

Work is something you do, not  
someplace you go, say telecommuting  
advocates. But make sure your teleworkers  
know what to do and how to do it.

At

BY WYLIE WONG

# Work In A Virtual World

When small-business owner David Proctor needs to hire new employees, his job postings read something like, "Wanted: Seasoned software developers with 7+ years experience for a small but fast-growing company. Ideal candidates must be self-starters who can work from home."

Proctor's company, Naperville, Ill.-based Next Wave Logistics Inc., develops Web tools for network-marketing and direct-selling companies, such as Pampered Chef and Southern Living at Home. All of the company's 35 employees telecommute, which saves money on office space and results in happier workers, he says. They have the flexibility to work their own hours and avoid long commutes, which improves the quality of their lives and increases time with their families.

"It comes down to trust and communication," says Proctor, vice president of the firm. "We're a software company and the proof is in the deliverables. There are deliverables weekly, if not multiple times per week. And with the phone, e-mail and instant-messaging, communication is easy."

Teleworking is booming in corporate America, and small busi-

nesses are no exception. The number of teleworkers has more than doubled from 11.6 million in 1997 to 24.1 million in 2004, according to the American Interactive Consumer Survey, an annual survey of consumer trends by the Dieringer Research Group, a Milwaukee-based research firm. About 18 percent of all employed adult Americans telecommute at least one day a month. More than half (54 percent) of businesses with 20 to 99 employees allow part of their workforce to telecommute, according to a 2004 survey by Boston-based Yankee Group.

These businesses use telecommuting for many reasons. Many, including Next Wave Logistics, not only save money on office space and furniture, but also find that it's a good employee recruitment tool because it lets workers better manage their work and other obligations. Despite the benefits, however, small businesses need to watch for pitfalls. Telecommuting is not for everyone, nor is it appropriate for all types of jobs. But being too selective about who is allowed to telecommute can cause jealousy and dissention among employees. In many cases, business owners must walk a fine line and judge employees and situations on a case-by-case basis.

Innovative managers, aided by advances in technology, have driven telecommuting's growth, say analysts.

"It's grown because companies have recognized the need for flexibility with employees and the availability of mobile technology, such as personal digital assistants (PDAs) and virtual private networks (VPNs), that boosts remote worker productivity," says Chris Liebert, a senior research analyst of small- and medium-sized businesses for the Yankee Group.

Generally, the need to work out of the office for a sales meeting or to visit existing clients has contributed to the proliferation of telework, says Gil Gordon, a telecommuting consultant who owns Gil Gordon Associates in Monmouth Junction, N.J.

"We're seeing the trend away from the narrow view of telecommuting as either full time in the office or full-time telecommuting," Gordon explains. "Now it's morphing into more of a broader mobility. In one week, for example, you're two days in the office, two days on the road visiting

a client and one day at home." The trend is for people to work from wherever they can add the most value, he notes. "It's like that famous quote from Woody Leonhard's book, *The*

*Underground Guide to Telecommuting*: 'Work is something you do, not someplace you go.' And it's happening."

### A virtual company

When Proctor launched Next Wave Logistics five years ago with co-founder Harold Zimmerman, they decided it would be a virtual company with employees working out of their homes. They did, however, rent a 750-square-foot office to serve as a headquarters, where employees could hold meetings.

Proctor says telecommuting has fostered loyalty among the workforce. In fact, only two workers have ever quit the company. Some employees have young children, and working from home gives them extra time with their kids. Staffers can run errands for a few hours, just as long as they make up

## No Standing Still for Small Businesses

In a survey of 178 U.S. businesses with between 20 and 99 employees, Yankee Group found that:

- 79% had mobile workers, with an average of 11 mobile workers per company
- 54% had telecommuters, with an average of eight telecommuters per company

Source: Yankee Group

Telecommuting has some wonderful advantages, including flexibility for the worker and cost savings for the employer. But employers and employees alike need to recognize that it's not necessarily easy to work from home—it comes with its own set of problems.

One of the biggest problems is the lack of boundaries between home and work life, says Gil Gordon, a telework consultant in Monmouth Junction, N.J. Without a commute to a separate location, workers often find themselves either unable to pull away from home activities, such as cleaning or raiding the fridge, or unable to pull away from work duties, and end up staying up till 1 a.m. to answer e-mail.

It helps to have an actual physical barrier between home space and work space, Gordon says. Ideally, telecommuters have a spare room in their home to use as an office. Lacking that, they should at least put up a screen that walls off their work space.

In addition, telecommuters must contend with a variety of interruptions that don't exist at the office. They must tell spouses and children to respect their work time. That means no blaring TV or demands for trips to the mall. Gordon recalls a telecommuter telling him how she laid out the rules in her household. She told her children, "I don't want to be bothered unless there's smoke and blood—and lots of it."

Unfortunately, animals don't respect those boundaries. Cheryl Toth, a consultant who telecommutes from Patagonia, Ariz., for Medical Alliances Inc. of Alexandria Va., complains that her dog always barks when a package is delivered to her door. And, usually, that's right in the middle of a conference call.

On the other hand, telecommuters need to guard against isolation. Toth sometimes misses the personal interaction of working with colleagues in an office. To combat that, she's begun to travel more to visit her clients. Indeed, whether it's flying to meet a client, meeting a friend for lunch or working out at the gym, Gordon says telecommuters should make a point of leaving the house regularly.

# THE DOG ATE MY EXPENSE REPORT ...

Telecommuters love the flexibility but contend with some unique problems



JAMES WASSERMAN

Ernest Forsyth, IT Manager, Clique Communications

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT VPN

Need a virtual private network (VPN) but don't know where to begin? Small businesses have two options to give remote workers secure connections to corporate networks: Internet Protocol security (IPsec) VPNs and Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) VPNs.

The IPsec is the most popular and least expensive VPN, but it is also more difficult to manage, says Aaron Vance, an analyst with Synergy Research Group in Scottsdale, Ariz. That's because IPsec VPNs, which use the Data Encryption Standard for security, require information technology managers to install and configure software on telecommuters' computers. (SSL VPNs don't require special software.) Teleworkers simply access corporate resources through their Web browsers, Vance says.

Another difference between the two is that IPsec VPNs allow access to all company applications, including custom software, whereas SSL VPNs are limited to applications that offer Web-based access. IPsec VPNs also offer more options for limiting access to sensitive information.

the work hours later in the day.

"We're saying, 'We expect a lot out of you. We won't look over your shoulder. We won't micromanage. Why don't you work from home and get face time with your children?'" Proctor says. "We have some developers who are up at 1 or 2 a.m. working because they took half a day off. It's fine as long as you get stuff done and make your deadlines."

The benefits of telecommuting outweigh any negatives, says Robert Thornburg, Next Wave's IT director.

"The flexibility to set your own schedule is the main benefit for me," he says. "There have been times I've had early morning appointments. I have to get out of bed early in the morning, go out to the car, sit in traffic and think, 'I don't know how I used to do this.' When you can roll out of bed and in two minutes be at your desk, that's just amazing."

Similarly, Clique Communications in Hopewell, N.J., allows its 45 employees, particularly software developers, to telecommute to foster their creativity and productivity. The company builds communications tools for businesses, schools, medical facilities and government agencies.

"Developers tend to be people who work long hours. We know they work best in their setting, so we try to cater to that," says Ernest Forsyth, Clique's information technology manager.

However, telecommuting doesn't erase the need for personal contact, Proctor points out. Almost every Next Wave Logistics employee lives in the Chicago area, so they occasionally meet at the office, then go to lunch.

These meetings never start on time because everyone is catching up with one another. "If we meet at 9 a.m., the meeting doesn't start until 9:45 a.m. It turns into 'social hour,' but that's just part of the deal," Proctor says. "There's the connection that needs to happen."

### The telecommuting "type"

"The flexibility is great and allows people to have a good quality of life, but it takes a certain type of person to work from home," says Cheryl Toth, a Patagonia, Ariz.-based consultant who telecommutes for Alexandria, Va.-based Medical Alliances Inc. "You have to make sure everyone is able to work alone and get stuff done; that they're good communicators and good with follow-through, or else they are a management nightmare."

Proctor suggests carefully monitoring new telecommuters

to make sure they are productive. Companies experimenting with telecommuting should start slowly, allowing workers to telecommute once or twice a week at first to track their productivity.

Gordon advises small businesses to offer teleworking only if it solves a business problem, such as cutting costs on office space, and not as a perk to select employees. If a small-business owner gives telecommuting privileges to one worker and not another, it could cause dissension, he explains. Make your telecommuting policy clear: Some job assignments, such as sales positions, are more conducive to teleworking, and telecommuting privileges are contingent upon maintaining good job performance.

"Be selective," he says. "No matter what size the firm is, [the success of telecommuting] depends on the right job or the right person." **[BT]**

## CEOtakeaway

- Telework can save your company money, save your employees the time and stress of commuting and increase worker satisfaction and loyalty.
- Consider which jobs are best suited for telework, such as sales rep.
- Think carefully about the personalities of potential telecommuters. Some employees may not have the discipline or self-motivation to work from home.
- Make sure teleworkers attend regular company meetings. Nothing can replace face-to-face contact.