



The Renewed Allure Of Telecommuting

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With gasoline prices rising above \$4 a gallon, a recent survey found that 40% of tech workers would willingly take a pay cut to telecommute. Meanwhile, more employers are apparently offering IT pros the choice to work remotely as a perk to attract hard-to-find skills. Is telecommuting an option you offer your staff?

IT staffing firm Sapphire Technologies has found that clients these days are more frequently allowing tech consultants to forgo long commutes in their cars and expensive air travel to client locations and instead work from home or from Sapphire offices closer to home.

“It’s not the norm, it’s still an anomaly,” says Erik Fleishman, manager of Sapphire’s Sacramento, Calif., office and West Coast regional recruiting division. “But it’s definitely something that’s become more popular over the last two months, especially in some markets.” That includes states in the Northeast, like Maine -- which often recruits from Boston -- as well as other regions, like northern California, which has a big demand for scarce talent combos, such as health-IT skills and clinical knowledge.

To attract rare talent, Fleishman says clients are telling Sapphire to be flexible on their behalf in the arrangements they offer prospective workers. Sapphire has 52 offices in North America, including 45 in the United State, and so some clients also are asking the staffing firm to allow consultants to work from local Sapphire sites (instead of their own homes) in cases where the client “doesn’t know” the contractors (and presumably their productivity level) well, says Fleishman.

Companies in industries such as banking, computer manufacturing, and health care are among the Sapphire clients pitching new off-site gigs to consultants for tech positions like “high level architect,” says Fleishman.

As for the recent report by another staffing company, Dice, that found nearly 40% of tech workers would accept a pay cut of up to 10% to telecommute full-time, Fleishman isn’t too surprised.

“In the Northeast, some clients who allow people to work remotely are also paying \$10 to \$15 dollars less,” he says. So, indeed, some consultants are willing to accept the lesser pay to avoid travel, he says.

One of the issues organizations have in allowing staff -- any staff, not just techies -- to work from home is that often these people still need to come into company offices from time to time for meetings, on-site projects, and so on. That opens up challenges in terms of juggling workspace.

But a recent report by Nucleus Research points out that software tools, like PeopleCube's Resource Scheduler, can make workspace management easier so that companies can more readily launch or expand flex-work programs, including telecommuting.

By the way, from 2007 to 2008, there was only a slight increase in the number of tech pros who named "telecommuting/work from home" as a factor that matters most to them about their jobs, according to the 2008 InformationWeek Research National Salary Survey of 9,653 IT professionals.

In 2008, 15% named "telecommuting/work from home" as a job factor that matters most, versus 12% who said that in 2007. However, it's worth noting that the 2008 survey was conducted in February and March, months before gas prices spiked to more than \$4 a gallon.

According to data kindly provided to InformationWeek by the AAA, the national average per-gallon price for unleaded gas in February was "only" \$3.03. And in March, the national average reached \$3.24 per gallon for unleaded gasoline.

If gas prices continue to soar, I wonder how high on the priority list telecommuting will spike among IT pros in next year's InformationWeek Research salary survey?

What do you think?