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WORK & FAMILY

Jill Hamburg Coplan

Making the Case for Telecommuting

Many small companies find the concept taboo, but most quickly learn that the benefits usually outweigh the risks

Telecommuting is on a lot of readers' minds. Take Michelle B., an accountant married to a member of the Birmingham Barons, the double-A affiliate for the Chicago White Sox. "Though we're both from Texas and love it here, because of [my husband's] career, we have to move every six months," she writes. She's not sure how to raise the issue of telecommuting with a company she would like to work for.

Or Jack B., a consultant in Charlotte, N.C. "I telecommute one week out of the month and am trying for more," he writes. But he's concerned that spending more time off-site could keep him too far from clients and hurt his business.

Then there's Brenda M., who works for a medical-billing business in Cadillac, Mich., and wants "to be more available for my children's needs." She also finds her open office distracting. She requests some persuasive arguments to win over her boss, who has never let anyone work from home.

BATTLE PLANS. Telecommuting is clearly a burning issue for many employees. A survey released last month by online benefits company LifeCare found that such flexible work arrangements were the No. 1 coveted employee benefit, beating out even health care.

But while high-tech industries have famously embraced the practice, many other small businesses have resisted mightily -- even though volumes of research show that telecommuting reduces absenteeism and turnover while improving employee productivity and satisfaction. Employers may resist having staffers work from home because of a lack of trust, a fear of change or of losing control, or concerns that collaboration by a close-knit team will suffer.

No one knows exactly what the 21 million people who worked remotely last year felt about the quality of their teamwork (that figure is from the Employment Policy Foundation). Some clearly do yearn for the give-and-take. "I miss my co-workers. I miss going out to lunch with them and just chatting," says Wendy Maxey, who telecommutes from Blacksburg, Va., (where her "significant other" is in graduate school) for Lodging.com, an online travel reservation site in Boca Raton, Fla., employing 40 people.

Debra Dinnocenzo, author of *101 Tips for Telecommuters*, says anyone interested in telecommuting should be ready to counter employers' objections with a proposal full of well-prepared information. And count on having several meetings to convince all the managers who will need to O.K. it.

BRINGING IN BUSINESS. I've found a handful of small-business owners who first opposed telecommuting but eventually learned to love it. What they have told me is that the initial benefits -- savings on office space -- were soon dwarfed by the new business that telecommuters were unexpectedly able to generate.

That was the case for Andy Levine's company, Development Counselors International, a 41-year-old economic-analysis firm based in Manhattan. When someone proposed telecommuting five years ago, "I didn't like the idea at all," Levine says. But a valued 15-year veteran running one division suddenly purchased a winter home in Tucson. Another senior staffer sprang the news that she wanted to join her family in Denver. "Quite frankly, I had a gun to my head," he says.

The upshot? "Our Western business has tripled as a result," Levine says, "and we have expanded the practice dramatically." Two of the company's older employees are working from Florida, and a recent hire works entirely from her home in Pennsylvania, he adds. "It has been a very, very positive experience."

Next week: Reluctant entrepreneurs talk about the arguments for telecommuting that won them over.

Jill Hamburg Coplan has covered work, family, business, and finance for the past decade as a writer and editor for newspapers, magazines, and wire services. She left Working Woman magazine, where she was senior editor, when her first child was born and now works solo from a home office in Brooklyn, N.Y. You can e-mail her at [Jill Hamburg Coplan](mailto:Jill.Hamburg.Coplan)

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