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Telecommuting surge taking hold in Utah

Renaissance » Downturn, climate concerns, technological advances combine to boost work-at-home concept.

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Though telecommuting has been around for years, it would seem its time has finally arrived.

And for practitioners such as Vikki Johnson and Deb Parry, there is probably no better place than the Salt Lake Valley when it comes to getting the kind of support they need to make their workplace alternative a success.

Johnson of Springville has been working from her home for six months and doesn't miss the office politics, the backstabbing, nor the long daily drives and the rigid 40-hour workweek.

She has a flexible schedule and couldn't be happier about the arrangement. "I love it," she said. "I really do."

Johnson works as an agent for Ohio-based Convergys, which contracts with other companies to provide their call-in customer service. She is one of a growing number of Utahns who telecommute, and her timing could not be better.

Though some bosses still fear the concept, in an era of concerns and policy discussions about dependence on foreign oil and global warming, working at home instead of driving to an office can save a lot of energy and offers other rewards.

"It cuts down on overhead costs," said Parry, who works in finance at the Utah Department of Environmental Quality and has been telecommuting from her Layton home a few days a month for about five years. "It's more beneficial to the environment. Fewer people have to be on the roads. There are a lot of pluses."

With cash-strapped businesses also looking to save money amid the worldwide economic meltdown, not having to provide office space and energy for workers is money ahead. Companies could save as much as \$2,700 per employee in the first year of telecommuting, according to one study, and Johnson estimates she saves \$500 in costs per month by working at home.

Johnson, Parry and other telecommuters along the Wasatch Front have one other advantage. A recent survey by Microsoft found that the Salt Lake City area was ranked fourth among the nation's midsize cities for support for telecommuting.

When employees were asked about how supportive their bosses and coworkers were, Salt Lake came in No. 1.

"Over half of the people in Salt Lake City say their company has a remote working policy, which sort of speaks to why Salt Lake was so high on this list," said Michael Clark, western regional general manager for midsize companies for Microsoft, which conducted the survey to better understand the technology marketplace.

Many workers want the lifestyle flexibility, and technological advancements allow them to perform such functions as answering office calls at home, participating in meetings via video and securely interacting with their companies' computer systems.

Paul Jarman is CEO of Utah-based inContact, which specializes in computing services for call centers that have at-home work forces. He said he sees many advantages to such arrangements.

"First of all, you typically get a better employee," he said. "The typical home worker is in his mid-30s. They're better educated. You also have significantly less attrition."

In the Microsoft survey, two of the top reasons Salt Lake-area workers gave for telecommuting were that there are fewer distractions than in an office and they could be more productive at home.

Jack Nilles, a former university researcher and consultant on telecommuting, says the standard office is full of interruptions that constantly erode productivity.

"Suppose you're in the office and you came up with an incredibly brilliant idea on how to save the company millions of dollars," said Nilles, who has been studying the subject for more than 30 years. "Here's how it really works. Some guy

comes in and says, 'Hey what do think about the basketball game last night.' How long does it take you to get back to that brilliant idea? Often the answer is never."

For many companies, telecommuting programs not only save money but expand the range of employees they recruit. Rick Owens works out of his Denver home as Convergys Corp.'s senior director for the company's home agent program. In addition to providing the flexibility to ramp up staff as needed for clients, he said with the program "we can use a work force that's been typically been disenfranchised, a lot of people who for one reason or another haven't been able to be valuable in the workplace. They're very valuable employees, the stay-at-home parent, senior citizens, physically challenged people."

A variety of technological breakthroughs have solved many problems associated with telecommuting. Convergys and inContact say advances have made their computer systems secure, and Microsoft has a unified communications package that enables workers to answer phone calls from any computer with high-speed Internet access. The package also integrates e-mail, scheduling and voice mail through the Web or on smart phones, and workers can collaborate on applications such as spreadsheets.

FranklinCovey Products and Google also offer a variety of products.

Still, thousands of employees in Utah and millions nationally who could work at home drive to an office every day. The reason, according to Nilles, can be summed up in two words -- the boss.

"The reason more don't telecommute generally is because their management is terrified of it," said Nilles, who claims to have coined the term telecommuting when he began research into it in 1972. "A lot of people grew up with the idea that you have to be together in one place to keep an eye on each other. There's an inherent feeling of mistrust in that attitude." Once companies establish policies, though, its fairly easily to start a telecommuting program, he said.

Although some employees may miss the social atmosphere of the office, Nilles said online workers tend to make a special effort to keep informed about co-workers and gossip.

Convergys employee Johnson said she stays in contact with team members and supervisors through in-house chat rooms, instant messaging and occasional phone calls.

She had a hard time adjusting to the online environment at first, and she warns others that telecommuting is not for everyone. People who thrive on social interaction or those who use the office setting to push for pay raises and promotions may not thrive working alone, she said.

Nilles said telecommuting may be a model of how work is done in the future. A company is formed for a particular project, people from all over the world are recruited and they work together online.

"They work until the project is finished. Then they go off and do their own thing. The company disappears and another version forms when some other project comes up. This kind of thing is going to be increasingly popular. To some extent it will encroach on the good old traditional company. That's not going to be around much anymore."

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