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More companies moving to telework

Benefits include productivity gains, more loyal employees

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Teleworking saves time and money, boosts productivity, eases traffic congestion, conserves energy -- and now, years after technology made a reality of the home office, corporate America is finally awakening to the benefits of employees staying home.

Statistics show a significant increase over the past two years in companies that have embraced teleworking. Even the federal government is on board, responding to recent congressional demands that it not just allow but encourage workers to perform some of their duties from home.

"It's all about communication, communication, communication," said Michael Guld, president of the Guld Resource Group, a business development consulting company based in Richmond, Va.

"Technology is growing at such an exponential pace, there is definitely a lag time in its practical application. The spike in the number of people teleworking is just beginning, but it will continue to grow at a very rapid pace," he said.

Last year, 12.4 million Americans worked from home at least one day per month, a 25 percent increase over the year before and a 63 percent increase over 2004, according to a recent report from WorldatWork, an employment think tank. By 2010, WorldatWork estimates that 100 million Americans will do at least some work at home.

Larry Ciraulo, director of IT client computing services at Sun Microsystems, which pioneered its "open work" program 10 years ago, manages workers around the world but rarely visits a Sun office site.

"I've got about 20 people working for me worldwide, and I do 80 to 90 percent of my work from my house. I manage my people by the results," he said.

Today, fully half of Sun's work force has no permanent office, working either from home, the road, at the offices of clients or at satellite offices set up for temporary use.

"This is one of the biggest drivers of employee satisfaction," Ciraulo said. "You get higher levels of employees who are loyal to Sun and stay at Sun because they're given this flexibility."

Still, American businesses have been slow to awaken to the benefits of teleworking.

According to a study by Dimension Data, 55 percent of American businesses had some form of remote work program, lower than all European nations including France, at 75 percent, and Switzerland, at 73 percent.

Why? Experts see an ingrained corporate culture in the United States that places high value on face-to-face interaction.

Many companies, they say, still have Mr. Dithers-style managers who are reluctant to cut the cord and allow their employees to work from home for fear too many Dagwoods will spend more time with bed sheets than spreadsheets.

The answer to that concern is simple, according to Robert Trumble, professor of management at Virginia Commonwealth University and a former Fulbright Scholar who has studied remote working for years.

"There is one primary issue that in this case is clear and that is the need to have very clear output results measure. ... No one cares the number of hours you work or when you work, as long as the results are there," Trumble said.

"If you want to keep tabs on teleworkers, there are so many ways. Every stroke on a computer can be monitored, every phone call, GPS tracking systems in cars. Cameras might be a bit much, but it could easily be done," Trumble said.

Dawna Ballard, a professor of communications who studies workplace issues at the University of Texas, agreed that measurable results and communication are the keys.

"You get more work out of employees who telework, so it works if it is the results you are looking for.

"If you have a more face-time-absorbed corporate culture, then teleworking might present problems," she said.

Ballard expects fewer and fewer workers to be based in traditional office space in the future: "It's not just about working at home, it's about working anywhere. You're not tethered to home or anywhere else anymore," she said.

Mitchell Hershkowitz, communications practice manager for Dimension Data Americas, manages a team of teleworkers across the country using an array of Internet-based technologies to keep up with everyone.

He requires, for example, his team to maintain online work schedules in real time so he can track their progress and know where they are.

"I might IM (instant message) them in the morning just to say 'Hi' and find out what's going on, but I do not micromanage -- that's not the point. I use the technology to stay in touch and to work with them throughout the day," Hershkowitz said.

It helps, he said, to have the right people as both managers and employees. "The key is the culture around how managers deal with their employees. And then the integrations of the technology," he said.

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