

Quest

e-newsletter

Information and ideas for your quest

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This issue

Working From Home:

- Knowing if it's right for you
- Setting up your office
- Preventing isolation

Working From Home: The Risks & Rewards

When I entered the job market 16 years ago, the idea of working for a company while working from home was absurd. Today, however, it is a reality for millions of employees in the United States. According to a national study conducted by the International Telework Association and Council (ITAC), approximately 28 million or 1 in 5 U.S. employees participate in some form of teleworking – at home, on the road, in telework centers or in satellite offices.

This trend continues to be fueled by our society's need for more balance in life and personal control. We want to enjoy our children, spend time with family and experience more of what life has to offer. Employers are also reaping the benefits, including increased productivity, lower overhead costs, and reduced absenteeism and turnover.

While teleworking is not part of the business mainstream, it is experiencing success in certain industries. In this issue of *Quest*, I will outline four factors you can use to test if working from home is a viable option for you. I will also share tips on setting up a functional home office, ways to manage your time effectively, and show you proven strategies that will keep you plugged into your organization's culture.

Evaluating the Conditions

As appealing as working from home might be, it's not the best option for everyone. To determine if a work-at-home arrangement is right for you, assess the following four factors:

- **The job** – Consider if you can realistically perform your work from a home-based office. According to an annual study conducted by ITAC, teleworkers are most often found in managerial or sales positions, and within real estate, management of enterprises and the information industries.
- **The organization** – Ask yourself several questions, including:
 - Does your organization value the benefits of working from a home office?
 - What's your organization's level of commitment to those who work from home?
 - How does a work-at-home arrangement fit into your organization's culture and management style?

You will also want to evaluate the relationship you have with your employer. Trust is the foundation of a good work-at-home arrangement. You will want to establish clear objectives and guidelines with your employer. If your organization doesn't have a work-at-home program, you can suggest launching a pilot program and offer to participate.

- **Your work style** – You will need to evaluate your performance record, work ethic and capabilities. Your employer will. A good work-at-home candidate is a self-starter who can manage time wisely, problem solve, communicate effectively and follow through. You will be judged on output, not how much time you spend at your desk.

- **Your home environment** – Determine if you can create a functional work area at home. You will need a dedicated space, the proper equipment and the cooperation of everyone who lives with you. Maintaining a professional image can be more challenging in a home office. For example, you will need to consider how distractions like family members watching television, children playing or a dog barking will affect your ability to concentrate, make telephone calls or conduct meetings. You will need to implement strategies to address the various aspects in your home environment. (Also see “Setting up a Work Area” and “Managing Your Time.”)

Setting up a Work Area

Once you decide that working from home is right for you, your next step will be creating a suitable work area. The most important ingredients include:

- **A dedicated space** – You will want to contain your work in a designated area. This will help you to stay organized, and establish work and home boundaries. Your dedicated space will serve as a hub, and place for equipment and files. You may also need to establish an at-home storage area for supplies and other tools related to your job. Think twice before setting up shop in “common” areas like the kitchen or family room. These areas, however, work well as temporary spaces for tasks like reading or working on a laptop.
- **Proper equipment** – Your home office needs to be outfitted with the necessary equipment to perform your job. The most common types of equipment are:
 - **Computer** – Consult with the computer professionals in your organization to determine hardware/software needs, installation and available technical support from home.
 - **Printer** – Know your organization’s printing standards (e.g. laser, ink jet, color).
 - **Dedicated telephone line(s)** – Remember you will need service for telephone calls, e-mails, faxes and Internet connectivity.
 - **Telephone** – Consider the different ways you use your telephone and then set up the necessary features (e.g. conference and three-way calling, distinctive ring, call forwarding, voice mail).
 - **Telephone headset** – Check out Hello Direct for the best selection - on the web at www.hellodirect.com or call 1-800-444-3556 for a catalog.
 - **Fax machine** – Think about an all-in-one unit for faxing, printing and copying. It can be a great space saver.
- **Furnishings** – You can tailor your office to suit your needs and taste. If you meet with customers in your home office, avoid straying too far away from your organization’s preferred style. Basic office furnishings include your workstation/desk, chair, storage (filing cabinet, shelves, bins, racks, etc.) and lighting. For tips on setting up an ergonomically correct home office, visit www.telecommute.org/resources/home_office_setup_brochure.shtml to download a free brochure.



Managing Your Time

One of the most attractive aspects of working from home is the flexibility to structure your own schedule. But before you set up shop at home, consider these factors:

- **Work-at-home Schedule** – You’ll need to decide how many days a week you want to work from home. Try different scenarios (e.g. one day a week or afternoons three days a week).

This test period will help you determine the best days and times to work from home. Plus, it will make the transition easier. Be sure to communicate your schedule to all the appropriate people (e.g. your employer, co-workers, customers and vendors). You will also want to update everyone on how to reach you (e.g. telephone/fax number(s), e-mail address, mailing and street addresses).

- **Office Hours** – Your job responsibilities and your employer’s expectations will determine how accessible you need to be and how much time is needed in the office. Telephone features like call forwarding are convenient when you’re away from your desk (e.g. in the backyard, garage, basement) or working off-site. SimulRing is a new technology that offers subscribers one telephone number that when called, all of the subscriber’s designated telephone numbers automatically ring at the same time (e.g. main office, home office, cellular phone). For more information on SimulRing visit www.simulring.com. Portable phones can be good too, however, sound quality is often sacrificed.

The convenience of living and working under one roof can make switching into “off mode” a challenge. Remember to take regular breaks and be careful about working long hours. Also, try to avoid eating meals at your desk and watch your snack food consumption.

One last thought about office hours – your body clock. Instinctively, most of us are aware of our body’s natural rhythm (ebb and flow) and we can relate to being a lark (morning person) or an owl (evening person). Consider your own body clock and how you can use it to your advantage. If you want to learn more about the body’s biological clock or want to take the Lark and Owl Test, visit www.circadian.com/learning_center/lark_owl_test.htm.

- **Distractions** – Interruptions can be just as worrisome in a home office as a traditional work environment. You trade talkative co-workers, spontaneous meetings and coffee breaks for children who are unexpectedly home from school, repair people working and telephone calls from friends who just want to chat. Working from home requires self-discipline and focus. If you have time to throw in a load of laundry, take a long lunch on the patio or visit your child’s school, great. But remember it’s easy to get sidetracked. Know your limits.



Staying Connected

Isolation can be a side effect of working from home. Traditional office environments provide regular face-to-face communication and social interaction that is vital for relationship building and career growth. Unfortunately, the old adage “Out of sight, out of mind” is still true. When you work from a home-based office, it’s easy to feel out of the loop and disconnected from the organization. Here are several strategies that will help you sustain your relationships and feel like an integral part of your organization.

- Schedule regular meetings with your supervisor. Meet at the office when possible. Also communicate regularly through other types of communication (e.g. telephone, e-mail, instant messaging)
- Schedule lunch with colleagues - try once a week
- Keep in touch with colleagues via telephone – during a coffee break is perfect
- Send greeting cards to remember special occasions and show your appreciation
- Stop by the office to get updates, pick up mail and meet new employees
- Read bulletin board information and all internal communication pieces
- Submit updates or articles for insertion into internal communications (e.g. newsletters, bulletin boards, e-mail distribution, staff meeting announcements)

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- Go into the office for staff meetings, brainstorming sessions, training programs and employee celebrations
- Consider working at the office during peak periods or for special projects
- Participate in employee outings and off-site activities
- Work at the office – perhaps one day a week or two mornings a week
- Attend events sponsored or supported by your organization (e.g. fundraisers, arts/culture/community events, business development initiatives)

As you can see there are a number of factors to consider before *and* after you decide to work from home. It will be interesting to see where the future will take us next ... maybe working from the moon.

Telework Web Resources

Gil Gordon Associates - www.gilgordon.com

International Telework Association and Council (ITAC) - www.telecommute.org

Joanne H. Pratt Associates - www.joannepratt.com

Working Solo, Inc. - www.workingsolo.com



Jennifer is a professional speaker, author and president of CommuniQuest, Inc. Through her seminars and keynotes, she delivers fresh insight and proven techniques on how to work smarter and live a more satisfying life. For more information on her workplace strategies and inspirational programs, visit www.communiquest.com or call 1-888-866-0821.

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