

Hartford Business

Telecommuting Hits The Fast Lane

Companies look for ways to offset skyrocketing prices at the pump

By Mary Johnson

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Record-breaking prices at the pump are pushing interest in telecommuting in the state.

Jean Taylor Stimolo, program manager of Telecommute Connecticut, said that her organization, which helps facilitate telecommuting in the state, saw a 25 percent increase in activity from February to March. The numbers from April and May are not yet available, but Stimolo said her team quantified the latest influx of calls and e-mails as a “surge.”

Telecommute Connecticut is a complementary service of the state Department of Transportation that guides employers through the process of implementing telecommuting policies in the workplace.

Yes, telecommuting helps companies go green. Sure, it increases company competitiveness and employee morale.

But the timing suggests that the real reason behind the increased interest in telecommuting in recent months is the cost of fuel. As of press time, the American Automobile Association listed the national average for regular unleaded gas at \$4.06 a gallon. In Connecticut, the average price was \$4.36.

“[Telecommuting] complements all the other transportation options,” Stimolo said. “People are trying to be more sensible in the way they work.”

Stimolo’s organization estimates that there are about 158,000 telecommuters in the state. That takes nearly 60,000 cars off the road daily. It saves 28.6 million gallons of gas per year. And it eliminates 81,000 tons of air pollution annually.

Pitney Bowes On Board

Edward Houghton, director of work force effectiveness at Pitney Bowes, said his company has been offering alternate commuting options to employees long before sky-high gas prices have made it the latest business trend. But recently, he’s seen a marked increase in the number of inquiries on the subject.

“I’m my own personal lab rat,” Houghton said.

Houghton lives in Shelton, and for many years, he commuted from Shelton to Stamford four days a week and worked from home on the fifth.

Now he has moved his office to Shelton and works a four-day compressed work week, something he’s able to do by working during the time he would have spent commuting.

“Seriously, I was planning on retiring a year and a half ago,” Houghton said. “It really came down to the commute and being able to balance work and family life.”

Employee retention and morale is one byproduct of telecommuting, but it can also present several hurdles to employers, said attorney Theresa Waugh of New Haven-based law firm Littler Mendelson.

Obvious areas of concern lie on the human resources side of the business, namely how to effectively manage an employee with limited time in the office.

Firm Policy Needed

Problems can also arise in terms of wage and hour issues, Waugh said. Salaried employees pose less of a concern, but with telecommuting employees paid by the hour, regulating overtime becomes more difficult.

“That’s hard enough to police when you’re in the office,” Waugh said. “When you have telecommuting employees, it gets dicier.”

That problem can be mitigated with a firm telecommuting office policy, Waugh added, one that identifies the rules regarding overtime. And she advises having employees sign it so that employers can reprimand bad behavior when necessary.

A custom company policy can also help the company outline which employees are eligible for telecommuting, something that can help avoid potential discrimination claims. A policy could also address safety issues to deal with potential workers’ compensation claims, Waugh said.

Waugh said the state’s current workers’ compensation law indicates that employees are covered while in the office and while engaged elsewhere at the request of their employers. If the employees have been approved to telecommute, they should still be covered under the law.

But how are employers to know if an injury resulted from work or play?

“[Workers compensation fraud] is more likely to happen in this situation,” Waugh said. “It’ll end up being a test of honesty.”

Employers also relinquish a lot of control in terms of ensuring work place safety, Waugh said.

“And that opens issues like, ‘is the company going to try to tell people what kind of furniture to have in their home offices?’” Waugh said.

Bob Brady, chief executive officer of compliance and training resource provider Business & Legal Reports in Old Saybrook, also cautions against the lack of face-to-face communication that comes with telecommuting.

“I think that’s important for the team to have a protocol that ensures some form of face-to-face communication,” Brady said. “People have to feel connected to their organization.”