

Home Office: The Non-IT Specialist's Guide to Telecommuting

By Cynthia Allen



Telecommuting is more than just a “buzz” word. It has become a way of life for more than 25 million Americans who report working from home as part of their primary job, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

Employers and employees have embraced technology that reduces the need for 40 hours of weekly office time.

Even though telecommuting has achieved widespread popularity, many association professionals still are leery of leaving the “brick and mortar” for the convenience of a home office. Tracy Orтели, manager of the Nurse Educator Certification Program for the Manhattan-based National League of Nursing (NLN), was one of them.

“Telecommuting was the perfect opportunity. I was 45 miles away from Manhattan with kids. I didn’t want to commute two hours each way,” Orтели says. “I worried, though, about not being part of the organizational culture and wondered how I would get a sense of the team climate without being there.”

The reality is that working virtually is nothing new for association professionals. Most volunteer leaders don’t occupy an office down the hall or even in the same state (maybe even country). And, let’s face it — we’re travel junkies, often spending days at or en route to conferences, board meetings and industry events with a BlackBerry safely secured to our hip.

Translating the same concepts and technology to virtual work arrangements as we do to our normal mobile management can create a productive environment that benefits both parties.

Defining Virtual Workplaces

Telecommuting isn’t one-dimensional; it took different forms as the practice increased in popularity. Brian Willard, head of BK Solutions, Inc., a firm offering technology solutions to nonprofit organizations, says understanding the three main models of working outside of the office makes creating and applying the right IT plan easier.

- 1. Telecommuters** — This is probably the most common of the three. It includes people who work from home periodically during the week and staff who travel and work from the road.
- 2. Hybrid** — The hybrid model refers to employees who work outside of the office all the time even though the organization has a physical headquarters building.
- 3. Virtual** — The last, and least common, model is completely virtual where the

organization doesn’t have an office building and all employees work from their personal offices or are contractors staffing the association.

“Instituting a telecommuting policy has a lot to do with the culture of an organization and the job the employee performs. Some positions don’t lend themselves to it and some office cultures don’t prosper without face-to-face interaction,” Willard says. “For any model, planning is essential to make a seamless transition.”

A Technology Plan

Too many people still think they’re ready to start telecommuting with just a computer and modem, but there is much more to it. Take advice from association professionals who telecommute from a personal office and IT specialists to draft a plan that will make telecommuting work for you.

- **Determine the best way to connect remotely to the server that houses**

WEB RESOURCES

If your association is completely virtual, consider these Web-based tools and applications to manage your operations.

- **GotVMail (www.gotvmail.com)** — online phone service that assigns you a toll-free phone number, multiple extensions and access to voicemail boxes starting as low as \$9.95 per month. You can forward calls to each extension to an existing cellphone or land line.
- **Strong Space (www.strongspace.com)** provides secure, online file storage. Without an internal server or shared file drive, employees need a place to save files that can be accessed by colleagues.
- **Weebly (www.weebly.com)** allows you to create Web sites using professional-looking templates. It also includes free hosting and a tool to create an online blog.
- **Trillian (www.trillian.com)** lets you integrate multiple IM tools into one interface.
- **Google Docs & Spreadsheets (www.google.com)** — work collaboratively and share files with this free Google service (Please note: A “gmail” account is required).

databases, e-mail and shared files and remember — connection speed matters.

— JOSHUA PRENTICE, DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS, NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR INTERIOR DESIGN QUALIFICATION (NCIDQ)

The server is the electronic soul of the association. It holds records of the past, present and future. Without access to e-mail, shared files and member databases (all run through the association’s in-house server) work can’t really be done.

“I am more comfortable with Web-based applications so most of our applications are available through the Internet,” Prentice says. “Because of that, an FTP site works best for our staff that travels or telecommutes. For other organizations it might be a VPN; you have to see what is best for your employee’s circumstances.”

- **Become friends with the IT team or consider hiring an outside consultant.**
—TRACY ORTELLI

“Initially, we made things up as we went along,” Orтели says. “I used my own laptop and phone but eventually we brought things in-house and I had an NLN-issued computer and live support which made it easier to solve problems.”

Orтели forged a bond with the IT staff. As the first telecommuter in the office, she was a guinea pig who worked out the kinks. Orтели says you encounter many of the same problems you would if you were sitting in the same building.

“Having a live person I had already met with made everything much more manageable,” Orтели says. “She had a name and a face. We talked a lot about how to make the arrangement easier and so far have been able to implement solutions that are cost effective and easy for me to use.”

- **Avoid the temptation to save files to your computer and not the shared space.**
— KENNETH BAKER, PROGRAM MANAGER, SPECIAL PROJECTS & COMMITTEES, NCIDQ

The shared drive also is an electronic historical record of the association’s



activities and serves a vital role in keeping things moving forward as staff and board members rotate.

“We had to come up with a plan to make sure work was backed up somewhere and that everyone had access to files I updated, even if they were a thousand miles away,” Baker says. “For me, the best tactic was to save a copy of everything daily on a USB drive and on the NCIDQ server through our FTP site.”

Baker says the added insurance relieved the anxiety he felt about losing information through lost connections to the FTP server or, worse, a complete computer meltdown.

- ***Secure transfer of information is essential — whether you sit inside a building or a basement — but other policies need consideration.***

—JOSHUA PRENTICE

Secure transfer of information is an important point of discussion for any work arrangement. However, as a telecommuter the association must establish rules for copying files to a CD or USB drive and transportation of documents.

“We use an organizational firewall to protect against unauthorized visitors, viruses and other security breaches, but we stay away from personal firewalls, or firewalls on the employee’s own desktop, because it interferes with some of the programs and applications we need to run,” Prentice says. “But this is something each organization needs to consider for themselves.”

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- ***Consider software that allows collaborative work on documents to simulate a face-to-face experience.***

—BRIAN WILLARD

Through applications like SharePoint, associations can set up communities of employees or volunteer leaders to work on documents simultaneously. SharePoint experienced some growing pains, but the most recent version is promising, according to Willard.

“Microsoft has improved SharePoint, and this is something I am looking into for my clients,” Willard says. “It allows you to check files in and out and I see that being a very useful tool.”

Willard also encourages his clients to use instant messaging because it simulates a conversation. ■

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