



Telework Pros and Cons: 28 Reasons To "Telework"--With Data To Back Them Up

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*This is a guest post by Kate Lister. Kate, along with partner Tom Harnish, runs a web site called [Undress4Success.com](#), which offers advice on work at home jobs, freelance opportunities, and home-based businesses. Kate and Tom are telecommuting researchers and authors; their academic study of the topic is balanced with practical lessons they've learned from over twenty years of home-based work and business ownership. They are currently working on a book, **Undress4Success—The Naked Truth About Working From Home** for John Wiley & Sons (March 2009). This will be their third book for Wiley.*

The terms telework and telecommuting were coined by Jack Nilles (<http://www.jala.com>), a former NASA engineer, more than three decades ago. "One of my colleagues at NASA was carrying on about if we can put a man on the moon, we ought to be able to do something about traffic," recalls Jack. So that's what he set out to do. Today, about five million Americans earn a full-time paycheck working at home. Our research shows that another fifty million could. While the concept of telework has been simmering for years, soaring gas prices are fanning the flame such that we may have finally reached a tipping point.

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I've been working from home for over 25 years. Two years ago my husband and I sold the vintage aircraft flightseeing business that we operated for over sixteen years—from home. More unemployed than retired, we were determined to continue to live the at-home lifestyle to which we'd become accustomed, and set out to look for home-based work. It was a real eye opener to find that in spite of all the individual, corporate, and community benefits of telework, a huge number of stigmas and biases about it persist. So we decided to write a book on the topic. As part of our research, we've synthesized information from over 250 studies of telecommuting and related topics. We've interviewed dozens of telework enthusiasts and naysayers including researchers, Fortune 500 executives, virtual employers, venture capitalists who support the remote work model, and dozens of home-based workers in a wide variety of professions.

What we've concluded is that while there are some very real barriers to telework, the industry pioneers have proven it can be done and it is worth the effort. Telework offers a pull, rather than a push solution to a wide range of problems. It benefits employers, employees, and the community. A strong national telework strategy would increase GNP. It would substantially reduce our Gulf Oil dependence. It would bring traffic jams to a halt and reduce the carnage on our highways. It would alleviate the strain on our crumbling transportation infrastructure. It

would help reclaim many of the jobs that have been lost to offshoring, and provide new employment opportunities for at-home caregivers, the disabled, and the un- and under-employed. It would improve family life, and emancipate latchkey kids. It would substantially bolster pandemic and disaster preparedness. It would reduce global warming. And it would save companies and individuals billions of dollars.

Naysayers argue that not every person or every job is right for telework. I don't argue that point. But studies show that 40% of jobs could be done from home and two-thirds of the working population say they'd prefer it. What's more, the companies that have tried telework have proven that the negatives can be easily overcome and the pros far outweigh the cons. Don't take my word for it, read on and decide for yourself:

Advantages of Telecommuting for the Community *

• Reduces our foreign oil dependence

- If the 40% of employees who could work from home did so half of the time (approximately the national average) it would reduce Gulf Oil dependence by almost 60% and save Americans \$40 billion at the pumps (<http://undress4success.com/research>)

• Slows global warming

- Half-time telecommuting could reduce carbon emissions by almost 80 million metric tons a year
- Tougher environmental laws are coming
- Telework offers easy Clean Air Act compliance
- Additional carbon footprint savings would come from reduced: office energy, paper usage (as electronic documents replace paper), roadway repairs, urban heating, office construction, and business travel

• Bolsters pandemic and disaster preparedness

- Three quarters of teleworkers say they could continue to work in the event of a disaster compared with just 28% on non-teleworkers
- A decentralized workforce would reduce the chance of another World Trade Center or Pentagon-like target to attack by removing the temptation that a large population center provides. If an attack does occur, fewer people will be effected, economic stability will be maintained, and continuity of operations is assured.

• Redistributes wealth

- Location-independent job opportunities offer better employment options to rural workers

• Higher productivity among teleworkers will increase GDP

• Cost savings from telework will encourage home-shoring and bring back many of the jobs that have been lost to foreign labor

Advantages of Telecommuting For Companies *

• Improves employee satisfaction

- People are sick of the rat race, eager to take control of their lives, and desperate to find a balance between work and life.

- Two thirds of people want to work from home
- 36% would choose it over a pay raise
- Gen Y'ers are particularly attracted to flexible work arrangements
- 80% of employees consider telework a job perk

• **Reduce attrition**

- Losing a valued employee can cost an employer \$10,000 to \$30,000
- Recruiting and training a new hire costs thousands
- 14% of Americans have changed jobs to shorten the commute
- 46% of companies that allow telework say it has reduced attrition
- 95% of employers say telework has a high impact on employee retention

• **Reduces unscheduled absences**

- 78% of people who call in sick, really aren't. They do so because of family issues, personal needs, and stress.
- Unscheduled absences cost employers \$1,800/employee per year; that adds up to \$300 billion/yr for U.S. companies
- Teleworkers typically continue to work when they're sick (without infecting others)
- Teleworkers return to work more quickly following surgery or medical issues
- Flexible hours allow teleworkers to run errands or schedule appointments without losing a full day

• **Increases productivity**

- Best Buy, British Telecom, Dow Chemical and many others show that teleworkers are 35-40% more productive
- Businesses lose \$600 billion a year in workplace distractions
- Sun Microsystems' experience suggests that employees spend 60% of the commuting time they save performing work for the company

• **Saves employers money**

- IBM slashed real estate costs by \$50 million
- McKesson saves \$2 million a year
- Nortel estimates that they save \$100,000 per employee they don't have to relocate
- Average real estate savings with full-time telework is \$10,000 per employee per year
- Partial telework can offer real estate savings by instituting an office hoteling program
- Dow Chemical and Nortel save over 30% on non-real estate costs
- Offers inexpensive compliance with ADA for disabled workers
- Saves brick and mortar costs in industries where regulations or needs require local workers (e.g. healthcare, e-tail)

• **Equalizes personalities and reduces potential for discrimination**

- Hiring sight unseen, as some all-virtual employers do, greatly reduces the potential for discrimination
- It ensures that people are judged by what they do versus what they look like
- Communications via focus groups, instant messaging, and the like equalizes personalities. No longer is the loudest voice the only one that's heard.

- **Cuts down on wasted meetings**

- Asynchronous communications allow people to communicate more efficiently
- Web-based meetings are better planned and more apt to stay on message

- **Increases employee empowerment**

- Remote work forces people to be more independent and self-directed

- **Increases collaboration**

- Once telework technologies are in place, employees and contractors can work together without regard to logistics. This substantially increases collaboration options.

- **Provides new employment opportunities for the un and under-employed**

- 18 million Americans with some college education aren't working
- Less than a third of disabled Americans hold jobs (compared to 80% of rest of the labor force); 41 million disabled Americans are unemployed
- 24 million Americans work part time

- **Expands the talent pool**

- Over 40% of employers are feeling the labor pinch; that will worsen as Boomers retire
- Reduces geographic boundaries
- Provides access to disabled workers
- Offers alternative that would have otherwise kept parents and senior caregivers out of the workforce
- Offers geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural diversity that would not otherwise be possible

- **Slows the brain drain due to retiring Boomers**

- 75% of retirees want to continue to work—but they want the flexibility to enjoy their retirement

- **Reduces staffing redundancies and offers quick scale-up and scale-down options**

- Having access to a flexible at-home workforce allows call centers, airlines, and other to add and reduce staff quickly as needed.
- The need to overstaff, just in case, is greatly reduced
- 24/7 worldwide coverage is easier to staff with home-based help

- **Reduces traffic jams**

- Traffic jams rob the U.S. economy of \$78 billion/year in productivity
- They idle away almost 3 billion gallons of gas and accounts for 26 million extra tons of greenhouse gases
- Every 1% reduction in vehicles yields a three fold reduction in congestion

- **Prevents traffic accidents**

- Highway deaths cost \$60 billion a year and result in 3 million lost workdays
- More than a quarter of accidents occur during commuting hours

- **Take the pressure off our crumbling transportation infrastructure**

- Crumbling transportation infrastructure - new roads are being built to meet needs of 10-20 years ago. Less than 6% of our cities roads have kept pace with demand over the past decade.
- By 2025 we'll need another 104 thousand additional lane miles - that will cost 530 billion

- **Insures continuity of operations in the event of a disaster**

- Federal workers are required to telework to the maximum extent possible for this reason
- Bird flu, terrorism, roadway problems, and weather-related disasters are all drivers
- Three quarters of teleworkers say they could continue to work in the event of a disaster compared with just 28% on non-teleworkers

- **Improves performance measurement systems**

- Drucker, Six Sigma, and management experts agree that goal setting and performance measurement is key to successful management
- For telework to work, employees must be measured by what they do, not where or how they do it

- **Offers access to grants and financial incentives**

- A number of states, including Virginia, Washington, and Connecticut, offer training and financial incentive for businesses that adopt telework.

Advantages of Telecommuting For Employees *

- **Saves employees money**

- Employees save on gas, clothes, food, parking, and in some cases, daycare (provided they can flex their hours to eliminate the need)
- Average savings is \$7,000 to \$13,000/year per person

- **Increases leisure time**

- Full time telework results in an extra 5 workweeks of free time a year—time that would have been spent commuting
- The majority of teleworkers report they have more time with family, friends, and leisure.

- **Reduces stress, illness, and injury**

- 80% of diseases show that stress is a trigger. Because telework reduces stressful commutes and alleviates caregiver separation issues, teleworkers are likely to suffer fewer stress-related illnesses.
- Teleworkers are exposed to fewer occupational and environmental hazards at home
- Teleworkers suffer fewer airborne illnesses because of lack of contact with sick co-workers
- Teleworkers report being able to make more time for exercise
- Anyone who has ever dieted knows it's harder to stay the course when you dine out. Teleworkers often eat healthier meals and are less inclined to consume fast food lunches.

The Holdbacks To Telework *

- **Management mistrust**

- 75% of managers say they trust their employee, but a third say they'd like to be able to see them, just to be sure.
- Company culture must embrace the concept at all levels, sweatshop and typing pool mentality has to be abandoned
- From Peter Drucker's introduction of Management-By-Objectives in the mid-1950's, to Six Sigma which was popularized by General Electric's Jack Welch in the 1990's, setting and measuring goals has long been held as the key to good management.

• **It's not for everyone**

- For some, social needs must be addressed. Telephone, email, instant messaging are a solution for some. Innovative solutions such as virtual outings, online games, and even Second Life have proven successful as well. Occasional telework is also a solution.
- Telecommuters must be self-directed
- They should be comfortable with technology or arrangements should be made for remote tech support
- They should have an defined home office space
- Home-based employees need to understand that telecommuting is not a suitable replacement for daycare unless they can schedule work hours around their children's needs.

• **Career fears from 'out of sight out of mind' mentality**

- Some employees cite career fears as a reason not to telecommute. Successful teleworking programs overcome the 'out of sight, out of mind' issue with performance-based measurement systems, productivity versus presenteeism attitudes. Teleworkers who maintain regular communications (telephone, email, instant chat, even the occasional face-to-face meeting) with traditional co-workers and managers find career impact is not an issue.

• **Co-worker jealousy**

- Employees need to understand why they were or were not chosen for telework
- Employees should see telework as a benefit that is earned, not given
- Standards of selection should be uniform

• **Security issues**

- Security issues are easy to solve, but must be addressed
- 90% of those charged with security in large organizations feel that home-based workers are no a security concern. In fact, they are more concerned with the occasional work that is taken out of the office by traditional employees who lack the training, tools, and technologies that teleworkers receive.
- Security training should be provided for all employees

• **IT infrastructure changes may be necessary**

- Teleworkers need access to company systems, software, and data
- Infrastructure changes that support telework improve efficiency for office and traveling employees as well
- Companies need to address remote technical support issues. Off the shelf solutions exist.

All roads point to telework. As a nation, it's time to make the road less traveled, our way to work.

* Statistical information contained herein comes from a wide range of studies. Sources are available on request. Email info-at-undress4success-dot-com.



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