

Telecommuter Darin Hartley works very hard as ASTD's developer of new business ventures even when he's not in the corporate office. Really.

THE GOOD,
THE BAD,
AND THE STUFF
YOU NEED.

Observations of a Telecommuter

By Darin E. Hartley

Here are just some of the comments I've heard about telecommuting:

"How can you stand being home with your husband/wife that much?"

"I couldn't work like that because I need to talk to people. I'm social."

"Do you wear your pajamas all day?"

"It must be a dream working at home. I wish I could do it."

"How can you get anything done? I need to be at the office."

"What happens when you have a computer problem?"

"Do you really work, or do you just watch daytime television?"

As you can see, many telecommuting misconceptions are floating around. The reality is that there's a positive and a negative side to the whole telecommuting thing. A person's personality and motivation, and his or her home office infrastructure, play a large part in whether working remotely turns out to be a good thing or a bad thing.

CHILDREN DON'T ALWAYS UNDERSTAND THAT A CONFERENCE CALL IS MORE IMPORTANT (AT LEAST TEMPORARILY) THAN TALKING ABOUT "POKEMON" WITH THEM. SEVERAL OF MY ASTD COLLEAGUES CAN ATTEST TO MY YOUNGEST CHILD HAVING JOINED A TELECONFERENCE.

In January 2001, I left Dell Computer Corporation after more than five years to join ASTD as the developer of new business ventures. One of the major tenets of the Dell Business Model is to keep capital costs low. That's accomplished partly by not spending heavily on fancy office space. Most Dell employees, including directors and vice presidents, work in cubicles. While at Dell, I worked in various offices and shared offices as well as cubicles. It's something you learn to appreciate because it's part of the company's business model. When the opportunity to work at ASTD came, I knew I would be telecommuting about three-quarters of the time. I had to figure out how to do that. And I'm going to share here what I've learned so far.

But first, why are we seeing an increase in telecommuting? I asked Gil Gordon, author of *Turn It Off: How to Unplug From the Anytime-Anywhere Office Without Disconnecting Your Career*. He gave these major reasons:

- Companies can recruit and keep the best talent when they offer telecommuting.
- Companies can save money on capital expenditures such as office space, parking, and so forth.
- Employees who telecommute can be more efficient and productive.

What's more, as metropolitan traffic continues to become more congested, some state and local governments may invest money in telecommuting incentives and infrastructure rather than build more roads.

What it's really like

Telecommuting isn't just rolling out of bed and picking up the phone to make calls. It is working, just remotely. It is, however, different from working in an office. One, your commute is shorter—from

your bedroom to perhaps the den. No one can dictate what you can have on your desk or walls—a point that resonates with other telecommuters I talk with. You create the atmosphere you want with art, objects, music, or whatever.

Your home office can be quieter than an office workspace, and that will probably increase your efficiency. You'll eat lunch out less often, saving money, and you can drink whatever kind of coffee you like instead of the office brew. The phrase *casual business attire* has new meaning, and you avoid much of the office infighting and politics. You can become closer with your spouse, children, or significant other. Those are some positive things about telecommuting.

The catch? You need strong self-discipline and initiative. Without those, your telecommuting experience is going to be tough. After all, you set your own schedule and there's no one watching when you start and stop.

Another problem is that some people assume telecommuters are on call 24/7. There's no clear division between work time and nonwork time. These days, that's true in a way for all workers but more so for telecommuters. For example, this morning about early-thirty, I stumbled out of bed and ran through the dark house to get to the phone, only to receive a call from overseas by a fellow who just wanted my voicemail but got me so we ended up talking a while.

As a telecommuter, you soon realize that work and life become a soluble mixture; it's hard to separate one from the other. Some people might not want to spend more time with their families or partners. Children don't always understand that a conference call is more important (at least temporarily) than talking about "Pokemon" with them. Several of

“LET’S SEE . . . TIME-MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE (CHECK)
 BOOKS ON HOW TO SET UP A HOME NETWORK (CHECK), W
 BINS, THOSE COLORED FOLDERS (CHECK) DARN, F
 TO GET ASSORTED PAPER CLIPS HEY! THE STORE’S ST
 OPEN”

my ASTD colleagues can attest to my youngest child having joined a teleconference.

There can be a sense of isolation. At times, I send emails that go unanswered for days or weeks. That’s frustrating because what I love about email is the instant gratification and connection. Even with technology, it’s sometimes difficult to connect with people off-site. Think about co-workers who leave. You talk about them for a few days or weeks, and then they’re forgotten as new tasks and problems arise. Work life goes on. A telecommuter doesn’t leave; he or she is out of sight but doesn’t want to be out of mind.

There will be times when your expectations of telecommuting will differ from reality, and everyone’s reality will be a little different. Try to identify potential problems—and solutions—up front. Talk with other telecommuters to get their tips. If you used to be bombarded at home with calls after work hours, get a voicemail account when you begin telecommuting and let voicemail answer after normal work hours.

What you’ll need

As with any other endeavor, preparation is crucial to the success of the telecommuting experience. One reason many people don’t choose telecommuting is because they don’t have the necessary setup at home. To work remotely, it’s important that your home office function like a corporate office. I don’t mean that you need to have a break room, water cooler, or bulletin board for notices to sell your treadmill (“new and cheap”); I mean that you will need the functionality available in most offices.

Specifically, you’ll need these items:

A decent computer. Get the fastest system with the most memory you can afford. If you’re a mobile

telecommuter, consider a portable with a docking station. You might not have access to a large server to back up your work, so a big hard drive helps. I also recommend having a CD-RW (readable/writable CD drive). That will let you back up important files on CD as you need to. You’ll also need access to the Internet, which requires a modem—a cable modem, for example—or network card in your system if you’ll be hooking up to a high-speed Internet service.

A printer. You’ll need to be able to print documents. If you do graphics work, you’ll probably want a color printer. There are all-in-one printers that scan, copy, and fax. If you ever need to send a paper fax or make a copy quickly, these machines can be a lifesaver, and they’re less expensive than you might think.

A fax machine. If you don’t have an all-in-one printer, you’ll need a plain-paper fax machine. Granted, if you have a modem you can receive and send faxes using the fax software resident in most computers. But there will be times when you’ll want to send a paper fax.

A copier. Again, if you don’t have an all-in-one printer, you might consider getting a copier. They’ve come down in price. You’ll want to make copies of reports, itineraries, expense receipts, and so forth, and you don’t want to be trudging down to Office Giant every time.

A phone. Sounds obvious, right? Who doesn’t have a phone? I mention it because you should think about how you use your phone to determine whether it’s the right one. A trimline white phone might do for your kitchen, but for a person making work calls all day? Will you be making conference calls? Are you going to have to use your computer or

IF YOU WORK 30 YEARS IN THE COURSE OF YOUR CAREER AND COMMUTE AN HOUR EACH WAY TO AND FROM WORK FIVE DAYS A WEEK, YOU'LL SPEND ABOUT 13,200 HOURS IN TRANSIT. THAT'S EQUIVALENT TO 1,650 EIGHT-HOUR DAYS OR ABOUT 7.5 YEARS GETTING TO AND FROM WORK. WHAT COULD YOU DO IN THAT TIME IF YOU WERE ALREADY AT WORK?

other tools while you're on the phone? If you answered yes to the last two questions, you should probably have a phone with a speaker option or at least a jack for a headset so you can operate hands-free when you need to. Do you need or want caller ID? Will you use integrated voicemail from a phone company, or are you going to use an answering machine? Will the machine be separate or built into your phone? Will you need to move around while you're on the phone? If so, you might consider getting one with a base set and mobile unit.

So you can see, any old phone won't do. You'll need a phone that will support what you do as a telecommuting worker.

At least one separate phone line. People are going to call you. If you have only one phone line, all of your calls—personal, work, sales, and so forth—will come through that line. That may work OK for a while, but eventually there'll be a clash with the other inhabitants of your home over use of the phone. You could use your cell phone as the other line, but that's expensive if you receive or make a lot of long-distance business calls.

I have two separate lines, but I'm going to get an EFAX account, based on a tip from Cecile Marie, chief e-learning officer of Sunnymore Group and telecommuting evangelist. With the EFAX account, I'll be able to receive faxes 24/7 and my phone won't ring in the middle of the night. I've already had inci-

dents in which the voice line was busy so incoming faxes couldn't come through. And because my other phone line is also my fax line, the fax machine can't auto-receive; I have to answer because I don't know whether it's a fax or a phone call.

A home network. If you telecommute and live alone, a home network might not be necessary. But if you telecommute and live with your family or other folks—or there's more than one computer in the house—you might need a home network. My wife works from home 10 to 20 hours a week, so it's impractical to share a computer for checking email and similar tasks. The answer for us was a home network, and it has worked out great. It lets us share access to the cable modem and lets me surf the Web while I'm on the phone with a colleague or client. I can access all of the files on my other system and print to the all-in-one printer—though if I need to scan, copy, or fax, I have to go upstairs.

You can set up a home network relatively easily with some hardware and software. Whether you network wirelessly or through your phone line (my choice), you'll need the associated home network card for each system you plan to network. If you have three systems you want to network, you need three home network cards. The basic procedure is to install a home network card into each computer to be networked, install the associated software, and set up sharing and Internet rights for your network.

SOME TELECOMMUTING RESOURCES

Websites

- www.att.com/telework/index.html
- www.efax.com
- www.gilgordon.com
- www.spotlife.com
- www.webex.com

Publications

- *Turn It Off: How to Unplug From the Anytime-Anywhere Office Without Disconnecting Your Career*, by Gil Gordon

- *Managing Telework: Strategies for Managing the Virtual Workforce*, by Jack Nilles

- "The Home Sharing Network," by Bob Ryan, in *Access* magazine

◀ <http://195.7.48.75/release/mag/access/021801/p8s1m.htm> for information on home networking

Organizations

- American Telecommuting Organization

◀ <http://www.knowledgetree.com/ata.html>

- ITAC, International Telework Association & Council

◀ www.telecommute.org

Generally, you'll want the computer with the highest speed access to the Internet to act as the server for the rest of your computers on your home network. So, if the computer in your daughter's room has a cable modem and your work computer has a 56k modem, your daughter's computer should be the server.

One note: If you're going to use phone lines to install your home network, you'll need to ensure there's a working phone jack near the system. You can't create a network through plug-in phone jacks from an electronics store.

An uninterruptible power supply. You might want to look into a UPS for each of your computers. It can provide surge protection and back-up power to your computer. With the software installed and UPS properly connected to your computer, the system will shut down automatically during a power loss. The computer will stay powered long enough for it to be shut down safely by the UPS software. Think about purchasing a UPS. My first set of home network cards was destroyed by a power surge.

Miscellaneous phone services. If you don't have an answering machine, you might want to sign up for

additional phone services. I recommend voicemail and caller ID. Voicemail takes multiple calls at the same time. Caller ID will display the phone number of inbound callers if the numbers are available. Cecile Marie advised me to get a permanent toll-free number. If I have to move, I'll still have the same number and people who don't know I've moved will be able to contact me.

A digital camera for the computer. If you're involved in Web-based collaborative meetings, you might consider investing in a digital camera for your PC. You can send video images of yourself through the Internet to people you're talking with. That works well with applications such as WebEx [◀ webex.com](http://www.webex.com) and Spotlife [◀ spotlife.com](http://www.spotlife.com).

A comfortable chair. You'll do a lot of work sitting in your home office, so don't scrimp on your chair. Your back will pay for it.

An office of some sort. You don't have to have a separate office in your house or apartment, but you'll need a permanent place that's isolated from the rest of your abode. It can be a corner in a bedroom, the living room, or the basement. You don't want to carry stuff around looking for a place to work. Some telecommuters work from their cars using their laptops. Make sure you have basic office supplies such as a stapler, pens, paper clips, and paper at the ready at all times.

Plenty of trainers, especially contract trainers and performance consultants, telecommute. The biggest difference in the way they operate from other telecommuters is probably the necessity for mobile computing power. Trainers often have to serve and communicate with their client base remotely, so it's important for them to have access to their work tools locally. There's nothing more tiresome than taking sheets of notes on legal paper so you can re-enter them on your computer. For telecommuting trainers, a portable computer is a micro office with their tools, templates, job aids, and more.

Now you have some idea of what telecommuting might be like and how to prepare. The decision whether to go remote is up to you! TD

Darin E. Hartley is developer of new business ventures for ASTD and a telecommuter based in Texas. He's also the author of *On-Demand Learning: Training in the New Millennium* and the upcoming *Selling E-Learning* (ASTD Press, September 2001); dhartley@astd.org.