

Telecommuting Could Make Our Lives Better

By Jay Fidell
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As we know from the discussion on rail, more people are living farther away from their jobs, and getting to work is a critical problem for them. Commuters are driving an hour each way — that's 33 work days a year. If people didn't have to commute, things would be easier, don't you think?

Imagine how much oil is consumed and how much air is polluted from this bumper-to-bumper going-to-work traffic. But don't give up — with some fresh thinking about the intersection of work and technology in Hawai'i, we can all benefit from some great telecommuting strategies.

If your company hasn't already moved into telework, the probability is that it would do better, you would do better and we would all do better if it did. Costs go down, productivity goes up, and we take pressure off the infrastructure and environment. Great, but how can we do that?

LET'S COUNT THE WAYS

Telecommuting uses less office space and saves money on rent, parking and power. It saves gas and reduces our dependence on fossil fuel. It saves the roads and alleviates traffic, emissions and standstill time. A teleworker who telecommutes once a week reduces emissions by 20 percent.

Your company will also save on air travel, the most expensive commute of all, not only in dollars and time but in fossil fuel. Add to that hotels and meals. Travel is nice, but it's best on vacation and not for work.

If you do it right, your teleworker will be more efficient at home or in a satellite office than in your main office. Using the Internet, he will have full access to company data, e-mail, resources, customers, supervisors and co-employees. He may miss the water cooler and lunchroom, but his quality of life and job satisfaction are nevertheless likely to improve.

That means you're more likely to keep him if someone else offers him a job. Out of Fortune Magazine's 100 "Best Places to Work" in 2008, 84 offered telecommuting. In a study of technology workers, 37 percent said they would take a 10 percent reduction in pay for the opportunity to telecommute.

BIG BROTHER IS OUR FRIEND

FactPoint Group reported this year that teleworkers customarily spend 38 percent of their time working on their home computers, 17 percent on the phone, 24 percent on reading, research and analysis, and 9 percent in face-to-face meetings.

But how do you know your teleworker won't slack off? Well, you can get information on logins, logouts and keystrokes and an instant analysis of what your teleworker has been doing, and how well he has been doing it.

You can determine compensation with the same productivity analysis. You can pay creatively by completion, as in the old days, or bonus by productivity. The prospects are endless, limited only by the labor laws.

Teleworkers are increasingly likely to be characterized as independent contractors, which have control of the workplace, the hours and the equipment. Employers like contractor arrangements because they save on payroll costs, and teleworkers like them for the flexibility they offer.

USING THE NEW TECHNOLOGY

A desktop PC costs 25 percent of what it did three years ago, and laptops have also decreased dramatically. Broadband and wireless are ubiquitous. New phone systems, VoIP and 3G are here, and smarter than before.

Telework is increasingly feasible because of the new technologies that have been coming online, with the Internet, collaborative software and Webcams. Software has never been so powerful and adaptable.

How about a virtual private network so you can operate your office computer from home; a program to transfer large files to and from your office and other teleworkers; a program to back up your home computer to the company's server; a paperless filing system to provide you with the same access to data that you have in the office? We have all this now.

You can use instant messaging to communicate with your office and co-workers, simultaneously if you prefer, the way Barack Obama sends text messages to his supporters. Messaging can give you a silent public-address system to reach everyone in your company, any time, anywhere. You can inform or get information, or move them to action, immediately and remotely.

MEETINGS BY REMOTE

Are teleworkers at a disadvantage for meetings? Not at all. Conference calling is easy, even for dummies. Before, you had to call an operator in advance to set up a conference call, at noteworthy expense. Now you can include bridge technology in your office phone system. Your teleworkers can use it for conference call meetings all day long. Problem solved.

You can use Skype or Skype-out not only to call anywhere in the world, but to make multi-party phone conferences, and color video conferences with anyone who has a camera. All this is free, or at least very cheap.

With “telepresence” systems from Cisco, Microsoft and Polycom, you can have video conferences in which you can look into the eyes of the others. This permits electronic collaboration in ways we have never been able to do before — it’s just like you’re all there in the room together.

IT’S TIME TO TELECOMMUTE

The Society for Human Resource Management’s 2007 benefits survey showed that 56 percent of the 590 U.S. companies surveyed offered some form of telework in 2007, up from 51 percent in 2006. It’s hard to know if it’s the same in Hawai’i — some people don’t tell you that they’re teleworking.

Our state needs to have more telecommuting. It should encourage and incentivize telework. Our companies should offer telework jobs, benefits, bonuses, stock options and pay above market. We should make these as attractive as we can, and at least as attractive as work in the office.

Two related local companies, ComTel and Makai Communications, have designed telecommuting systems and built fully distributed work forces. They say that this has increased productivity and profitability. They see themselves as role models, advising customers to do the same thing.

Lou Darnell, ComTel CEO, is committed to spreading the word on their success. In this way, he hopes to expand the number of companies and workers that are adopting the benefits of telecommuting in Hawai’i.

You don’t have to wait. Incentives or not, you can implement these technologies and move your company and your job down the path now. And voilà, we will make money, remake and improve our economy, our lifestyle, our community and our environment. So what’s not to like?

And it goes without saying, doesn’t it, that I wrote this piece from home?

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