

Telecommuting May Be Cure for 'Gas Pains'

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



Last week, a business associate asked if I'd like a coupon for a gallon of gas, and when I said "yes," he handed me a \$5 bill! With the pump price of gasoline taking nearly that entire "coupon" per gallon, telecommuting is attracting increased interest from cash-strapped workers and businesses.

The concept sounds simple: Rather than burning high-priced gas to drive to the workplace, employees can work from their homes. Mobile communication devices and personal computers make "telecommuting" a viable option.

The reality, however, is more complex: Businesses must carefully craft telecommuting policies, defining the company's telecommuting goals and expectations.

In addition to reducing office costs, telecommuting can boost employee performance and satisfaction, and reduce turnover. But the downside is the challenge of managing a workforce that consists of both on-site and "remote" employees.

In a study released in March, International Data Corp. predicted that by the close of this year, 75 percent of U.S. professionals will be considered mobile workers and will utilize at-home and mobile stations to access and conduct work previously done in an office setting.

The IDC study was one of several released this spring that documented companies allowing employees to work "remotely."

A nationwide survey commissioned by Skype revealed 62 percent of the companies contacted had remote workers. One third of the employees polled worked away from the office, either at client, customer or partner premises, at home, or in public spaces. A study by Telework Exchange and Cisco documented a similar increase in the telecommuting trend.

But unless a telecommuting arrangement is carefully defined, there can be drawbacks for businesses and workers. Tensions can arise when employees working on-site and those working remotely don't see each other and don't understand each other's workload demands, said Michigan State University researchers Brenda A. Lautsch and Ellen Ernst Kossek in their study "Managing a Blended Workforce: Telecommuters and Non-Telecommuters."

The researchers urged businesses to create a culture of inclusiveness that requires supervisors to understand how their decisions will affect both in-office and remote employees. The most successful managers take a similar approach to monitoring the workflows of the two groups and creating a feeling of equity between them. Supervisors are urged to stay in frequent contact with their telecommuting employees to make them feel they are "in the loop" and part of the office culture.

In a study released last year, Kimberly Elsbach, a professor in the Graduate School of Management at the University of California, Davis, warned telecommuting could jeopardize a worker's career. Using interviews and behavioral tests, Elsbach found that when bosses and co-workers see an employee at work, they tend to think more highly of that person.

Elsbach's advice: Managers must be aware of "face-time dynamics" when evaluating telecommuting workers. Employees who telecommute should develop strategies that provide "face time" with their supervisors and co-workers.

I advise companies to develop formal telecommuting programs that establish ground rules, corporate-wide consistency and equity. Programs should address:

- **Eligibility** – Who can telecommute and how is eligibility decided? The criteria should be clear and equitable. First and foremost, the arrangement should meet the company's needs. A telecommuting arrangement should not be considered permanent. It should be periodically reviewed and ended if necessary.
- **Applying** – How can an employee apply to telecommute? Establish a procedure for workers to request a telecommuting arrangement. Specify the procedure for applying and the criteria that will be used for approval.
- **Work schedule** – When will the employee be on the job and off? Specify compensation, benefits, work responsibilities and the amount of time the employee is expected to work per day or pay period. Will work hours be flexible, or are telecommuters expected to be available during specific hours? How will time worked be tracked if the employee is eligible for overtime?
- **Work space** – Where will the telecommuter work? These locations should be secure and conducive to creating a professional relationship with on-site co-workers and clients.
- **Equipment, software, support** – Whose equipment will be used and what kinds of support will be provided by the company? Is the equipment limited to "official use," or can the telecommuter use it for personal purposes?
- **Monitoring** – How will the work of telecommuters be monitored? A monitoring system should measure the production of telecommuters in a way that is similar to the measurement of on-site workers.
- **Liability** – Who is responsible for injuries and accidents at the telecommuting site? The employee's home workspace likely will be considered an extension of the company's workspace. Therefore, the company may be liable for job-related accidents that occur in the location during the employee's working hours.
- **Training** – What kind of training will be provided supervisors and workers to implement the telecommuting program? Prudent companies establish telecommuting training programs for supervisors and workers. Require telecommuters to sign an agreement acknowledging completion of the program and acceptance of the program's conditions.

The best telecommuting programs are devised by “stakeholders” working together under the guidance of a company’s human resources staff or consultant. Confer with workers, supervisors and company managers to identify and address areas of concerns. Head off problems before they doom an otherwise beneficial, cost-effective program.

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