

Managing Telecommuters

BY FRANCINE WERTHERMANN CAMPAGNA

WITH TELECOMMUTING being the buzzword du jour in business circles these days, you'd think we really did find a new and better way to slice bread. Just pick up any business publication and you're likely to find reasons why telecommuting is a hot ticket, from saving the environment to using office space more effectively.

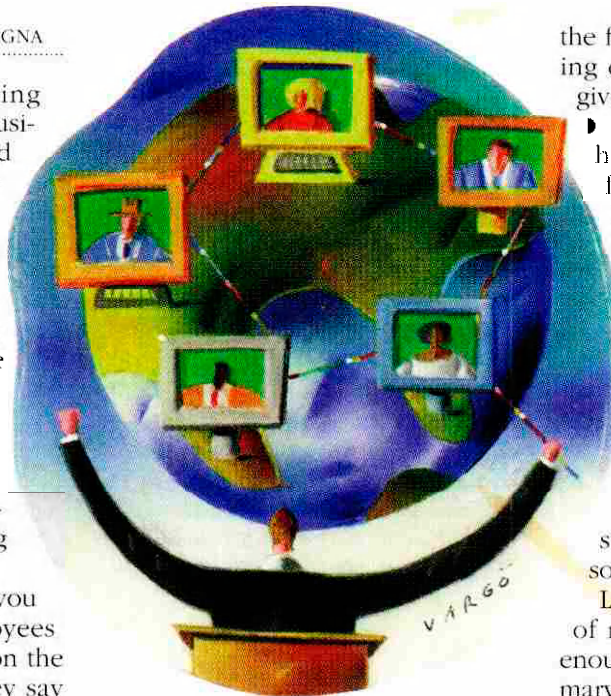
However, when your training department and your clients are located all over the country, there are some distinct disadvantages to having telecommuting employees.

A major disadvantage is that you have no idea what your employees are doing. You know what is on the training schedule and what they say they are doing, but a trainer's work is only partially in the classroom. Doing preparation and follow-up, loading a client's database, making travel arrangements, and so forth all take up a trainer's time. Seeing people do those tasks in the next office is one thing, but if your employee lives clear across the country, you're relying totally on an honor system.

Tip: Get written documentation from your trainers whenever possible. Sure, they should be documenting everything anyway, but this forces them to do it and gives you some clues to what work they are actually doing. Legally, written documentation is a good idea anyway in case a client—or, worse, an employee—sues you.

Another challenge is collecting basic personnel information, such as sick leave and vacation days taken. Again, an honor system prevails because telecommuters can tell you what they are entitled to in a given pay period. Getting information on a regular, timely basis to meet payroll deadlines is a task in itself. It does you no good to know a trainer was sick a month later.

Tip: Require monthly or twice-monthly accounting, preferably via e-mail or fax. Not only is this an efficient method of transferring information, but it also creates a permanent record.



Note how many days the trainer spent traveling, training, working at home, being sick, and taking vacation. Then, compare those totals to the number of days a staff employee would work in a month. That tells you whether the trainer is under-working or over-working in a given month. A side bonus is that at budget time, you'll have information to generate management reports on labor-overhead costs.

A third challenge is communications. While that might seem like a peripheral issue, it can be crucial when it comes to keeping a trainer motivated, inspired, and wanting to continue to work for your company. People feel a great need to be connected and to be supported by their bosses and co-workers. Some telecommuters work entirely on their own, and they can feel lost. It's hard to build team spirit when your team is spread across the country.

Tip: Here are some ways to stay in touch.

• Create twice-a-month e-mail newsletters just for your department, with training tips and news from the home office. Cyber-bonding isn't as good as being face-to-face, but it will help telecommuters feel part of a team.

• Distribute the ever-changing training schedule via e-mail, and include funny training stories from

the field. That way, you are distributing critical information quickly and giving it a friendly spin.

• Hold quarterly meetings at the home office. Though expensive, face-to-face meetings are critical for discussing policies, procedures, and new training techniques. They also reinforce the tie to the company.

• Make phone calls. Not e-mail or voice mail, but a real phone call. Though that can easily turn into phone tag when employees are on the road, nothing beats a real conversation once in a while. However, it can be very time-consuming if your department is large, so do it only when necessary.

Last, but not least, is the challenge of reviewing your staff. It is hard enough to review trainers whose primary jobs are off-site. But when you see them maybe four times a year, just how much information do you have to go on?

Tip: Keep all written communications from and to staff members. Document and date any verbal communication involving policies, procedures, and personnel issues. Pay close attention to clients' training evaluations. And make scheduled observations of training sessions. If you have a large training staff, that can be difficult so you may be able to observe only one session a year.

Despite the challenges, there are a lot of reasons telecommuting makes sense. When it's feasible, you can match a trainer to a client in the same part of the country, which reduces expense and travel time. If a trainer has a family, he or she can work at home, which eases the difficulty of being on the road a lot. And, I guess we are helping save the environment.

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