

At Home On The Job

North Bay workshop aids employers in creating telecommuting opportunities

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By Nathan Halverson

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Aimee Whaley has found a way to instantly zap to work -- avoiding rising gas prices and hours spent commuting.

Whaley, who works for Agilent Technologies in Santa Rosa, simply walks down the hallway of her Sacramento-area home, crosses the threshold into her home office and, poof, she is on the job.

She is among a growing number of people who have turned to telecommuting as a way to live where they want, cut their commuting costs and avoid aggravating traffic.

About 12 million workers telecommute more than one day a week in the United States, about twice the number from 2000, according to Gartner Dataquest. Next year, an additional 2 million people are expected to join the ranks of teleworkers.

People who worked from home saved 840 million gallons of gas last year in the United States and reduced carbon dioxide emissions by 14 million tons, according to a study conducted by Tiax, a Boston tech consulting firm.

In Sonoma County, there is ample room for growth. More than 40,000 people travel to other counties to work, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. And more than 15,000 people commute into the county from elsewhere.

The North Bay Leadership Council is holding a two-hour workshop on Wednesday to help businesses create telecommuting programs for employees.

The workshop, which will be held in Novato, will help employers determine how to set up telecommuting, which employees it is best for, and what pitfalls to avoid.

Businesses are embracing the new movement as a way to save money on office space and energy costs, said Elham Shirazi, a telecommuting consultant who is leading the workshop.

“It has very much become a work-force strategy,” Shirazi said.

At Sun Microsystems, about half of its employees now telecommute, resulting in savings of \$387 million per year, according to MSNBC.

The U.S. General Service Administration has set a goal for 50 percent of its employees to be teleworking by 2010 -- currently about 10 percent do.

Not only does it reduce costs, but it helps companies retain employees who move out of the area, or attract key talent who don't want to relocate, Shirazi said.

In recent years, technology has erased many of the barriers to working from home. Everything from video conferencing to instant messaging allows employees to attend meetings and keep up with daily chitchat.

A big key is that high-speed Internet is widely available in urban areas, and is becoming increasingly available with wireless connections in remote areas.

At Agilent, about one in 10 employees telecommutes, according to the company. With a global work force, Agilent has been on the forefront of adopting technology to make it easier to work remotely.

No matter where Whaley is working from, she has access to her e-mail and company database from her laptop.

She also gets access to collaboration tools such as WebEx, which lets co-workers in Colorado or Santa Rosa connect to her computer so they can watch what she is doing on her screen -- a substitute for looking over her shoulder.

But the adjustment to working from home can be a bit isolating at first, Whaley said.

"You miss walking into the office and asking people how their weekend was," she said.

This lack of personal face time worries some people, who fear that when promotion time comes nothing beats a personal connection.

Whaley, who commutes into Santa Rosa about once a week, said she overcomes the distance by making a concerted effort to stay connected with people using instant messaging, the phone and e-mail.

Jim Veler, Whaley's manager at Agilent, said technology has really improved in the last few years.

"Instant messaging is huge," he said. "I can always connect with Aimee by just logging on to instant messaging."