

Many Try Telecommuting To Drive Less

BY BARRY SHLACHTER
STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER
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Donna Hornsby had an 80-mile round-trip drive between Springtown and her contract job at Sabre Holdings in Southlake.

But climbing gasoline prices, and a musical chairslike scramble for unassigned cubicles every morning, prompted her to telecommute from home four out of five days a week.

With more Americans believing that high-priced fuel is here to stay, many like Hornsby are finding ways to mitigate the pain at the pump. And some employers are pitching in.

Fidelity Investments, which has a large facility in Westlake, has launched a carpooling connection to encourage shared rides among workers. Dallas-based Oncor subsidizes passes on mass transit.

What's also clear is that climbing pump prices are altering American lifestyles.

According to a survey of 43,000 consumers by the New York-based research firm NPD Group, 6 percent say they're working from home at least some days, 6 percent say they've bought a more fuel-efficient vehicle, 4 percent changed a job to be near home, and 2 percent relocated closer to work.

"We haven't seen such behavioral changes since 1979-1981, when there was an actual reduction in miles driven," said David Portalatin, NPD's Houston-based director of industry analysis. "These changes are happening because we have had 2 1/2 years of sustained high gas prices."

The most fascinating finding, Portalatin said, was that 4 percent of respondents say they are working less. "They may not be the family's main breadwinner and possibly decided to reduce work hours because the cost of commuting didn't make the job as worthwhile."

More companies are permitting telecommuting as an option, but few here go as far as Sabre, owner of the Travelocity Web site, in encouraging employees to work from home.

Even Verizon, which has a large facility in Irving and provides much of the technology that makes telecommuting possible, said the number of its North Texas employees working full time at home was insignificant. Spokesman Lee Gierczynski said telecommuting is more often done on a case-by-case basis and then only occasionally, or

even as a one-off deal, say, when a worker is in a crunch and staying home would be more practical.

Out Of The Cubicle Race

When Hornsby joined Sabre in September, she was the only person on her team not assigned to a cubicle. She soon found that she was not alone in her predicament. Sabre had reduced the size of its Southlake office complex from three buildings to two, saving \$10 million, said Al Comeaux, a spokesman. The radical consolidation meant a race for a convenient work space every morning.

“I was right next door, then we changed floors,” Hornsby said. “And with less space and more people, finding a desk became harder. If I was there by 8:30 a.m., I would not get a space anywhere near my teammates.”

Then her boss, who knew that Hornsby kept two horses, suggested that she telecommute. She recalled him saying: “Donna, you can work in the barn if you want to. As long as the work gets done.”

And although she hasn't shifted her laptop to be cheek by jowl with her appaloosas, telecommuting has worked out on several levels.

By working from home four days a week, Hornsby figures that she is saving \$75 a week on gas, not to mention wear and tear, on her 1987 BMW, which has clocked more than 200,000 miles. Conserved is another \$30 to \$48 by not eating out, as she would near the Southlake office. And she saves a couple of hundred dollars a month on business attire.

“I still buy shoes -- I give Imelda Marcos a run for her money -- but I have just two suits left. God help me if I ever have to wear them again,” she said.

Although some bosses might suspect that their subordinates are catching up on TV soaps or rebuilding the garage roof on company time, Hornsby said her job is so real-time demanding that her colleagues and superiors know that she is working -- albeit on the living-room couch.

“There's no clocking in; just trust,” said Hornsby, 49, who edits Web-site content for SabreSonic, a unit that provides software reservations and ticketing solutions for airlines. “But my job has high visibility, and if I am not doing it productively, it shows up immediately.”

In fact, although she is paid for 32 hours a week, Hornsby figures that she actually puts in about 40 hours. When she worked in Southlake, she rarely put in more than 32.

The Downside?

“For me it’s feeling extremely isolated, not having the interaction with other people,” she said. “I still need human contact and that’s why I make the trek one day a week to Southlake.”

Then there’s SabreTown -- a proprietary social-networking system within the company firewall. It’s Sabre’s own private MySpace.

“I live for SabreTown -- I don’t know if we want to print that,” Hornsby said, laughing. “I’ve found it to be a truly great networking tool on so many levels, probably the most useful workplace tools I have ever encountered. Just the coolest thing.

“It has actually lessened my sense of isolation. I feel more connected.”

Comeaux said that SabreTown has been so successful in connecting far-flung colleagues -- 55 percent of Sabre’s 9,000 employees, slightly more than half of whom work overseas, say they use it -- that the company is marketing a commercial version, known as cubeless. American Express is testing it, he said.

It’s Economical

Isolation is less a problem for Courtney Clifton, a Sabre employee who chose to telecommute from Hurst.

“A good thing about working at home is that you are closer to restaurants and can always meet people for lunch. I go to the office every now and then, about twice a month, usually for a whole day.”

Telecommuting is not for everyone, said the single mother of three, a business-systems financial analyst who has been with Sabre six years in two separate stints. “You do have to have motivation to do your work,” she said. “And it takes some time to get used to.”

That said, working at home has improved her concentration on work.

“I suspect I have ADD, since I can get distracted very easily. Office chatter can do it. And at Sabre, they cram so many people in cubes, and the cubes have actually gotten smaller.”

Overall, the 32-year-old Clifton figures that she’s saving \$60 a week by not commuting to Southlake in her Cadillac Escalade SRX. “That doesn’t take into account driving out to lunch.”

She saves another \$8 by not stopping twice at Starbucks for coffee. And she cut her spending on clothing over a three-month period by half, to \$75 from \$150.

“Economics was the main factor,” she said of her decision to telecommute.

Like Hornsby, Clifton believes that she's more productive at home. "I can get up immediately and start working at 7 or 7:30 a.m. If I go to the office, everybody is chatting with everyone and it's not till 9 that I sit down and get focused.

"In my team, only two of nine worked at home initially, and those two did it just two days a week," she said. "This year it changed. Now just two people are in the office almost every single day, and the rest work at least one day at home. Three of them work every day from home almost all the time."

It's Calmer At Home

Nilesh Thali, a Sabre software developer, said he's telecommuting three or four days a week, up from two, not to save money -- his drive from Roanoke is about nine miles -- but for the relative calm of home.

Because of the unassigned flex-space scramble, "You could be in the midst of a team that could be loud. Of course, you learn to start tuning the noise out. There would always be spaces, but you had to set it up every day," he said, referring to his computer and materials.

Telecommuting's downside is not being in close physical proximity with colleagues at key stages, Thali said.

"Even with software development, you still have to interact with people. Nothing beats working with people directly. Face-to-face communications solves problems quicker."

And working conditions at home aren't always perfect.

"But on days my daughter goes to day care, there are fewer distractions."