



## Want To Save The Planet? Stay Home

**Companies large and small tout their green initiatives. But they've left a big one on the table.**

**By Laura Vanderkam**

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Kermit the Frog need not be morose — it seems everyone wants to be green these days. Americans increasingly care about the environmental impact of their decisions, and so magazines teem with ads touting companies' environmental cred. A Wal-Mart insert highlights its biodegradable plant pots and T-shirts made with recycled Coca-Cola bottles. Tide boasts that its Coldwater detergent, which lets you wash laundry in cold water, will save you up to \$65 in energy costs annually. A General Motors ad features the 2008 Chevy Tahoe Hybrid — “America's first full-size hybrid SUV” — gleaming angelically in a forest.

“This has gone from a mission statement to a market opportunity,” says Joel Makower, executive editor of GreenBiz.com. “Companies of every size are now asking, ‘What's our green strategy?’ “



*(Illustration by Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY)*

Unfortunately, this strategizing has missed some low-hanging fruit. We might be using Coldwater detergent, but every morning, 76% of America's commuters drive, alone, an average of 25 minutes to their workplaces. Many of these people then proceed to e-mail or call people in other places. Indeed, about 40% of the U.S. workforce has jobs that, largely, do not need to be done from a central location. If the millions of Americans who never work from home, but could, stayed in their PJs, this would save a sizeable chunk of our oil imports from the Persian Gulf.

“This takes windmills and all the other alternative fuels combined and tops them,” says Kate Lister, founder of the telecommuting research company Undress4Success.

An added bonus? Not only is telecommuting better for the planet, it's better for business, too. Any company that truly wants to go green — while making green — should send as many workers home as it can.

### **Telecommuting pioneers**

As someone who has worked from home for years (I'm writing this in my bedroom), I know that cellphones and laptops make commutes optional. Now that I have a baby, I'm an even bigger fan of this flexibility. Indeed, many companies that offer telecommuting treat it as a work-life balance perk to retain young parents.

But society as a whole benefits as much as my kid from my decision. By working primarily at home for the past five years (approximately 1,000 days), not only have I saved myself the more than 800 hours I would have spent on the road if I had an average commute, I've saved 1,500 gallons of gas and approximately 13 metric tons of carbon from the atmosphere.

Collectively, America's 16 million self-employed workers (many of whom work at home like me) are making the roads that much more clear and clean for everyone else — and taking the pressure off governments to build roads or pricey transit systems. So are the 12.6 million corporate employees who, according to GreenBiz.com's State of Green Business 2008 report, work from home at least eight hours a week.

Despite the environmental benefits, and the broadband connections that render location largely irrelevant, people who work at home still represent a small, pioneering portion of America's 150 million-strong workforce. The reasons are more cultural than anything else. A Korn/Ferry International survey of 1,320 global executives found that 61% believed telecommuters were less likely to advance in their careers than other workers. The face-time mindset lingers.

"Management still thinks people need to be in the office for eight hours a day in order to be productive," says Makower. "Anyone who works in an office eight hours knows that probably three hours and 45 minutes are spent being productive." (Are you reading this at work?)

### **Seeing green**

Partly because people waste so much time commuting, and waste so much time at work while consuming electricity and office space, companies that have implemented telecommuting programs have seen economic benefits — rather than productivity losses — from this decision. A meta-analysis of 46 studies, published in the November *Journal of Applied Psychology*, found that telecommuting was associated with higher supervisor performance ratings, increased job satisfaction and a reduction in intent to leave the company.

Of course, commutes aren't the only way information workers hurt the environment.

Makower notes that GreenBiz.com's 10 employees all bike or take public transportation, print only when absolutely necessary, and yet "the minute I get on a plane and fly to Des Moines, all of that is overwhelmed by the act of travel." Airplanes spew an incredible amount of carbon into the upper atmosphere. A green corporate strategy would not only push telecommuting, managers also would need to triple check whether any off-site meeting, training or conference was absolutely necessary.

Fortunately, the technology to meet virtually, instead, already exists. Avoiding business travel might be the one legitimate reason to come into the office. People who have used Cisco's high-definition TelePresence technology (usually installed in special rooms in corporate headquarters) say it's uncannily like sitting across the table from your counterparts. Cisco Services Europe reports that its own travel budget dropped 14% in the quarter after it began using TelePresence. The company published a case study about one executive who estimated that his productivity rose 20%, and his flight-related carbon footprint shrunk 57%, after he axed travel to most meetings. He was also able to attend his daughter's school play for the first time.

Certainly that, and working in your pajamas on non-travel days, beats saving \$65 on your energy bill.

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