

# *Bringing* WORK HOME

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## ADVANTAGES *and* CHALLENGES *of* TELECOMMUTING

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Telecommuting first gained notoriety in the late 20th century with the advent of home computers and sophisticated telecommunications technologies. Specific research on the patterns and practices of telecommuting first appeared in the 1970's when Jack Nilles coined the terms "telecommuting" and "teleworking" and directed the first telework demonstration project with partial funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF). The 1980's brought the initiation of pilot telework programs in the United States and by the 1990's many states, local governments, and private sector corporations had implemented telework programs. In 1996 the federal government introduced a national telecommuting initiative with the goal of increasing both the number of federal teleworkers as well as the number of teleworkers in other sectors.

**According to a recent survey an estimated 28.8 million Americans telecommuted in 2001. This represents a 17% increase in telecommuting from 2000.**

For the federal and state governments, the primary drivers of the telework movement were environmental considerations, minimizing traffic congestion, and compliance with the Clean Air Act of 1990. For corporations, the implementation of telework initiatives was seen as ways to also achieve financial and human resource objectives (Van Horn & Storen, 2000).

According to an AT&T sponsored survey released by the International Telework Association & Council (ITAC), an estimated 28.8 million Americans (one-fifth of the adult working population) worked from home, on-the-road, in a telecenter, or in a satellite office at least one day per week in 2001. This represents a 17% increase in American telecommuters from 2000 (Fetto & Gardyn, 2002). A report produced by the Electronic Commerce & Telework Trends (ECaTT), identified nine million European telecommuters and projected that this number will grow to 16.2 million, or 10.8% of the European workforce, by the year 2005 (Telecommute Connecticut, 2002). Despite this dramatic growth, telecommuting has yet to reach the levels originally expected. Early speculations predicted that there would be 55 million telecommuters in the United States by the beginning of the 21st century (Wells, 2001).

While organizations are offering telecommuting programs in greater numbers than ever before, acceptance and utilization of these programs is still inhibited by a number of factors. These factors include manager reliance on "line-of-sight" management practices, lack of telecommuting training within an organization, misperceptions of and discomfort with flexible workplace programs, and a lack of information regarding the effects of telecommuting on an organization's "bottom line" (Wells, 2001).

At the onset of the 21st century, a new "anytime, anywhere" work culture is emerging (Van Horn & Storen, 2000). Continuing advances in information technology, the proliferation of a global workforce, and increased desire to balance work and family are three of the main factors that will likely help elimi-

nate the current barriers to more pervasive use of telecommuting. With implications for organizational cost savings and increased employee flexibility and productivity, telecommuting has become a critical human resource management strategy in many leading organizations. This document, which provides a comprehensive explanation of the current issues surrounding telecommuting, is organized into eight major sections:

- > **The Basics of Telecommuting**
- > **Telecommuting: Is it Right For Me or My Organization?**
- > **Cost-Benefit Analysis of Telecommuting**
- > **Telecommuting Paradigms: Justification, Benefit, or A New Way of Doing Work**
- > **Impact of Telecommuting on Professional Relationship Building and Career Progression**
- > **Telecommuting and Work-Family Issues**
- > **Creating and Implementing a Telecommuting Program**
- > **Case Studies: Telecommuting in Today's Organizations**

## II. THE BASICS OF TELECOMMUTING

### DEFINITIONS OF TELECOMMUTING

Telecommuting, as it is referred to in the United States, teleworking, as it is referred to in Europe, home-working, working-at-a-distance, off-site workers, or remote workers are all terms that are used convey the idea that work is something you do, not someplace you go (Baruch, 2001). Due to its various labels and definitions, a lack of clarity exists regarding many telecommuting issues, including an agreed-upon number of telecommuters in today's workforce. In their study "Measuring the Impact of Workplace Flexibility," the Boston College Center for Work & Family defined telecommuting as "a schedule in which employees conduct their work off-site for some portion of their core working hours." The location of work may be the employee's home, a satellite office, or some other location outside of the traditional office space (e.g., while on the road or from a client site).

### VARIETIES OF TELECOMMUTING

According to a February 2000 Work Trends study, 62% of employees who have the opportunity to telecommute do so at least one day per week, whereas 37% of employees who have the option choose not to telecommute

**Telecommuting: A schedule in which employees conduct their work off-site for some portion of their core working hours. The location of work may be the employee's home, satellite office, or some other location outside of the traditional office space**

(Telecommute Connecticut, 2002). Various factors influence telecommuting arrangements within organizations. Telecommuting programs can be full-or part-time, formal or informal, and employee- or company-initiated.

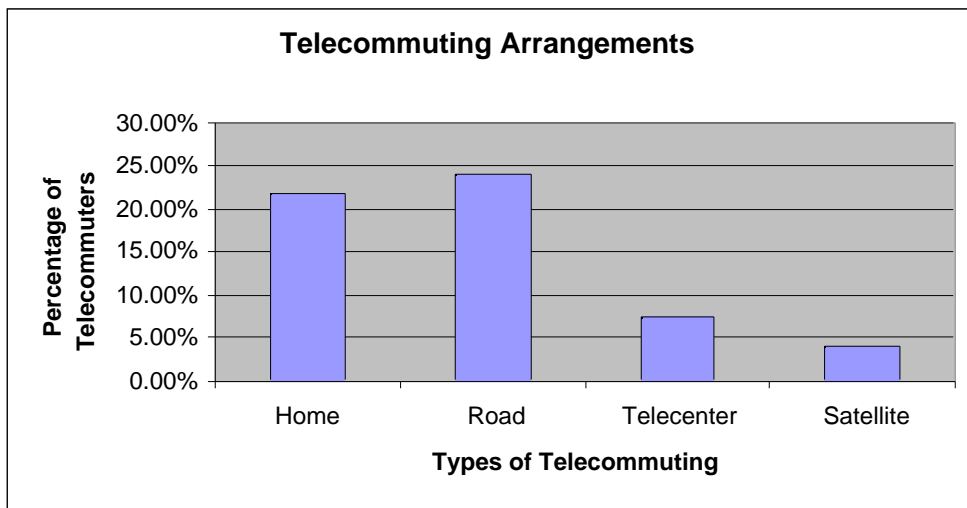
Individuals who telecommute full-time conduct all of their work off-site in a location other than their employer's office with little to no face-to-face interaction with managers and co-workers. Individuals who telecommute part-time conduct some, but not all of their work from a location other than their employer's office and interact with managers and co-workers on a limited but scheduled basis. Although the frequency that telecommuting is supported or utilized varies by organization, findings from the Center for Work & Family study indicate that the optimal telecommuting arrangement occurs when employees telecommute no more than two to three days per week. It can also be desirable to limit the number of consecutive days that an employee is out of the office. This reduces possible feelings of social isolation and allows for the scheduling of meetings and interactions with clients, co-workers, and managers on the days when the "telecommuter" is in the office.

Formal telecommuting programs are characterized by a contract between the employee and employer that outlines the specifications of an individual's telecommuting arrangement. This contract could include information such as the specific days that the individual will work off-site, hours the individual will be available to clients/customers/colleagues, frequency with which an individual will respond to voicemails/e-mails, and objectives/deadlines for the completion of work tasks. Informal telecommuting programs are usually not supported by contract and may be structured to include only one scheduled day of telecommuting per week, month, etc. or simply allowing the flexibility to work from home as the need arises.

Employee-initiated telecommuting typically stems from the employee's desire to reduce commute time, mitigate the disturbances to work encountered in an office setting, or more efficiently manage and balance the demands of work and family. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many roles can be done more productively with a telecommuting arrangement. This is especially true for positions that involve a high percentage of reading, writing, or other work activities requiring extended periods of focused concentration. Company-initiated telecommuting arrangements are often aimed at reducing costs (for example facilities costs or costs associated with lost productive employee time due to difficult commutes) or to retain highly talented personnel who would not be able to work for the organization in a traditional work arrangement.

## TELECOMMUTER PROFILE

As illustrated in the graph below, an estimated 28.8 million Americans telecommute from home, on the road, telecenters, or satellite offices.



## FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE IMPLEMENTATION AND UTILIZATION OF TELECOMMUTING ARRANGEMENTS

The growth of telecommuting arrangements in the United States can be attributed to a variety of factors including:

- > Declining technology and telecommunications costs
- > Increased investments in digital technology and infrastructure
- > Greater demand for information-technology sector jobs
- > Increased use of computers in the workplace
- > Organizational goals of increasing productivity
- > The need to reduce office commute time
- > Growing desire to better balance and manage the demands of work and family

Despite these compelling reasons to consider telecommuting, such arrangements can still lack support and utilization in the workplace. In practice, the two most frequently cited barriers to telecommuting include: 1) the existence of a management style that associates physical presence with performance and is therefore not conducive to managing telecommuters effectively; and 2) a lack of universal understanding or recognition by employers of the potential monetary advantage presented by support for telecommuting employees (Van Horn & Storen, 2000).

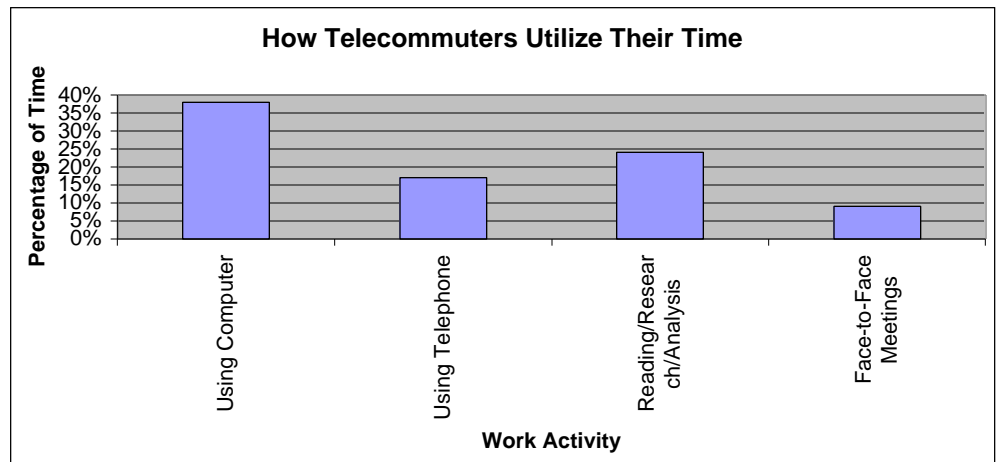
### III. TELECOMMUTING: IS IT RIGHT FOR ME OR MY ORGANIZATION?

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF “TELECOMMUTABLE” OCCUPATIONS

Today there is an increase in the number of organizations that offer telecommuting options, the number of economic sectors with jobs conducive to working remotely, and the percentage of workers who believe that their job would be conducive to telecommuting. Telecommuters are primarily concentrated in professions that rely heavily on telephones, computers, and other information technology devices (VanHorn & Storen, 2000). Specific roles most conducive to telecommuting are those that:

- > Are information-based and portable
- > Require a high level of concentration
- > Offer a high degree of autonomy
- > Can be planned in advance and performed at varying times
- > Involve minimal instruction, examination, and physical access to fixed resources
- > Consist of creating/manipulating/disseminating information

Result in measurable output such as written reports or financial figures (Doherty, Andrey, & Johnson, 2000; Nilles, 1998; Weijers et al, 1992; Gil Gordon Associates, 2000).





## **CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIVIDUALS AND MANAGERS BEST SUITED FOR TELECOMMUTING**

Telecommuting is not a performance or “satisfaction-enhancing” work arrangement for all individuals. Careful consideration must be taken to select employees whose personal and working characteristics are best suited for such a highly autonomous work arrangement.

## **CHARACTERISTICS FOR INDIVIDUALS BEST SUITED FOR TELECOMMUTING**

### ***Self-Motivation***

Individuals should be skilled at setting routines and meeting deadlines. Employees without strong self-motivation often have difficulty in situations lacking supervision.

### ***High Level of Job Knowledge & Skills***

Individuals should have enough knowledge of their position to facilitate working and solving problems independently.

### ***High Performance***

Individuals should be solid performers, although it is important for some top performers to remain in the office at least part of the time to serve as mentors to co-workers.

### ***Independence & Confidence***

Individuals working remotely are less exposed to supervision and feedback and should therefore have the ability to make independent decisions.

### ***Comfort with Solitude***

Telecommuting can arouse feelings of isolation, therefore individuals with a lower need for social interaction are well suited for telecommuting arrangements. It is beneficial for new hires that will be telecommuting to first work in the office environment to facilitate assimilation with the organizational culture and interaction and relationship building with co-workers before working remotely.

### ***Time Management & Organizational Skills***

With limited daily demands or “check-ups” placed on employees by their managers, individuals should possess the ability to schedule and organize their work to meet deadlines.

### ***Concentration***

Individuals should be highly focused and able to handle potential home distractions.

### ***Strong Communication Skills***

Individuals who telecommute will need to make greater efforts to stay in touch with managers and coworkers, providing them with necessary information and updates while working away from the office setting.

### ***Trustworthiness & Reliability***

It is essential that telecommuting individuals be held accountable for getting the job done to the same extent as if they were being supervised in the office setting. Mutual trust is an essential element of a telework arrangement.

Adapted from Shilling, S. 1999. The basics of a successful telework network. HR Focus, 76(6): 9-11.

In addition to focusing on the personal characteristics of the employee, when considering telecommuting options it is crucial that managers and employees understand exactly what telecommuting entails and the implications it will have for both the individual and the organization. Following is a list of questions that should be asked and answered in order to evaluate the likelihood of a successful telecommuting arrangement

## **EVALUATING THE TELECOMMUTING “FIT”: QUESTIONS FOR EMPLOYEES AND THEIR MANAGERS TO ASK**

### ***Do you have a thorough understanding of telecommuting?***

Including benefits and costs, the training involved, and potential changes it may make for you, your family, and your organization.

### ***Do you have the right job?***

Assess the conduciveness of your daily job tasks to working remotely.

### ***Do you have the right home office environment?***

Ideally telecommuters should have a separate office at home complete with the necessary technology to get work done and away from domestic activities and distractions.

### ***Are you comfortable with information technology (IT)?***

Computer literacy, including an understanding of basic software applications, e-mail, and some troubleshooting ability is a critical skill for every telecommuter.

### ***Are you susceptible to overwork?***

Telecommuting allows the option of working anytime from anywhere. Therefore individuals who telecommute must possess the ability to differentiate between work time and personal time as overworking can not only lead to stress but also to decreased productivity.

### ***Do you see telecommuting as a way to balance work and other roles?***

Individuals who see telecommute as a way of combining work with childcare or other domestic demands are not likely to be the best candidates for

telecommuting as they will be frequently distracted and unable to meet work-related expectations. This will also lead to less satisfaction due to the blurring of distinction between work and home life.

Adapted from Telecommute Connecticut

In addition to identifying the employees whose personal characteristics and working styles are most conducive to telecommuting, some managers may be better suited than others for supervising employees who telecommute. The most effective managers of telecommuters are skilled communicators and listeners who trust employees and empower them to take responsibility, make decisions, and be accountable for their own actions. Such managers tend to employ a more hands-off, participative management style with a focus on results. (Wells, 2001).

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## PROFILE:

### How CIGNA Finds the Right “Fit” for Telecommuters

Philadelphia-based CIGNA Corporation is a leading insurance company and provider of employee benefits. The company employs approximately 40,000 individuals, of which 2,000 telecommute full-time and 7,000 telecommute part-time (HR Focus, 2001). One unique aspect of CIGNA’s program is that many of the telecommuters are administrative or clerical workers, not sales or professional/managerial individuals. In many companies, these positions are not considered to be telecommutable because of a bias that suggests these workers may need to be closely supervised. Due to its progressive stance, CIGNA is recognized as having perhaps the foremost telecommuting program in the insurance industry.

CIGNA’s telecommuting program was developed in response to a 1990 study conducted by the organization that cited flexibility as a primary need expressed by employees. In the Spring of 1991,

CIGNA instituted a Flexible Work Arrangement policy and introduced telecommuting as a flexible work option. When considering candidates for telecommuting, CIGNA seeks employees who perform to expectations, exhibit self-motivation and a thorough knowledge of their current position, strong communication skills, self-organization, and available dependent care (CIGNA Corporation, 2002).

For the past several years CIGNA has been listed by “Working Mother” magazine as being family-friendly and one of the best companies for working mothers. Telecommuting is only one of the many family-friendly programs offered by CIGNA with others including job-sharing, on-site childcare, nursing mothers’ rooms, on-site health care, and take-home meal service (Silicon Philly Newsletter, 2002).

## IV. COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS OF TELECOMMUTING

Telecommuting presents advantages and challenges for both the organization and the employee. Since every telecommuting situation is unique, the advantages and challenges will vary based on organizational cultures, management styles, and individual personalities.

### **ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES OF TELECOMMUTING: AN EMPLOYEE'S PERSPECTIVE**

From the employee's perspective there are a number of advantages to telecommuting. The most obvious is the time saved in commuting to and from work each day. In some congested areas, this time saving can be significant (1-2 hours per day or more.) In addition, another advantage of a telecommuting work arrangement is the increased autonomy and flexibility of work schedule. Although employees need to be available to clients and co-workers during typical business hours, working remotely allows individuals to focus on work when they feel most energized and efficient. It also can provide flexibility to attend to outside issues and family needs, such as a doctor's appointment or child's activities while minimizing interruptions to the workday.

Although this autonomy and flexibility in managing work can lead to increased productivity and satisfaction among employees, it also presents two key challenges: difficulty in separating work and home lives and feelings of social isolation. Employees who work from home may find it difficult to create clear demarcations between work time and personal time. Since the ability to work can become ubiquitous, telecommuters sometimes find themselves working overtime late into the evenings, on the weekends, or even on vacation. According to the Center for Work & Family, 46% of telecommuters worked while on vacation as compared to 34% of traditional office workers. In addition, only 24% of telecommuters rated their work/life balance as "good" or "very good," compared to 26% of traditional workers, and 38% of those using daily flextime, (the ability to alter working hours on a daily basis). These results would imply that telecommuting does not necessarily lead to greater feelings of work/life balance.

A lack of face-to-face interaction with co-workers can leave many telecommuters feeling socially isolated and "out-of-the-loop." This feeling can manifest itself in many different forms. Job successes and achievements can seem less exciting without others with whom to celebrate. In addition, some work tasks can seem daunting if the employee feels isolated from supporting resources (i.e., a knowledgeable co-worker or manager willing to provide feedback or advice). Informal learning that takes place daily in an organization's

work environment will also be missed by the telecommuter. One reason that part-time telecommuting is considered optimal is that it mitigates such feelings of social isolation and taps into the benefits of teamwork and learning.

## **ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES OF TELECOMMUTING: AN ORGANIZATION'S PERSPECTIVE**

Telecommuting offers many advantages to organizations that introduce and implement this work arrangement with appropriate training and consideration of employee/manager-fit. A telecommuting arrangement can improve employee productivity as individuals who work remotely are unaffected by typical office environment distractions. This facilitates a greater focus on work for more concentrated periods of time. Offering telecommuting work arrangements also provides organizations with a larger talent pool from which to recruit and select. When telecommuting is offered as an option, geographical distances become less significant, or potentially irrelevant, in the consideration of employment. Furthermore, organizations are better able to employ disabled, elderly, or other individuals who are capable of employment but whose physical circumstances may prevent them from working on-site.

Another significant advantage of telecommuting can be a reduction in the organization's overhead / facility costs. With increasing numbers of employees working from home or in other remote locations, organizations can often reduce their investments and expenditures in office buildings, parking lots, and other physical capital.

Despite its advantages, telecommuting also presents challenges for organizations. The most obvious for many is the perceived difficulty in monitoring employee performance and measuring employee productivity. How does a manager know what his or her employee is doing if the employee cannot be seen? For organizations and managers who supervise using a "line-of-sight" approach, telecommuting can be an unsettling work arrangement that brings unwelcome and unproductive change into the organization. Therefore, organizations that implement telecommuting arrangements must be committed to trusting employees, empowering individuals to make decisions, and measuring by outcomes rather than "face-time."

Another challenge presented by telecommuting concerns developing synergy and teamwork between telecommuters and their co-workers. It is often difficult to establish a mutual trusting and supportive relationship among individuals who infrequently interact face-to-face. For purposes such as the development of working relationships, a combination of telecommuting and on-site work is preferred over a full-time telecommuting work arrangement (Kurland & Bailey, 1999; McNerney, 1995; HR Focus, 2002; Telecommute Connecticut, 2002).

**"...Organizations that implement telecommuting arrangements must be committed to trusting employees, empowering individuals to make decisions, and measuring by outcomes rather than "face-time."**

**AN EMPLOYEE'S PERSPECTIVE:*****Advantages***

Autonomy and flexibility over work schedule

Elimination/Reduction of commute time

Less money spent on commuting, parking, work attire

Higher morale and job satisfaction

Avoidance of office politics

***Challenges***

Difficulty distinguishing between work and home time

Feeling of isolation from workplace social network

Inadequate equipment or lack of technical support

Implications of limited interaction w/manager for career

Feelings of hostility/resentment from co-workers

**AN ORGANIZATION'S PERSPECTIVE:*****Advantages***

Improved employee productivity

Lower employee absenteeism

Increased employee retention

Larger talent pool from which to recruit/select

Reduction in overhead facility costs

***Challenges***

Difficulty in employee performance monitoring

Difficulty in measuring employee productivity

Change forces organization outside comfort zone

Possible negative effects on workplace social network

Difficulty in fostering team synergy

## V. TELECOMMUTING: A BENEFIT OR A NEW WAY OF WORKING?

The term “telecommuting” evokes different views of individuals working remotely. Preconceived perspectives on telecommuting can shape attitudes towards and impact the implementation, success, and satisfaction of telecommuting work arrangements. This section identifies two paradigms from which telecommuting is often discussed:

- > **Benefit: telecommuting as a special “perk” offered by organizations to top performers; and**
- > **New way of doing work: telecommuting as the acceptance that work is something that one does, not someplace one goes.**

### TELECOMMUTING AS A BENEFIT

According to the Center for Work & Family, many employees see flexible work arrangements such as telecommuting as a privilege rather than as a way of working. Working from home allows employees the “luxury” of occasionally dealing with household responsibilities such as arranging home repairs, child-care emergencies, etc. For many employees, the belief that telecommuting is a privilege or benefit can cause feelings of uncertainty about the likelihood that the arrangement will continue should managers, jobs, or performance change. These employees may also feel that they “owe” something additional to the organization for permitting them to use a flexible work arrangement. Many telecommuters admit to feeling guilty when working at home for taking even a short break that would not receive any notice if taken in the office environment. For this reason, telecommuters frequently work longer hours than their office-based counterparts in an attempt to secure their telecommuting work arrangement. Some studies have shown that as many as 42% of American telecommuters work 50 to 75 hours per week and that one-half of European telecommuters work more than ten extra hours per week (Doherty et al., 2000; Pratt, 1999; Empirica, 1999).

What implications does this view of telecommuting as an organizational benefit have for the formation of employment agreements? Can telecommuting be used as a negotiating measure from the perspectives of both the organization and the individual? Many employees assert that they would agree to a slightly lower salary if they could have increased workplace flexibility and the opportunity to telecommute on an occasional or consistent basis. As the convenience and acceptance of working “anyplace, anytime” grows, companies that are unable to provide the most competitive salaries may still attract and retain the talented people by offering flexibility through work arrangements such as telecommuting.

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## **TELECOMMUTING AS A NEW WAY WORKING**

The other perspective on telecommuting asserts that the real issue is whether quality work gets done on time, regardless of where it is done or if it is completed during the standard eight-hour workday. Viewing telecommuting as a new way of doing work, and appropriately training potential telecommuting and non-telecommuting employees and managers on the impact of such an arrangement can present advantages to individuals and organizations in terms of employee recruitment, selection, satisfaction, retention, and productivity. Many progressive companies who are strongly committed to work/life issues hold this perspective of telecommuting arrangements.

## **VI. IMPACT OF TELECOMMUTING ON PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP BUILDING AND CAREER PROGRESSION**

### **IMPACT OF TELECOMMUTING ON RELATIONSHIPS WITH CO-WORKERS**

As has been mentioned, not all jobs or individuals are ideally suited for telecommuting. As a result, not every employee who would like to telecommute will be able to do so. This can lead to resentment towards telecommuters from those who cannot participate in a similar arrangement. Resentment towards telecommuters likely stems from two basic assumptions made by non-telecommuters: 1) employees are given the option to telecommute for non-work related reasons (e.g., relationship with management) and 2) employees who do not telecommute will have additional work created by the absence of telecommuters from the office. To facilitate successful telecommuting arrangements from both the perspective of employees and the organizations, it is important to minimize resentment in the workplace by eliminating these and other negative assumptions.

To avoid the perception that non-work related reasons play a role in determining who can telecommute, managers should make clear the criteria by which telecommuters are selected. If performance is a criterion for being considered for this work option, individuals not performing at the level necessary should receive an honest explanation from management along with suggestions for improving performance. It should be clearly stated during implementation of telecommuting arrangements that the work level of telecommuters and non-telecommuters will not change simply because some individuals are working from home. Although the amount of work each employee is responsible for should not change, the distribution of work may be altered due to the fact that some issues can only be attended to on-site.



Telecommuting can also have implications for teamwork and the development of team synergy within an organization. When some individuals leave the office setting to work remotely, this can have a negative impact on the social network of the workplace. Telecommuters may also miss the informal learning that takes place at the workplace, as well as the spontaneous office conversation, humor, and frustrations that often create a bond between co-workers and helps them work together more effectively (Kurland & Bailey, 1999). Before the initiation of telecommuting arrangements, executives and managers must consider the implications of this type of work arrangement for all employees.

### **IMPACT OF TELECOMMUTING ON RELATIONSHIPS WITH MANAGERS/SUPERVISORS**

Some of the major challenges facing managers who supervise telecommuters are how to measure productivity, build trust, and manage people who are not physically present. Many managers believe that if they cannot directly observe their employees working than they are unable to evaluate how an employee is doing or provide constructive performance feedback (Kurland & Bailey, 1999). It is for these reasons that managing telecommuting requires a mindset grounded in trust and focused on measuring results.

In an organizational setting, trusting an employee means having confidence in his/her competence and commitment to a goal, and believing that he/she will act in the best interest of the organization (Handy, 1995). Managers who have difficulty trusting employees to make decisions and work independently will find managing telecommuters extremely challenging. This reinforces the importance of assessing not only individuals who are best suited to telecommute, but also those who are best suited to manage telecommuters.

### **TELECOMMUTING, ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE, IDENTITY, AND COMMITMENT**

An organizational culture that is people-centered, task-oriented, participative, and open to change will be most conducive to the implementation of successful telecommuting arrangements. However, telecommuting can present challenges to the formation and maintenance of organizational culture.

Difficulties can arise in disseminating the organizational culture to remote workers, developing a climate of trust between telecommuters and their managers, and sustaining telecommuters' identification with the organization. To help overcome these difficulties, having telecommuters work in the office environment for an initial period of time in order to assimilate into the culture can be helpful.

**Difficulties can arise in disseminating the organizational culture to remote workers, developing a climate of trust between telecommuters and their managers, and sustaining telecommuters' identification with the organization.**

Opinions differ regarding the impact of telecommuting on employees' sense of identity with and commitment to the organization. On one hand, research suggests that working remotely can adversely impact employee commitment and organizational identification due to feelings of detachment.

Telecommuting cultivates a strong sense of autonomy, and daily presence in the home environment can make home issues seem more pressing in the eyes of the employee. This comes at a time when a changing employment contract (fewer long-term employment relationships) also inhibits the development of organizational identity, loyalty, and commitment.

A contrasting view is that the flexibility and empowerment offered by organizations through telecommuting increase employee appreciation and loyalty toward their organization. Current research suggests that almost 80% of telecommuters feel a greater commitment to their organizations and that most plan to remain with their current employer (Telecommute Connecticut, 2002). One way to maintain corporate identity and commitment among remote employees is by having them visit the organization regularly and remain involved in office events (Chapman, Sheeney, Heywood, Dooley, & Collins, 1995). Facilitating an environment where remote employees remain "in the loop" in terms of both formal and informal office activities helps to solidify their feelings of affiliation with the organization.

### **IMPACT OF TELECOMMUTING ON CAREER PROGRESSION**

Some employees may be reluctant to telecommute because of the perception that working remotely hinders promotional opportunities, especially for exempt employees (Chapman et al., 1995). Both employees and organizations are concerned with the importance of being visible to managers and co-workers in the office (i.e. "face time".) The perception that employees who put in the longest days at the office get the most work accomplished and are the most committed is deep-seated. However, repeatedly putting in extra "face time" at the office can also be an indicator that an employee is not completing his/her work in the most effective manner. Fostering a culture that assesses employee performance based on results, not the number of hours spent at the office, will alleviate the misconception those with the most "face time" are working the hardest and getting the best results.

In addition to the issue of "face time," organizations must also consider how, if at all, telecommuting will impact job or project assignments, salary, and movement within the organization. Before an employee begins a telecommuting arrangement, it is important for that individual and his or her manager to have a candid discussion of the employee's career goals and how telecommuting might impact these, if at all. For example, the employee should understand that a promotional opportunity or high-profile project may require working in the office, and that each individual assignment must be considered in

order to determine whether it can utilize a telecommuting arrangement. If the new opportunity calls for a return to a more traditional work arrangement (i.e. work in the office), employees who are unwilling to do so could limit their developmental opportunities.

A final concern with regard to development is the possibility that employees who are less visible in the organization will not be considered for higher-level positions. “Out of sight, out of mind” is a very real phenomenon that can affect the number of potential opportunities one is asked to consider. These issues should be discussed to ensure that employees and managers understand each other’s positions regarding the telecommuting and the “pros and cons” of such an arrangement.

### **IMPLICATIONS OF TELECOMMUTING FOR CLIENTS/BUSINESS PARTNERS**

For a telecommuting arrangement to be successful, the quality of service and attention given to clients or business partners cannot suffer because an individual works remotely. Although telecommuting provides individuals flexibility in the hours they work, for the most part telecommuters must arrange their schedule to be compatible with the needs of their clients and partners. It is extremely important that telecommuters communicate their hours of availability to clients and partners, and then make themselves available during those times. Some of the most important issues to consider regarding the relationship between telecommuters and clients or business partners include:

- > **Should clients/business partners be told in advance that they are working with a telecommuter or should this be addressed only if a question regarding work location is raised?**
- > **Will clients/business partners need to meet at the telecommuter’s home office? If so, is the office conducive to professional appointments? Is it appropriate to have professional appointments at the telecommuter’s home? If not, is there an alternative meeting venue?**
- > **When a telecommuter is unable to answer the phone, will clients/business partners have the option to speak with someone from the main office or will voicemail be the only alternative?**
- > **Will the telecommuter have access to the client’s/business partner’s files at all times so as to be prepared if unexpected questions or situations arise?**

Thinking through these and other related issues before implementing a telecommuting program will help facilitate a smooth transition to working remotely for both the telecommuter and his/her clients and business partners.

## VII. TELECOMMUTING AND WORK-FAMILY ISSUES

### IMPACT ON WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT

Work-family conflict exists when an individual performs multiple roles (i.e., worker, spouse, parent, etc.) and the pressures from these domains are incompatible or conflicting (Duxbury & Higgins, 2002; Duxbury et al, 1998; Doherty et al, 2000; Mills et al, 2000). A dichotomy exists in the current literature with respect to the effect of telecommuting on work-family conflict. From one perspective, telecommuting is often considered a way of helping individuals cope with the demands of work and home. Telecommuting arrangements can help to reduce work-family conflict by providing:

- > **Increased work-time and work-location flexibility**
- > **Increased control over the scheduling of work and ability to integrate work and family schedules**
- > **Mitigation of tensions associated with combining parenting and career**
- > **Decreased commuting time**
- > **Opportunity for employees to manage emergency or unexpected situations in the home (e.g., sick children) without major disruption to work**

Despite these benefits, research results regarding work-family conflict and telecommuting are inconclusive. While some studies focus on the opportunity that telecommuting presents to better perform both work and home roles, other research emphasizes the potential for increased stress caused by the inability to distinguish and maintain the boundaries between work and family domains. Telecommuting can increase conflict between work and family when:

- > **Employees who work at home spend a greater, or disproportionate, percentage of their time on paid work activities**
- > **Flexibility gained through telecommuting benefits the work organization but not the employee's family**
- > **Commuting serves as a buffer between the employee's home and work domains, and the lack of a commute decreases the opportunity for employees to reduce the transfer of stress from one domain to the other (Duxbury & Hinnings, 2002)**

## PITNEY BOWES: Telecommuting As Socially Responsible Business

Pitney Bowes, a mail and document management company headquartered in Stamford, Connecticut, employs over 30,000 individuals worldwide. They began flexible work arrangements training in 1995 and they have offered structured and informal telecommuting since the early 90's. The company has long recognized the need and value of assisting employees achieve greater balance of their work and personal lives. Telecommuting is one of ways that Pitney Bowes has helped employee more effectively use their time and resources by spending less time on the road and thus have more personal time to focus on social and community pursuits. (Telecommute Connecticut, 2002). To Pitney Bowes, telecommuting work arrangements not only serve as strategic business solutions but also as examples of good corporate citizenship. Located off of congested Interstate-95 in Fairfield County, Connecticut, telecommuting arrangements at Pitney Bowes help to reduce traffic congestion and air pollution, thereby supporting the company's concern for the community's quality of life as well as the health and happiness of employees (Hootsman, 2001).

New managers at Pitney Bowes receive training in the management of telecommuters (Hootsman, 2001). Arrangements themselves are very flexible and can vary greatly from job to job and department to department. There is no company-wide policy but rather a set of guidelines to help managers and their employees develop an agreement that meets business needs and the employee's desire for flexibility. Formal telecommuting arrangements can include specifics regarding when and with what frequency telecommuters should work in the office, how often messages need to be checked, contact numbers, as well as what equipment should be installed in employees' homes. In addition to employees who formally telecommute, some employees occasionally telecommute a few days per month (for example, if they need to be at home to manage a personal situation). In

either case, whether a formal agreement has been reached or a just mutual understanding between an employee and their manager, the emphasis is on what elements of a job are best done remotely and what tasks are more appropriate while the employee is at their work site. (Telecommute Connecticut, 2002).

Pitney Bowes' CEO's early involvement in developing the statewide Commute Options programs and strategies helped to get telecommuting on PB's radar screen. The CEO continues to advocate telecommuting in his current role on the Connecticut's Transportation Strategy Board and understands its potential benefits in attracting and retaining talent and its impact on traffic. Pitney Bowes views telecommuting as a business driver that helps extend the employee recruitment pool, provides a highly valued flexible option to job candidates, reduces facilities and parking costs, facilitates global business coverage, and safeguards against business interruptions due to natural and man-made disasters (Hootsman, 2001).

Pitney Bowes recognizes that empowering employees with more control over their work schedules and location helps them be more productive and effective workers and less stressed and better balanced in their personal lives. By having the flexibility to adjust their work to the hours of the day that they are most productive and receive the fewest interruptions both Pitney Bowes and its their employees win. (Telecommute Connecticut, 2002). More awareness and training and continuing technological advances are expected to result in greater acceptance and utilization of telecommuting as business needs change and demands on employees' time becomes more challenging.

**Employees who use telecommuting have less clear demarcations between their work and family lives than employees who utilize other types of flexible work arrangements.**

## **DRAWING BOUNDARIES: DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN HOME AND WORK DOMAINS**

Differentiating between home and work domains probably serves as the greatest challenge to telecommuting employees. As has been mentioned, the Center for Work & Family found that employees who use telecommuting have less clear demarcations between their work and family lives than employees who utilize other types of flexible work arrangements. These results emphasize the need for corporate programs that train telecommuters on how to create mental and physical transitions between work time and family time.

Gil Gordon, one of the foremost experts on telecommuting, has written about the difficulty of drawing boundaries between home and work domains. In his 2001 book *Turn it Off: How to Unplug from the Anytime-Anywhere Office Without Disconnecting Your Career*, Gordon stresses the importance of assessing one's own work habits and making a decision about how available one wants to be to his/her employer and clients during non-work times.

Making conscious choices helps individuals to distinguish work time from personal time, and mitigates the possible negative consequences resulting from spillover between the two domains. Communicating with management and staying committed to the choices made (i.e., not responding to work-related e-mails during non-work times) are essential to creating and maintaining balance in one's work and home lives.

## **THE HOME-BASED OFFICE**

In addition to assessing the suitability of telecommuting for employees and managers, analyzing costs and benefits, and exploring the impact of these work arrangements on relationship building, career progression, and work-family balance, the logistics of developing a telecommuting program require thorough consideration. Some of the most important issues for organizations to address regarding implementation of a home-based office include:

- > **What equipment is necessary for employees to telecommute?**
- > **Which telecommuting employees get what equipment?**
- > **Who pays for the installation of the equipment?**
- > **Who pays for, maintains, and services the equipment?**
- > **To what extent are employees allowed to utilize company equipment located at home for personal reasons?**
- > **To what extent are organizations responsible for making a telecommuting employee's home-based office safe and productive?**

The answer to the last question will likely depend on the nature of the telecommuting arrangement (i.e., formal or informal, company or employee-initiated.) Organizations must consider the implications of telecommuting for both employee safety and workers' compensation issues as well as for the protection of equipment and information such as computers, fax machines, and important files. Telecommuting employees need to consider the implications of working from home for their own homeowner's insurance policies. In addition to safety and security issues, issues such as appropriate taxation (if the organization is based in one state and the telecommuter resides/works from another state) also need to be considered. The Appendix lists a number of pertinent questions and issues that organizations and employees should consider before implementing a telecommuting work arrangement.

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## IBM CORPORATION: Equipping Employees for Success

Headquartered in Armonk, NY, IBM employs approximately 300,000 employees worldwide, of which 100,000 or one-third telecommute at least one or two days per week. First introduced in 1993, IBM's telecommuting program was initially designed to reduce overhead costs through office-space sharing. Space-sharing methods such as telecommuting from home and hoteling (the term used to describe having employees reserve communal office space rather than each having their own dedicated workstation) led to savings of \$56 million dollars for the company. Within two years of implementing the telecommuting program, IBM had reduced its need for office space by two million square feet.

A 1996 survey conducted by the organization showed that 87% of telecommuters consider themselves either "more" or "far more" productive because of this work arrangement and highlighted a

10% to 20% increase in the average employee's individual productivity. In addition, the study showed that telecommuting has improved IBM's ability to retain top quality employees (Telecommute Connecticut, 2002). Today IBM is considered to be one of the most progressive companies for developing innovative training and telecommuting arrangements. The organization also realizes that all telecommuters are not the same and that each work arrangement may require different terms and accommodations. Therefore, IBM is currently working to differentiate its 100,000 telecommuters and to categorize them by specific characteristics such as frequency of telecommuting. They feel this will help to ensure a best fit for telecommuting arrangements and individuals (American Business Collaboration, 2002).

## VIII. CREATING AND IMPLEMENTING A TELECOMMUTING PROGRAM

### INITIATING TELECOMMUTING: POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION

To reiterate a central theme, telecommuting is not simply staying home to work. It requires thoughtful planning, discipline, and assessment. Although telecommuting provides employees with increased flexibility regarding when and where they work, structure must still exist for both the employee and organization to benefit from this work arrangement. Before an organization initiates a telecommuting arrangement or agrees to a telecommuting arrangement proposed by an employee, both employees and managers should discuss the following:

- > **What business needs will be better served by telecommuting?**
- > **What aspects of an employee's/manager's job will benefit from working off-site?**
- > **What effect will telecommuting have on customer service?**
- > **What is the proposed work plan and schedule?**
- > **What work will be done in the office vs. off-site? When will the telecommuting employee be available to attend department/organization meetings? What days/week and hours/day will the employee telecommute and be accessible to customers and co-workers? How often will a telecommuting employee be in contact with co-workers, managers, and subordinates?**
- > **Does the employee have suitable space at home from which to work?**
- > **Can safety for the employee and others be ensured? Can this location be equipped with the necessary work tools and can the security of such tools be ensured? Does this location provide avoidance of distractions from children, spouses, elder dependents, and pets?**

The first step in creating a telecommuting program is to have employees assess their work styles and current positions to determine whether telecommuting would be a suitable arrangement. The personal and work characteristics discussed in Section II of this report should be considered. Some organizations offer employees a self-assessment instrument, accessible on the company intranet or in the Human Resources office, which employees can use to gauge whether telecommuting may be right for them.

If employees feel that telecommuting is a viable option, the next step is to document this desire to telecommute using either an employee request form or



by creating a formal proposal to be submitted to management. A documented request for a telecommuting work arrangement should serve as the foundation from which telecommuting discussions between employees and managers arise. Whatever the outcome of these discussions, decisions regarding telecommuting arrangements should always be documented. Written explanations of decisions to allow or not allow certain employees to telecommute can serve to prevent or combat accusations of discrimination or other unfair treatment should these claims arise.

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## AT&T:

### Allowing Employees to Think “Outside of the Box”

AT&T, one of the world’s leading telecommunications organizations, is in the business of providing much of the equipment and technology that enables telecommuting to exist. Based in New York City, AT&T is the employer of approximately 151,000 individuals. The organization launched its telecommuting program in 1992 in an effort to enhance corporate citizenship and attention to family-friendly issues. In 1994, the company organized a highly publicized telecommuting day where all managers who could work at home were asked to do so, including the Chairman of the Board. This day was designed to help overcome some of the emotional barriers and traditional management styles that were impeding on the proliferation of telecommuting throughout the organization. This telecommuting trial day served to increase the percentage of AT&T managers who work at home at least one day per week from 8% to 29%.

At AT&T, the decision to allow or encourage telecommuting belongs to each individual department head as opposed to being a more generalized company policy. Employees who have a formal telecommuting arrangement with their department

head are required to sign an agreement which specifies the location from which they will work, work hours, projects to be completed, equipment to be provided by the organization, reimbursable expenses, and frequency of communication with office. In addition to participating in a formal telecommuting arrangement, many employees also have the option of telecommuting on an odd day (for example, when a child is sick).

AT&T has seen many positive results from the implementation of this telecommuting program, especially with respect to employee morale and productivity. Employees who work at home tend to work an average of one hour more per day than those in the office. In addition, the flexibility to work the hours one prefers, whether in the early morning, late evening, or a longer day with extended breaks, provides employees with a sharper focus on their work and facilitates thinking that is “outside of the box.” Furthermore, salespeople working from home demonstrated 20% to 40% increases in sales as a result of fewer meetings and distractions encountered when working from home (Telecommute Connecticut, 2002; HR Focus, 1999).

## **TELECOMMUTING TRAINING**

The initiation of telecommuting without discussion of the inevitable changes this type of work arrangement creates can lead to failure. Telecommuting employees, managers of telecommuters, and co-workers who do not telecommute are often ill prepared for the changes that arise when members of the organization begin working remotely. This can lead to frustration, decreased productivity, and low morale. Where telecommuting training does exist, it is often overly focused on the technical aspects of working remotely and does not adequately address the important cultural, managerial, and interpersonal issues that arise. Effective telecommuting training should include a focus on the following issues:

- > **What to expect as a telecommuter**
- > **Improving organization and time management skills**
- > **Setting objectives and measuring productivity**
- > **Developing performance management skills**
- > **Enhancing communication with co-workers and managers at the office (Grensing-Pophal, 1998)**

Consideration should also be given to preparing families of telecommuters for the types of adjustments that may occur when a family member begins working from home. Encouraging families to establish rules or guidelines regarding interruptions during work-at-home times will not only help to enhance the telecommuter's productivity but can also lead to enhanced satisfaction, for the entire family, with the telecommuting arrangement.

# MERRILL LYNCH

## Merrill lynch's approach to telecommuting training

Based in Manhattan, Merrill Lynch employs 70,700 people worldwide. Since introducing its telecommuting program in 1996, approximately 3,500 of its employees have worked from home an average of 2 or 3 days per week. Although technical workers were the first beneficiaries of the program, since its inception staff members from human resources, marketing, finance, and communications have all been included in telecommuting opportunities. At Merrill Lynch, training is essential before employees begin telecommuting. In addition to information sessions held separately for employees and managers, and then together as a group, employees are required to spend two weeks in a telecommuting simulation lab.

In the simulation lab, employees work on the projects and use the same equipment they will use when working remotely. Although the simulation lab is in the office building, employees are restricted from having face-to-face interaction with their supervisors. This simulation allows employees and managers to experience the changes evoked by telecommuting and get accustomed to the reality of working remotely. After the two weeks many employees feel better prepared to participate in a telecommuting arrangement, while others realize that such alternative arrangements are not suited for them.

Adapted from Telecommute Connecticut

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### TIPS FOR TELECOMMUTERS AND ORGANIZATIONS

In addition to training, thinking through relevant issues in advance can help enhance the likelihood of implementing a telecommuting arrangement that is beneficial for both the employee and the organization.

**Employee Actions that can help create an effective telecommuting arrangement:**

***Development of a routine/ritual***

Helps to define boundaries between work and home and denotes the beginning and end of the workday.

***Creation of a daily and weekly "to-do" list***

Promotes organization and time management, best done in advance to ensure that resources necessary to complete tasks are available.

***Maintenance of communication with office***

Helps to keep telecommuters "in the loop" on office information and keeps co-workers and managers abreast on telecommuters' activities.

***Attendance at department/organization gatherings***

Prevents employees from becoming invisible just because they are working from home.

### ***Conversations with family and friends***

Establishing guidelines regarding interruptions during work-at-home times helps to enhance productivity.

### **Manager Actions that can help create an effective telecommuting arrangement:**

#### ***Constructing a standard telecommuting policy***

Although each employee's telecommuting arrangement will require customization, a standard telecommuting policy should be created to address issues such as telecommuting-at-will, trial periods, handling of time records and overtime if applicable, equipment usage, and confidentiality.

#### ***Developing goals with employees***

Working with employees to develop specific measurable goals focusing on what work gets done, not how or where, are fundamental to the "evaluation by results" leadership style needed with telecommuting arrangements.

#### ***Discussing impact of telecommuting on promotion opportunities***

Being honest with employees regarding the impact that telecommuting may have on promotion opportunities and work assignments is important as this may be a deciding factor for individuals considering telecommuting.

#### ***Responding to non-telecommuters***

Some non-telecommuters may be resentful of the flexibility afforded to telecommuters and inquire as to why they are not able to have a similar work arrangement. Managers should be honest with employees regarding why they are not able to telecommute. For example, if an average or below average performer expresses interest in telecommuting, managers should work with that individual to help him/her reach the level of performance necessary for these arrangements. Non-telecommuters should also be informed that, although they will not have additional work as a result of telecommuting within the organization, the distribution of work might be altered.

## IX. CONCLUSIONS

Although it has yet to revolutionize the American workforce to the extent originally expected, the prevalence of telecommuting arrangements in today's organizations is rapidly increasing. In this paper we have tried to offer a comprehensive explanation of the various issues that must be considered when formulating and implementing telecommuting arrangements. When considering whether telecommuting is appropriate for your organization, it is important to remember that:

- > **Not every position can be accomplished remotely and not every individual is suitable to work remotely or to manage remote workers. Assessment of person and job-fit to a telecommuting arrangement is essential.**
- > **An analysis and discussion of both the advantages and challenges of telecommuting to employees and the organization is critical before implementing a telecommuting work arrangement.**
- > **Telecommuting by one or many employees will impact other organizational members, relationships among co-workers, and relationships between telecommuters and their managers. Prior to implementation, it is important to consider how telecommuting may impact the dynamics of the organization in order to mitigate resentment that may arise among non-telecommuters and to foster an organizational culture that measures employee performance based on results rather than appearances.**
- > **Training is critical to the success of a telecommuting program. Employees who lack appropriate training are far more likely to encounter difficulties in managing their new work arrangement.**

Advances in information technology, proliferation of a global workforce, and the increased desire to balance work and family are only three of the many factors that will serve to amplify the popularity of telecommuting work arrangements. Organizations who recognize that work is something you do, not someplace you go and who adequately prepare for the implementation of telecommuting arrangements should benefit from greater employee commitment, productivity, and job satisfaction.

## THE HOME-BASED OFFICE

### ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION:

- > What equipment is necessary for employees to telecommute?
- > Which telecommuting employees get what equipment?
- > Who pays for the installation and maintenance of the equipment?
- > Who maintains or services the equipment?
- > To what extent are employees allowed to utilize company equipment located at home for personal reasons?
- > To what extent are organizations responsible for making a telecommuting employee's home-based office safe and productive?
- > What home-based office expenses will be reimbursed (ex. cost of furniture, mailing/FedEx/UPS)?
- > Will clients/business partners be meeting at the home-based office?

### TIPS FOR SETTING-UP THE HOME-BASED OFFICE:

- > Dedicate a separate room/space for the home office away from household traffic patterns and temptations
- > Ensure that the home office is spacious enough to accommodate necessary equipment and storage
- > Create an office environment that is suitable and comfortable for work (e.g., appropriate lighting, distance from household congestion/noise, essential power sources and outlets, ergonomic furniture)

### POSSIBLE HOME-BASED OFFICE NECESSITIES:

- > Desk Supplies (writing utensils, stapler, paper clips, calculator, scissors, tape, hole punch)
- > Extra Supplies (file folders, floppy disks, FedEx/UPS forms)
- > Business Cards
- > Company Stationary
- > Phone (conference call, speaker phone, hold, & voicemail features; line dedicated for office use only)
- > Computer
- > Internet Connection (dial-up, cable, or DSL; access to company intranet)
- > Printer
- > Fax Machine
- > Photocopy Machine
- > File Cabinets
- > Educational degrees, certificates, awards (to add look of professionalism if office will be visited by clients/business partners)

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## ABOUT THE CENTER

Since its founding in 1990, The Boston College Center for Work & Family has been a national leader in helping organizations create effective workplaces that support and develop healthy and productive employees. The Center provides a bridge linking the academic community to the applied world of the work/life practitioner. We are fortunate to count many of the world's most progressive companies in the human resources field as our members. The Center for Work & Family is committed to enhancing the quality of life of today's workforce by providing leadership for the integration of work and life, an essential for business and community success. Our vision is that companies and communities will work together to ensure their mutual prosperity and the well being of employees and their families.