

Telecommuting Tips

By Amy Lindgren

April 25, 2008

With gas prices skyrocketing, telecommuting is looking more attractive than ever.

Of course you know this, but as a quick definition: Telecommuting is the practice of working from home for an outside employer. It's different from having a home-based business, in that somebody else assigns the work and pays your salary.

If you're tired of commuting to work, this might sound like a pretty good idea.

Here are a few of the benefits happy telecommuters enjoy:

- No commuting costs. This is probably the most obvious and coveted of the benefits. Many families are able to reduce expenses dramatically and may even cut back to one car — or none — in the household.
- No commuting time. A close corollary to the first benefit, this also ranks high on most telecommuters' favorites list. Even the easiest commute eats up 30 minutes each way, once you consider the hunt for keys, coat and wallet and the trudge to your workstation from the parking lot or bus stop. To win back five hours a week is better than winning the lottery for some workers.
- Workday flexibility. Working from home often means you can spread your tasks out to accommodate other obligations. Hence, early birds and night owls both can work in their optimum schedules while also meeting the kids at the bus stop or taking elderly parents to appointments during the day.
- Casual comfort. Tapping away on the laptop with bunny-slipper-clad feet propped on the back deck railing: That's the image we've all internalized from the living-it-up commercials touting the high life of the home-based worker. You have to admit: It does sound pretty good.
- Concentration. For writers and other project-based workers, the opportunity to work without interruptions ranks almost as high as the lack of a commute.

Of course, every silver lining comes with a cloud, and telecommuting is no exception. If you're considering this path, you need to know the downsides as well.

- Lack of concentration. OK, if you live alone, the concentration at home can be pretty good. But every housemate adds a level of distraction, and kids count double. Not to mention the sudden urgency the dishes or laundry will take on when you have a difficult project to start.

- Space. Work is kind of a space hog — something we tend not to notice when we're coming to an office every day. It's funny how big a desk, file cabinet, printer, computer and everything else can seem once it's all crammed into the spare bedroom. Not to mention that you lose the spare bedroom. For better or worse, you've just reduced the number of in-laws who can visit.
- Isolation. At first, you can't wait to get away from all those annoying co-workers, and you don't believe that you ever would miss them. But spending every day alone is overwhelming to many people, even with regular e-mail and phone check-ins.
- Disconnect from the boss. Good? Bad? Whatever your answer, consider this: The best projects and promotions don't tend to go to people the boss has forgotten about. Once you and your files make a one-way trip home, you have become a task manager, rather than a team player. That is, your boss counts on you in a particular role but isn't thinking about you in a larger context.

Not discouraged? If you're hoping to telecommute, here are some tips.

1. Don't expect to start as a telecommuter. Most organizations offer this option to workers whose habits and strengths they already know. Still, you can make an educated guess about which jobs could evolve in this direction. For example, in a clinic: patient care, no; appointment setting, maybe; medical coding, very possibly.
2. Stay visible. For health reasons — mental and career — it's a good idea to show up at work at least once a week. This can be to attend meetings, exchange paperwork or simply meet a co-worker for lunch.
3. Don't brag, and don't abuse the privilege. Your office-bound co-workers don't want to hear about you "working" on the beach, and neither does your boss. Cultivate the image of professionalism under all circumstances.
4. Keep your place on the team. Get in the habit of e-mailing weekly reports to your boss, and look for ways to help with team projects. Putting in for the baby showers and buying an occasional Friday morning treat for your co-workers are good ideas if you want to be considered one of the team and not an outsider.

- Amy Lindgren owns Prototype Career Service, a career consulting firm in St. Paul, Minn. She can be reached at alindgren@prototypecareerservice.com or at 1071 W. Seventh St., St. Paul, MN 55102.