morning. This also allows the manager to know early in the morning of progress made, questions or problems that need to be addressed and any changes in working plans that may arise for the coming day. For other projects a weekly update should suffice on Monday mornings, after a weekend of work has been completed. While a telecommuter may work many hours over a weekend all parties must take steps to prevent overwork. It can be counterproductive for someone to work twenty hours over a weekend – everybody needs a break now and then!

Both the telemanager and the telecommuter must have a clear understanding of deadlines and milestones for projects and assignments. If a particular part of a project must be completed by a date certain this should be clearly communicated. Priorities should be established when multiple assignments are made and the status of the work in priority order should be given to the telemanager. Any priority changes should be communicated as quickly as possible to avoid wasted time, effort and missed expectations. Just as a telecommuter must have organizational and time management skills a telemanager must also be organized. It may seem sophomoric to create and maintain a "to do" list in addition to a list of tasks assigned but this is the single greatest contributor to accomplishing all of the work that needs to be done on a daily and weekly basis. If the task is noted and checked regularly it is far less likely to be forgotten. Items on a "to do" list have a way of nagging at you until they are done and can be crossed off the list.

Once assignments, priorities and deadlines or milestones are established you will have a clear way of measuring progress.

The Bottom Line

Measuring the effectiveness of a telecommuting project is not usually a simple task – what is? There are ways to measure the exact cost of providing a work space and equipment for someone to work at the office location versus providing the equipment for a telecommuter to work from home. Measuring the overall effectiveness of work performed either at the office or telecommuting can be simple – is the work getting done on-time, within the budget and with the quality expected. The cost of providing a work site for someone at the office can be quantified by adding all the costs of having someone physically present. Consider floor space, partitions, filing cabinets, book shelves, desk, chair, computer, monitor, UPS equipment, printer access and supplies, network wiring costs, network equipment (hubs, routers, switches) office supplies, cabling, phone, lighting, air conditioning and heating, public address systems if any, break room, snack machines, refrigerator, chairs, tables, break room paper goods, soap, water, restrooms and restroom paper goods, cleaning personnel, security personnel, security and access badges, security equipment (alarms, cameras, monitors, etc.). The cost of all these items has a clear impact on the organization's budget. Small steps taken multiplied many times over can contribute to reducing the cost of doing business. One company actually had their auditing firm calculate the exact cost of providing a work space – it

amounted to $15,000 annually in hard costs per worker. Other factors to consider are some of the intangibles: reduced turnover rates, reduced absenteeism, improved morale, greater recruitment options and flexibility, reduced travel costs, more effective use of meetings & more productive meetings, results-oriented management. Additionally consider the changing face of legislation. A trend seen in high-population centers in the United States is the issuance of tax credits or "pollution credits" that can be obtained by increasing the number of telecommuters and reducing the number of commuters. Fewer vehicles on the road lessens the road maintenance, the need for more highways and fewer vehicles on the road reduces the amount of pollution going into the atmosphere. If a city the size of New York with ten million residents in the area can reduce the number of people commuting daily by 1% (assuming a commuting work-force of four million daily) the costs of commuting can be reduced by 400,000 people. Consider the population centers of Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, Boston, Washington D.C., Atlanta, Houston, Dallas, etc.

Take a hard look and put paper to pencil (or fingers to calculator) and add up all the costs of providing work space for someone in the office instead of taking the "givens" of space, furniture, etc. for granted. When considering the costs consider those items that are provided by other department's budgets. While you can easily quantify those items in your own budget, consider that network connection costs may be allocated to another department; floor space rent another; partitions, desks, chairs, bookshelves, etc. to yet another and so on. Consider the possibility of expanding your department's needs for additional personnel without the attendant wait and cost to provide additional work space. Short term spikes in personnel needs can be immediately solved by telecommuting workers. When an organization does not have the physical space to adequately provided a work area for additional workers, that organization needs to take a hard look at the need to have those workers physically present. Experience shows that placing two and three people in a space designed for one is not productive (such is the case with a major manufacturer in Texas – a "Fortune 100" company). Placing workers in hallways or next to copy/fax rooms can also be counterproductive. Remember: the interrupted worker is the non-productive worker.

Another note: management by body count is not effective management (a manager's importance is determined by the number of bodies accumulated around the manager - doesn't work). In <u>The Mythical Man Month: Essays on</u>

Software Engineering, Frederick P. Brooks, Jr., Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1995, the author states that you cannot birth a baby in one month by having nine women work on the problem. Likewise two or three people in a space designed for one is questionable at best given the current state of technology to spread the work force out in suitable working areas.

Telecommuter Perspectives

Self Assessment

The prospective telecommuter must take an honest look at their work habits, social interaction needs, proficiency and career goals (for a short list) before considering telecommuting. Telecommuting is not a panacea for work related or home related problems and to a certain extent will only serve to magnify any existing problems. The single greatest contributor to success as a telecommuter can be personal attitude: towards work, schedules, quality and quantity of work, organization and outlook towards others to name a few. Included at the end of this paper is a suggested self assessment for review and possible inclusion in the formation and management of telecommuting programs. In the process of self assessment consider if you have some of the following traits: good planning and organizational skills, time management, work well independently, low need for interaction with other workers, strong written and verbal communication skills, a high degree of self motivation and discipline and a strong performance record.

Telecommuting above all requires the ability to work independently and without close supervision. You should also be able to create your own structured work environment and manage that environment – from dealing with interruptions to scheduling your working day and/or night. Planning your work space in advance will contribute greatly to your ability to perform the work required and your success. A separate work space is best, away from high traffic areas in the home and comfortable enough to spend many hours without "climbing the walls." Proper equipment is necessary including desk, chair, lighting, air conditioning or heating, electrical outlets, nearby restroom, supplies and reference materials needed, etc. Creating a work space that is an obstacle course should be avoided.

Working from home also creates new concerns that must be addressed. Getting up and commuting to the office every day provides a certain amount of daily change of scenery that will be absent. Placing the work area away

from the rest of the home will help to foster the "at work" attitude while in the work area and also help the telecommuter gain the sense of not working twenty four hours a day every day of the year. Separating the work area from the rest of the home also helps others in the home recognize that you are at work and assists in limiting interruptions.

Planning for Telecommuting

As stated above maximum benefit can be gained by planning your work space in advance. To the greatest extent possible "work-life" should be separated from "home-life" by organizing the home office. Home related materials and files should be placed in a defined area in the home office, giving as much free space to start as possible to the work related materials. Remember the majority of your time will be spent working on work-related as opposed to home-related items in your home office. Having a proper desk with monitor, keyboard and mouse at proper positions is essential. Simply using a board over two file cabinets for a desk will only contribute to pain and discomfort in the long run and is actually dangerous and should be avoided. Inexpensive desks with returns (such as a secretarial desk) or computer work stations are available at almost all office supply companies. A small investment in the proper desk and chair will enable you to spend many hours at work in the greatest comfort possible – and at times it can be the minor discomforts that make the greatest distractions.

Proper placement of the furniture in the office should be taken into account. Windows facing North provide the most consistent light (as any artist will tell you). The location of the monitor so that your eyes will not be distracted by surrounding movement will help greatly. Usually placing the monitor so that a window is to your left and the door to the room to your right (or vice versa) works best. This way any motion from the left or right is not in your direct field of view but in your peripheral vision – your focus stays with what is on the screen directly in front of you. Take into account if you are left or right handed. Your phone and writing surface should be placed to the opposite of your hand – if right handed you should place the phone and have the writing surface to your left. If you need to write anything you'll be removing your hands from the keyboard and mouse anyway and being completely removed from proximity to the keyboard will help you focus on what you are writing. You must take these suggestions and modify them for your work habits as you may find you work better having the phone, writing surface, pens, etc. to your right.

Proper equipment is a necessity. Not just computer equipment but also phone equipment. Make the small investment in a headset phone available at Radio Shack or other stores for $20-45. This will free up your hands to access the computer while you are on the phone for teleconferences or speaking with other workers. A headset phone will greatly reduce the amount of stress on your back and neck from having to hold the phone against your ear. Having a radio in the room can serve as a distraction but can also be valuable for tracking the weather – arriving thunderstorms can knock out your electricity and your productivity. Having an answering machine for the "office" line only or the home to serve as "voice-mail" can help you keep in touch with project changes, requests and other calls that may come in when you've stepped out to eat lunch, use the restroom, pick up the kids at school, etc. The need for an answering machine can be especially true if a separate phone line is used for the office as the phone will ring only in the office and probably will not be able to be heard from other areas of the home.

Telecommuters and telemanagers should have a clear understanding on issues such as availability and minimum hours worked (although this is rarely a problem as telecommuters tend to work more hours than workers at the office). Planning your normal schedule and making sure others know your availability will be to the benefit of all. Lunch times in offices tend to be somewhat flexible and take place from 11:00 A.M. until 1:00 P.M. Since the teleworker has no way of seeing when others have gone to lunch and those workers still at the office have no way of seeing the teleworker going to lunch you should establish a set time, as much as possible, for your lunch break. Telecommuting lends itself well to starting work and working for many hours, often forgetting to take the lunch break. Missed breakfasts and lunches can become the normal situation. The temptation once "on a roll" and having a very productive period to continue to work is a good thing – you can get a lot done but at the same time you can adversely impact your health. When working at the office or telecommuting it still is a good practice to get up periodically and move about – stretch, use the restroom, go outside for a breath of fresh air and then return to concentrated work. Doing so will reduce your level of stress and ultimately contribute to your productivity. If you do not have a separate telephone line for your office work you should have caller-id. Using caller-id will allow you to manage the calls you do take and reduce the risk of "getting stuck" on calls that are better taken after the working time is over.

Managing the Work Day and Work Space

Plan your working day as you would if you were still commuting to the office. The exception here is that your commute now amounts to a few minutes – to walk into your home office, connect to the corporate network and begin work. As mentioned before your computer, monitor, keyboard, mouse, printer, etc. should be positioned so that your main focus of attention is the monitor. Any materials you need during the working day should be close at hand. Have reference manuals behind or near you within easy reach. If you bring in coffee or other drinks be careful to place these where the container will not be easily knocked over into your keyboard or mouse. Pet hair can reek havoc with your mouse and hopefully you'll be able to keep the critters out of the office anyway.

Try as much as possible to have a structured environment – a place for everything and everything in its place. A structured environment also means a working schedule – established starting time, breaks, lunch, stopping time, dinner and possibly some time after dinner for some work before ending the day. Give some thought to how you work and how you work best and plan your work space accordingly. A small amount of time spent in the beginning to analyze where to place your desk, chair, phone and monitor for the most comfort will pay dividends for months to come. Remember to leave space for easy entry into and exit from the office – no one wants to work in an obstacle course unless you're a Drill Sargent.

Keep track of your time worked. Make a notation at the start of work with the time started and what work you are performing. Note the time you stop working. This will be of tremendous help in filling out status reports, time sheets or if you need to reconstruct the time spent on various phases of a project. Let this good habit work for you.

Dealing With Interruptions

It may take some time for those around you to understand that you really are working when you're in your office. Many times others will think that just because you are at home you've got time available for other things. You must establish politely the first time that you are at work and have a deadline to meet. Most often this will satisfy the situation and establish with others that you are working and are not to be disturbed. It is important to establish this from the start, as a pattern can develop and be even harder to break later

after several interruptions have occurred. If politeness doesn't work then rudeness may be necessary, such as with phone solicitors and the like.

If an interruption must be addressed then if at all possible take the time to make a few quick notes on your current place in your work such as the current section you were working on or the next item you need to research, etc. This will help you upon your return to resume working in the shortest amount of time possible. Having a notepad and pen handy serves not only for note taking during teleconferences but for breaks as well.

If you do have to resort to less than polite ways to inform others that you are working, remember that you are on your employer's time and it should be treated no differently than if you were at the office. Many years of experience has shown that this is usually the exception and rare as most people will recognize the fact you have deadlines to meet and attention can be given to their concerns on your time at your next break or after the work day is completed.

"Getting the Work Out"

Planning your work space and work schedule will help you organize yourself to get your work done. Prioritize as much as possible and make a list at the start of each day of those tasks that must be accomplished that day, those carried over from the previous day and those that need to be completed in the next few days. Having a list of the items that need to be accomplished on a weekly and monthly basis will also be of help.

Setting time for the work requiring the most concentrated effort will be of the greatest benefit. If you can determine that a task will take three to four hours of uninterrupted work then try to schedule this not at the start of your day, but in the middle. At the start of your day you are still organizing in your mind the work you need to do that day. This may take several minutes to several hours – reading, returning and sending e-mail, reviewing where you left off before, etc. When you have organized in your mind the task you need to focus on and have refreshed your memory with all associated facts and requirements – this is the best time to work on the efforts requiring the most concentration.

In prioritizing give some thought to the smaller tasks. Can these be accomplished first or would it be best to work on these later? Sometimes

clearing out a long list of smaller tasks can contribute to a sense of accomplishment and help you "get in the grove" to tackle the harder or more complex tasks. At times completing the smaller tasks can help you work in the background of your mind the larger tasks and can lead to some breakthrough moments – sudden realizations of ways to solve problems while you thought you weren't actually thinking about that problem!

When *Not* To Telecommute

Clearly there are times that telecommuting will not be the best answer to working and solving problems. Project design phases, user acceptance and testing and other stages of projects requiring many people to interact are not well suited to telecommuting. This may change with the advance of technology as video-conferencing becomes widely available.

If interaction on a project requires more than a few hours a week to answer questions and contribute viewpoints then telecommuting may not be the best component of a project at that phase. Once the project has reached the stage where those involved know their assignments and requirements then telecommuting can step in and be a valuable part of the project's completion.

Telecommuting should not be considered if it will only serve to increase tension at home or at the office. Other workers that remain at the office may resent those that telecommute. Communication with all parties, those that telecommute and those that don't, is key for everyone to understand the objective is to get the work done in a timely manner with the quality desired. Some people can achieve the desired results telecommuting and others are best suited by the duties of their job or their aptitude to work at the office. Telecommuters still are members of the team working on the project. On the home front the spouse or others in the home may not be used to the idea of having the telecommuter around almost all the time. Again discussion beforehand can alleviate problems before they start.

General Issues & Considerations

Data, Fax and Voice Communication

Consideration should be given to the nature of network access, the frequency and duration of the connection and the amount of voice communication that will be required in planning telecommuting programs. If telecommuters will require full access to the network and frequently access file servers and documents stored on the network higher capacity lines should be used for data connection.   ISDN and DSL lines are ideal candidates for access. Various types of connection methods and equipment are available and will not be addressed here but to establish that major consideration should be given to the nature of the work to be performed. If the telecommuters will need access to a few computer systems then dial-up lines at 28.8K or 56K may suffice. The key factor to remember is the greater the transmission speed the less the telecommuters will spend waiting – of course this applies to everyone working on the network but even more so to those working remotely.   Added security can be obtained with the implementation of virtual private networks or a VPN. Most often this is accomplished with encrypting modems and routers but the greatly increased cost may not be justified.

If a fair number of document sharing is required for the project or the work then possibly a fax machine is in order. For reasonable cost machines are now available that combine the functions of a fax machine, copier and scanner in one unit.   If a fax machine is deemed to be necessary the associated phone line requirement should be included in the evaluation.

If the telecommuters will be expected to participate in several teleconferences during the week it may be best to include in the plans a separate phone line for business usage only. If a separate line is used thought should be given to an answering machine for the business line only. One item that should be on the list is a headset phone – it may not seem like much but it contributes greatly to productivity.

Equipment

When planning the telecommuting program consideration should be given beyond the obvious. All telecommuters will require a computer, monitor,

keyboard, mouse and a means of connecting to the network. Less obvious are items such as: glare filters, docking stations, document holders, printers, scanners, means of backup (Zip drives or CD writers) surge protectors, UPS equipment, etc. Also consider desk lamps or other types of task lighting. If the nature of the work involves or the company requires a certain degree of security then a paper shredder may be a necessary item. File cabinets that can be locked should be considered.

Software licenses required should also be considered. Network access software and individual computer access software must be planned. These items are as much a part of the software license procedures off-site as on-site.

Office Furniture & Supplies

Telecommuters will require much of the same office supplies that they would require if working on-site. A possible list would include such items as: calculator, hole punch, pencil sharpener, diskette & CD holders, a flashlight and spare batteries, label maker, paper cutter, clock, ruler, trash can, floor mat for the chair, toner or ink cartridges, pens & pencils, tape, paper clips, rubber bands, three ring binders and section pages, self-stick notes, file folders, etc.

Speak Up! (Suggestions For Teleconferences)

Low speaking or quiet voices are difficult to hear in a conference room full of people and essentially impossible over the phone. Speak up! Let everyone hear you – otherwise more time will be spent in repeating what the person said. When attending a teleconference the parties on the remote connections should have their working area arranged to allow them to concentrate on the subject matter at hand. Sometimes having to close your eyes to focus on the speaker is a necessity.

Schedule teleconferences in advance as would be for on-site facilities. This will give all parties the chance to be well prepared and contribute to a meaningful and successful conference. The same holds true for on-site participants in meetings. Know in advance what areas are going to be covered – make and publish and agenda and as closely as possible stick to it. Items of prolonged discussion should be considered for continuation in another session or separate sub-group.

Another suggestion is to have a work area on-site for those telecommuters that telecommute extensively. This could be a conference room set aside for certain days as "telecommuter day" with adequate network access ports and telephones, close access to network printers, copiers and fax machines as needed.

Legal Issues

Governments can not resist the temptation to justify their own existence. Such is the case with OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) a branch of the Department of Labor. As has been widely discussed lately is the issue of employer's legal responsibility for the work area in an at-home workers residence. While this situation changes with too much frequency to be fully documented here, suffice it to say the situation will change, and possibly more rapidly than the executive branch of government expects. Already bills have been introduced in the national Congress to address the issue and the involvement of employers and telecommuters alike can only help to better the workplace rules (at the office or at home) for everyone.

Documents should be created and signed by all parties involved clearly stating the nature of the work and responsibilities, expectations, schedules and reporting requirements. Consultation with in-house legal counsel or outside counsel in this area is a prudent investment and could be considered well worth the expense should any situations arise that would cause one to say "I wish we had…."

And Finally…

The benefits to be gained from a successful telecommuting program far outweigh any drawbacks. The increased productivity, lower real estate costs, reduced equipment and furniture costs, lower employee turnover, reduced absenteeism, improved morale, increased flexibility in talent procurement, reduced travel expenses and lower overhead expenses can contribute significantly to an organizations profitability, good will and competitive advantages.

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Self-Assessment for Telecommuters

Source: telecommuting.miningco.com

True/False to the following statements:

I believe I:
- enjoy working independently
- like to think through and resolve problems myself
- am a high initiative person
- am not a procrastinator
- can set and stick to a schedule
- like to organize and plan
- am a self-disciplined person
- am able and willing to handle administrative tasks
- can balance attention to major objectives and small details
- do not need constant interaction with people
- can work effectively with little or no feedback from others
- enjoy being in my own home
- do not need frequent feedback or coaching
- have the required level of verbal and written communication skills
- can pace myself to avoid both overworking and wasting time
- can resist a refrigerator that is only a few steps away

Job Appropriateness
My job:
- requires minimal face-to-face interaction
- involves many responsibilities that can be met by phone,
  fax or modem
- accountabilities can be quantified, measured and monitored
- affords me the freedom to manage my work as I see best
- does not require frequent interaction with work associates
- involves co-workers who are supportive and collaborative

Home Office Space/Environment
I have a space in my home office that:
- has an adequate amount of work space for my current needs
- would provide opportunities for future expansion
- has an adequate amount of storage space
- has adequate lighting

has sufficient ventilation
has a safe number of electrical circuits
is quiet enough to allow me to concentrate
provides appropriate separation from home/family distractions
is a pleasant and comfortable space I'd enjoy working in
is a reasonable distance from needed business services
has no zoning or lease restrictions that preclude telecommuting
has adequate insurance coverage to protect business equipment

Family Support
My family:
is supportive of my desire to telecommute and will react positively
is willing to minimize distractions and interruptions
will not require care or involvement from me during work hours
can accept my need to focus on work during business hours
is stable and has no relationship conflicts that would be distracting