

The Realities of the Virtual Worker

By Cathie M. Clark

“You work from home? I wish I could do that.” That is the reaction when people learn that you no longer have an office to go to. It sounds lovely, because they envision the savings on business attire and freedom of flexible work hours since no one is watching what you are doing. The realities of these situations can be less rosy.

History of the Telecommuter. When the concept of telecommuting was introduced and the technology to support such situations was developed, most corporations resisted it. Their heavy investment in office space and equipment—along with the PR visibility of such locations—overrode their interest in accommodating parents with small children, who were the first proponents. As companies’ leases neared expiration, they started looking at the expense of such spaces and undertook downsizing measures, such as converting workers—regardless of their functions—into large noisy expanses of cubicles. Later, the reduced productivity and discontent from the cubicle environment—as well as recognition of the waste in increasing commuting times—contributed to the appeal of allowing willing employees to give up their square footage in the office. Also, in the talent attraction arena, telecommuting capability could enable hiring ideal candidates who live in the most remote locations.

In extreme cutback situations, offices were completely closed and the employees told they had no choice but to work from home—no questions were asked about whether the employee had a suitable work environment at home. The impression left is that the company doesn’t care about you, just the significant savings realized by closing satellite offices.

However, media coverage of Yahoo’s reverse in position on telecommuting may raise the issue for reconsideration elsewhere. So, let me share my experience.

At my current employer, we are called “virtual” employees. Coinage of the term originally was viewed with humor. Merriam Webster defines virtual as “being in essence or effect, but not in fact”. But we *are* real employees, *in fact* working remotely. Everyone I know is uncomfortable with the term.

Low Investment. What does the company agree to provide for workers making the transition? A laptop with a “soft phone”, and a low-end printer, in many cases. What a savings for them! Appropriate internet connection sometimes is paid by the employer elsewhere, but not in my case. It is “not reimbursable (except where required by law)” and is therefore the financial responsibility of the worker allowed the “luxury” of working from home.

So who are these willingly virtual employees? There are several categories.

1. Empty nesters, who may have a now-unused bedroom that can be converted to an office (tax-deductible or not), and are limited only by their budgetary constraints for seating and work surfaces.

2. Parents of young children, who can tolerate working at a kitchen table surrounded by distracting family activity and noise inappropriate for professional phone interaction with clients.
3. Adult children caregivers of live-in elderly parents.

And who are those who are unwilling? Are there any? Yes: those of various ages and life stages who do not have any control over their home situation. For example, in this day of adult children returning to the nest, bringing with them their children and even spouses, a quiet home can quickly turn into a noisy circus. If the employee had worked in a nice office, liked his/her co-workers, valued the teamwork environment, and had a reasonable commute, the requirement for them to work at home can be intolerable. They can no longer excel at their work and are very unhappy under the arrangement. It simply does not work for them.

Food service companies know that many virtual employees need to get away from the house during working hours, and have provided free WiFi to attract their business. A daytime visit to the local Starbucks, McDonald's, etc., reveals just how many of these workers are willing to accept the din of food service over the chaos of their home office situations. When dogs barking, babies crying, lawn mowers roaring away, home trash collection noises, and lack of air conditioning interfere with concentration, work quality is affected. Discipline is also required to avoid being derailed by housemates who refuse to accept that although you are there physically, you are not there for them.

Ergonomics. In the 1980s, repetitive stress injuries in office workers prompted companies to investigate ergonomic solutions. Infinitely adjustable task chairs, contour keyboards and myriad pointing devices, and work station furniture appropriate to the tasks at hand were investigated and invested in by the company. Virtual workers are left to their own devices on this angle and generally are unable to make an investment in any suitable equipment. They are hunched over a laptop with a tiny mistake-prone keyboard, situated at an inappropriate height, squinting at an LCD screen under inadequate lighting, and taking frequent breaks to stretch and undo the fatigue of this arrangement. The formerly important consideration of ergonomics is sacrificed.

Technical Limitations. The best, fastest internet connection is slowed to a crawl by a VPN. Sluggish response time for each keyboard command is common, as are lockups requiring lengthy reboots. The Soft Phone concept relies on server connection. In the event of server failure, workers have no phone and cannot call the Help Desk except from their own cell phones, which often heat up intolerably over long troubleshooting calls. Conference calls are often disconnected for no apparent reason, in which case redialing to re-enter is impossible for an extended time: attempts to do so result in a busy-circuits fast beep lockout. This is especially embarrassing if you had been talking to a client and cannot reconnect quickly.

Supplies/Equipment Limitations. Although accounts may be set up with Staples for remote employees, the limited list of authorized items does not take into consideration the nature of the employee's work and needs. Ditto for those whose work requires access to high-capability printers or shredders

customarily resident in offices. Scanners and faxes are also often deemed unnecessary equipment for virtuals, so when one is needed a time-consuming trip to Staples or the nearest company office is required. The belief that virtual employees do not need the same items they needed when they were working in an office defies logic.

Colleague Interaction. It is difficult to develop close work relationships when you rarely if ever see—or even initially meet—your colleagues in person. Audio-only conference calls lose value when unrecognized voices, cutting in and out on a Conference Room speakerphone from multiple locations, are not identifiable with individual faces and body language. Reliance on instant messaging and email, although helpful, can result in misinterpretations of tone and subsequent hurt feelings. For some reason there is hesitancy to pick up the phone and talk directly to resolve misunderstandings.

So is it a Bad Idea? Not in certain circumstances. Sometimes it is actually ideal for both parties. Workers performing creative work done independently (technical writing, graphic design, database maintenance, etc.) benefit greatly from the absence of office distractions and commuting time. In fact, as up to 4 hours daily can be spent driving/riding to and from an office located in a major city, workers relieved of this obligation often are happy to spend that same amount of time at home on their computers doing actual work.

However, workers who need to collaborate with others all day, or who benefit from overhearing valuable information in passing, are more productive—not to mention happier—in an office.

So, where do you fall on this issue? Outlined above are compelling reasons for making your case to work at home if it is appropriate for you to do so—and you are forewarned of the drawbacks. However, if you have been thrust into such a situation and it is inappropriate for you, talk to your manager about making the changes needed for you to be a happy, productive employee.

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