

Internet Credited For Cleaner Environment

Telecommuting cuts energy use, both at the office and on the highway, former IBM Canada boss says

By MICHAEL HAMMOND

October 26, 2007

The Internet has been described as many things, but now it's touted as an environmental saviour.

John Wetmore, former chief executive of IBM Canada, said his company's mid-1990s push to find operational efficiencies led it to allow employees to work from home, a new concept in the early days of the Internet.

One third of the company's 300,000 workers now telecommute, or work from a home office. Wetmore said the program has proven not only cost-effective for the company, it has also allowed IBM to offer prospective employees the perk of being able to work from home.

"Along the way, we realized how powerful this is in a skilled environment where you are looking for scarce skills," he said yesterday.

Wetmore was one of a number of speakers at a one-day conference focusing on the Internet and the environment at the Centre for International Governance Innovation in Waterloo.

The event was billed as an Intelligent Community Conference, organized after Waterloo was named Intelligent Community of the Year by the Intelligent Community Forum, a New York-based think-tank.

Initially, IBM allowed only those employees who spent much of their time out of the office the option of working from home. Over time, as managers and employees became more comfortable with the concept, more employees opted out of the formal workplace.

The proliferation of high-speed, high-capacity Internet networks has given companies a number of options for how they want to operate their business and manage their buildings.

In IBM's case, Wetmore said 54,000 American employees who work from home part of the time allow the company to reduce its carbon emissions by 68,000 tonnes per year. It also helps save more than 30 million litres of fuel.

“There’s no reason why companies can’t implement the telework approach,” he said.

IBM has reduced its travel budget by using state-of-the-art teleconferencing technology. This allows people around the world to gather around a boardroom table and look colleagues in the eye with the help of sophisticated cameras, high-capacity Internet cables and plasma screen televisions.

The company also uses its expansive in-house Intranet to encourage employees to collaborate on technology projects without having to travel.

IBM has also used what it calls “Innovation Jams” to encourage employees to contribute to projects from around the world. The jams operate much like a discussion board would on a social networking website such as Facebook.

One idea generated is a network that brings systems like security alarms, sprinklers, heating and lighting into one computerized network that monitors itself and does not require human intervention.

This type of intelligent building is rapidly gaining traction among real estate executives and building owners, said Mark Golan, Cisco Systems’ vice-president of connected real estate.

Golan said nearly half of all power consumed in developed countries goes to office buildings. More surprising, even in the most efficient buildings, about 60 per cent of space largely goes unused during a typical work day.

Cisco, a provider of Internet networking equipment based in San Jose, Calif., has transformed a number of its buildings so that office and conference room walls are taken down in favour of more efficient floor plans designed for today’s collaborative style of work.

The company has also made use of new sensor technology to detect how much daylight is streaming into an office. This technology adjusts the interior lights accordingly, which has proven to be a big money-saver.

Golan said even the most innovative buildings are not at the point where all their functions -- from security systems to fresh air vents -- can be linked onto one intelligent network along with telephones and Internet hookups.