



**The Evolving Nature of Working at Home.** More and more people are getting to work without going to work. Instead of commuting to a corporate workspace, they're staying at home in their own space. Instead of separating their work lives from their home lives, they're blending them, or trying to. Instead of thinking of work as a place where they go, they're seeing it as something they do.

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Working from home, once stigmatized as peripheral or reserved for the self-employed, is now a mainstream reality for many types of workers, including those whose employers, for a variety of reasons, are either encouraging or mandating it. As a new kind of work habitat, the home is the unexpected office of the future, increasingly accepted as a viable, even preferable, workplace alternative.

In addition to changing the meaning of the home office, this blending of work and home is also changing the meaning of work itself. With mobile technology readily available, “office” space is no longer relegated to a spare room or basement enclave, and “work” is no longer limited to employment-related tasks. All kinds of other work—from paying bills and tracking investments to scheduling appointments and doing homework—takes place in homes where computers are always nearby and family members have easy access to them.

A Herman Miller research project involving 250 home-office workers from across the United States shows them, on average, working in 2.4 different locations around the home. Eighty-seven percent work in their home offices, 65 percent work in the living room/family room, and 48 percent work in the bedroom. Forty-three percent of women work from the kitchen counter; 33 percent of men do.<sup>1</sup> In short, the home office, enabled and untethered by technology, has expanded its reach throughout the home, reflecting the ongoing blurring of the lines that separate home life from work life.

### **A Rising Tide of At-Home Office Workers**

The numbers behind this back-to-the-home movement confirm its rising significance. According to national research firm IDC, there are more than 30 million home-based businesses in the United States<sup>2</sup>, enterprises headed by independent contractors, entrepreneurs, salespeople, and others. Teleworkers—corporate personnel who work from home and elsewhere using remote-access technologies to stay connected—continue to increase in numbers.

In 2006, corporate teleworkers numbered 12.4 million in the U.S., an increase of 10 percent over 2005.<sup>3</sup> Eighty-four of *Fortune* magazine’s “100 Best Companies to Work For” provide telecommuting opportunities; in 1998, only 18 did.<sup>4</sup> CoreNet Global estimates that by 2010, just 40 percent of all work will be done in corporate facilities. The remaining work will be done at home (40 percent) and outside the office or home (20 percent).<sup>5</sup>

The number of mobile workers, including home workers, also continues to grow internationally. IDC predicts that the number of worldwide mobile workers will reach 1 billion by 2011.<sup>6</sup> Japan’s number will increase the most to nearly 80 percent of the workforce, up from 53 percent in 2006. The distribution of mobile workers across Europe varies according to region, with high levels in northern countries (e.g., the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Finland) and considerably lower levels in southern countries (e.g., Portugal, Greece, Italy).<sup>7</sup>

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Forty-six percent of British firms offer workers the opportunity of teleworking; in 2004, just 11 percent did.<sup>8</sup> A 2008 IDC survey showed that 81 percent of the Asia Pacific executives believe that telecommuting improves productivity, up from 61 percent in 2005. The increase in a positive attitude toward telecommuting was also evident in Hong Kong, Australia, and India. Seventy-six percent of those surveyed in the People's Republic of China saw telecommuting as a means of improving work/life balance; in Singapore, 78 percent did.

Telecommuting owes much of this ongoing rise in popularity to the continuing improvements in technology. Increasingly mobile and capable technology keeps at-home workers connected with the main office, colleagues, customers, and the world. The number of teleworkers using a broadband connection at home increased by more than 45 percent in 2006, following a 65 percent rise in 2005.<sup>9</sup>

Web 2.0, which shifts applications and data storage from the desktop to the Web, enhances information sharing and collaboration and minimizes the chance of data lost in a computer crash. Social-networking sites like Facebook and Twitter are also serving as business-networking sites. Virtual worlds like Second Life are bringing people, including business people, together in cyberspace. Wikis, blogs, open source databases, easier and cheaper forms of IP (Internet Protocol) telephony, more robust VPN (Virtual Private Network) software—all these and more can help make the home just as suited for work as most any office cubicle.

### **Working from Home: The Advantages**

There's a wide range of benefits and advantages of working from home—for individuals, the businesses that employ them, and the environment. Working from home, away from the constant interruptions of the main office, can facilitate focused, efficient work on projects. It helps ensure that work goes on when roads are impassable or slowed to a crawl. According to Sun Microsystems, its home-based workers give back to the company about 50 percent of the time they save by not commuting and use the other half for themselves and their families.<sup>10</sup> In another survey, 78 percent of U.S. managers reported that their telecommuting workers were more productive than or as productive as their office-bound colleagues.<sup>11</sup>

Telecommuting can provide a competitive advantage as an effective recruiting tool for sought-after employees and a good way for a company to retain its best employees. A poll of about 10,000 U.S. workers shows 73 percent of remote and home-based workers satisfied with their company as a place to work, compared with 64 percent of office workers. Seventy percent of the telecommuters surveyed agreed with the statement that they were "proud to tell people I work for my company"; 64 percent of office workers agreed with it.<sup>12</sup>

Working from home can improve the morale of employees by showing them that their company trusts, respects, and appreciates them and wants to help them pursue the work/life balance they seek. One survey shows 90 percent of workers saying that

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at-home work has improved their ability to keep in touch with friends and family.<sup>13</sup> A study by researchers from Penn State, which analyzed 46 telecommuting studies spanning more than 20 years and involving nearly 13,000 employees, concluded that working from home has “favorable effects on perceived autonomy, work-family conflict, job satisfaction, performance, turnover, intent, and stress.”<sup>14</sup>

Telecommuting can also be a crucial component of corporate cost savings by reducing real estate and utility costs, generally estimated to be about \$10,000 per employee annually. And telecommuting can be a key element of a company’s environmental commitment, reducing fuel use, pollution, and carbon emissions. According to Forrester Research, employers that participate in the Best Workplaces for Commuters program “saved 389 million gallons of fuel and 3.4 million metric tons of carbon dioxide cumulatively from 2001 to 2005.”<sup>15</sup>

Cost savings aren’t a forgone conclusion from home-based work, however. Typically, a company realizes savings only when it can close a building or eliminate a floor of office space. That may not be possible, particularly if the company’s home-based work program is voluntary, in which case a re-allocation of workspace may be a more likely result. When people trade individually assigned offices for home-based work, the freed-up space can be used to create more collaborative areas.

### **The Challenges of Working from Home**

Still, with mounting evidence of its benefits, telecommuting brings challenges for a variety of reasons. The trust that’s required between employer and employee may be lacking in a company’s culture. The loss of status that some employees feel with the loss of their office may make them reluctant to leave headquarters. Closely associated with such reluctance is the fear that some employees have about being away from the daily activities of the office and that being isolated—out of sight, out of mind—will lessen their chances for career advancement and opportunity.

Being away from the camaraderie and friendships formed in the office also keeps some employees from wanting to make the change. They may feel more productive in an office environment, finding more distractions at home than at headquarters. They may find it harder to have creative, spur-of-the-moment conversations with coworkers. And, ultimately, they may begin to lose a sense of belonging to the work community.

Even so, some might be forced to leave headquarters and head home—and their homes might be ill-equipped in terms of space and furnishings to support their work and work style. And, whether they’re glad to be working from home or not, some find that the work/life balance they sought doesn’t happen: Work always beckons, taking center stage too much of the time and too late at night.

Increased productivity may come at too great a personal price. Internationally, 68 percent of teleworkers say that the blurring of the boundaries between work and home life is the biggest downside to working at home.<sup>16</sup> Just as some employees fear losing identity,

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some managers fear losing control and authority, either actually or as perceived by others. Telecommuting could, they worry, lessen their ability to motivate and influence and thereby lessen their own status and progress within their organization.

The worries tied to working from home haven't slowed the trend. In the U.S., two-thirds of *Fortune* 1000 companies have telecommuting programs;<sup>17</sup> over half of all U.S. businesses allow some form of telecommuting.<sup>18</sup> At I.B.M., 30 percent of employees work full-time from home as part of a "mobile workforce" strategy initiated in 2001.<sup>19</sup>

Implicit in this widespread adoption of telecommuting is a sense of respect and trust between worker and employer, an acknowledgement that high-quality work will be accomplished without a command-and-control style of management. "It requires a different skill set to manage people who work from home," says Tracy Brower, Workplace Knowledge Consulting Practice Leader at Herman Miller. "It means managing to results as opposed to managing to presence or the clock, and you have to deal with that through training and development."<sup>20</sup>

It's this kind of cultural change that makes some organizations hesitate implementing telecommuting programs. Brower calls this requirement "authenticity and alignment." Others might call it "walking the talk." Employees must be empowered and trusted to do their jobs. If the culture doesn't allow that, a telecommuting program will likely fail. In addition, "if people are going to be given more freedom in how they do their work, employers need to be very clear on what the objectives are, how they fit with overall corporate strategies, and how the workers will be evaluated,"<sup>21</sup> says Paula Edwards, Workplace Strategist at Herman Miller. There must be a willingness to manage outcomes rather than activities.<sup>22</sup> "This means," say researchers at Gartner, "that the focus of work measurement is centered on accomplishments against agreed-to goals and objectives."<sup>23</sup>

There's also a need to build support for telecommuting within the organization, even if the culture does align with it. Every employee needs to be made aware of the telecommuting program in terms of its goals and objectives and the criteria for selection, appraisal, and evaluation. This can be helped by implementing pilot groups that allow a company to incorporate what it learns into the program before larger-scale implementation, all the while keeping the organization informed of what's happening.

## Overcoming the Challenges of Home-Based Work

### Enrich the Employee Experience

Organizations that implement telecommuting programs must strive to make the employee experience rich and productive. One way to do this is to ensure that a connection between the home worker and the corporation is maintained, that those who work from home all or nearly all of the time have the opportunity for face-to-face, real-time connections with their colleagues.

### Designate Times to Connect

To address this need, managers can designate certain days, or parts of days, when

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telecommuters return to the office to reconnect with the people and activities there. It can be a time to share information, to build team spirit by reinforcing that we're all in this together no matter where we spend most of our working hours. It can assuage fears of being "out of the loop." Managers can also use technology in this regard, using it to facilitate online meetings and audio teleconferences. Whatever method is used, a company must be sure to seek regular feedback from its telecommuters, not only to elicit and show respect for their ideas but to give them an opportunity to discuss the positives and negatives of their at-home experience.

#### Develop Criteria and Provide Choices

Before considering such practices, though, a company must first develop criteria for selecting potential employees for telecommuting, taking into consideration the type of work they do, their work styles, their work ethic, and their level of self-motivation. Then they need to ask a basic question: How much choice do we give them in this matter? In other words, how can we match our goals with the needs and expectations of our employees?

At Sun Microsystems, the iWork program allows workers to choose the arrangement that's most appropriate for them. It resulted in 20 percent choosing home offices, about the same percentage as those who chose to work from an assigned workstation; the other 60 percent of program participants chose a flexible alternative, working from home or another location up to two days a week.<sup>24</sup>

Providing such choice is key to both attracting and retaining employees and helping them be productive. Those at Sun who could choose quit at half the rate of those who weren't given a choice, and they report "very high" productivity scores.<sup>25</sup> "Forcing someone to move who doesn't want to jeopardizes their effectiveness, productivity, and relationship to the organization," says Brower. "Choice is always preferable."<sup>26</sup>

#### Offer the Right Tools

Companies must ensure that their at-home workers have the tools they need to be involved and productive. Providing technology support—both equipment and training—is crucial and justifiable financially, considering the real estate and related costs that can be saved through a telecommuting program. The same can be said about furnishings that support technology and promote healthful work postures and practices. Chairs and surfaces that allow users to adjust them to their exact needs go a long way toward providing such ergonomic support.

When a company makes them available it sends a clear signal that the employee's health and well-being are a top priority. That kind of a signal of appreciative and concerned management, however, isn't an everyday occurrence. Although some companies may provide a one-time furniture-purchasing allowance for their at-home workers to spend as they see fit, others stay away from any involvement or support. Rather than being an indication of a lack of concern for their employees' welfare, such resistance may have more to do with the practical, logistical difficulties involved with

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purchasing furniture on a significant scale for people with varying needs and differing expectations. It can simply seem like too big and potentially too expensive a puzzle to solve.

In response to this situation and the difficulties it poses, some furniture providers are striving to make that process simpler, more adaptable, and less expensive. One way to do this is to work directly with individual corporations, addressing their specific goals, assessing their needs, and developing a program that gives them control without bogging them down in process and gives their employees choice without expecting them to become furniture-selection experts.

One approach to offering choice without requiring expertise is by providing the company with an extranet site that presents the products that it's decided to make available to its at-home workers. The workers themselves, within certain guidelines, decide what best suits their needs, and their homes. Special discounting, direct shipment to workers' homes, and minimal corporate oversight requirements make this approach efficient, cost effective, and sustainable; the choice it gives to at-home workers reinforces the company's trust in them and appreciation for what they do. At the same time, the company can be assured that its employees have access to healthful, ergonomically appropriate at-home work settings.

Whether furniture for at-home work is part of a corporate telecommuting program or not, it should be suited for use beyond the walls of a home office. With technology and those who use it expanding the definition of work and where it takes place in the home, there's a growing need for "office" furniture that's scaled for residential application, that's attractive and comfortable enough for the living room. The right combination of ergonomic design and aesthetic appropriateness can help make each worker poised to make each workday productive.

## Notes

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