



Home Sweet Office: Telecommute Good for Business, Employees, and Planet

By Brendan I. Koerner
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Ever since OPEC vexed Jimmy Carter into wearing a cardigan, telecommuting has been touted as a fix for what ails the US office worker — the agony and expense of commuting, the drudgery of cubicles, the shortage of family time. Long before the advent of the Web, evangelists were confident that cordless phones and faxes had already made the office a relic. “Working from home holds the promise of a new American dream,” Paul and Sarah Edwards gushed in their 1985 manifesto, *Working From Home*, in which they extolled the virtues of commuting from breakfast nook to den.

Two decades later, however, most workers still trudge to the office. Though a third of the more than 150 million working Americans telecommute at least occasionally, most do so just a few days each month. Only 40 percent of companies permit any sort of work-at-home arrangement, which means most insist on full-time attendance. According to a 2006 survey by the Telework Exchange, the top fear among resisters is that they’ll lose control of their employees, whom they doubtlessly envision frittering away the hours between 9 and 5 playing Minesweeper and munching Cheetos.

Telecommuting’s foes couldn’t be more misguided. When gasoline costs \$4 a gallon, companies shouldn’t just be doing all they can to expand telecommuting — they should be scrapping their offices entirely. No, not turning them into toy-filled communal spaces, as advertising titan Chiat/Day infamously did in the early-’90s, but abandoning them outright.

That might sound a bit radical to those who swear by the office’s supposed benefits, like camaraderie and face-to-face collaboration. But time and again, studies have shown that telecommuters are every bit as engaged as their cubicle-bound brethren — and happier and more productive to boot. Last year, researchers from Penn State analyzed 46 studies of telecommuting conducted over two decades and covering almost 13,000 employees. Their sweeping inquiry concluded that working from home has “favorable effects on perceived autonomy, work-family conflict, job satisfaction, performance, turnover intent, and stress.” The only demonstrable drawback is a slight fraying of the relationships between telecommuters and their colleagues back at headquarters — largely because of jealousy on the part of the latter group. That’s the first problem you solve when you kill your office.

Earlier this year, an IDC report from Asia found that 81 percent of managers believe telecommuting improves productivity, up from 61 percent in 2005. The increase is attributable largely to the proliferation of unified communications technologies — tools that connect mobile and remote workers. These include products like LifeSize Express, the first hi-def videoconferencing system priced at less than \$5,000, as well as Web-based services like Google Docs and Glance, which let users view a remote colleague's onscreen work in real time (in the case of Glance, with cursor movements and all).

The traditional office, meanwhile, remains a black hole of interruptions, procrastination, and soul-crushing politics. According to Gloria Mark, an informatics professor at UC Irvine, the typical office worker is interrupted or switches tasks every three minutes — hardly enough time to accomplish anything of substance.

True, there is value to getting folks together under one roof, but those gatherings needn't occur every day. Instead of leasing traditional offices — currently averaging around \$21.25 per square foot annually, and a quarter of that is typically either vacant or underutilized — companies could join meeting-room cooperatives, which allow firms to assemble when necessary. Given that it costs more than \$15,000 per year to provide an employee with 200 square feet of cubicle, the savings would be significant — so great, in fact, that companies would still come out thousands of dollars ahead after springing for workers' broadband and VoIP expenses.

Ditching the office could also provide businesses with a leg up in the scramble to recruit and retain talent. For starters, location would no longer limit a company's employment pool — gifted Kansans wouldn't be forced to uproot their lives for opportunities in, say, California. Also, based on the average American's commute time, driving speed, and vehicle specs — and assuming that gas costs \$4 per gallon — a telecommuter would save around \$1,200 a year on fuel alone — an instant salary bump, of sorts.

Perhaps you've been an office drone for so long that you can't imagine life without fuzzy, low-slung cubicle walls. Well, given that the typical American house is now over 2,500 square feet — up more than 60 percent since the early '70s — surely you can find room to build your own cube. Add some stale coffee and a buzzing fluorescent light and it will feel just like... well, you know where.

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