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Teleworking v commuting

The disruption to Britain's railways by striking signalling staff seems as good an excuse as any to take a fresh look at the merits of teleworking .

It may be that this form of employment comprises part of your working week already. A Department of Employment study in February found that one in 10 employers had at least one home-based worker and BT has estimated that by 1995 2.25m people will be working from home three days or more a week in the UK.

For the rest of us, it is perhaps one of those employment ideas that has been shelved in the rainy day file to be pulled out, dusted down and re-examined with the toast and marmalade as we face the prospect of lengthy traffic queues on the way to work.

The idea of teleworking is nothing new. The advent of the personal computer, modem and the Fax machine make working from home, in theory, a far more feasible proposition.

Information technology developments accompanied by greater availability, quality, reliability and cheaper prices have led to increasing numbers of employees often deciding that there are different ways to organise their workloads.

Noel Hodson, director of Strategic Workstyles 2000, an Oxford-based teleworking consultancy, has studied the prevalence of what he terms 'tacit teleworking' , where it has been adopted almost unconsciously by employees outside the policies of their employers.

When he investigated teleworking at the World Bank headquarters in Washington he was informed by its personnel department that it did not exist there. An inquiry among information technology specialists however, revealed they had established communications links for 1,000 teleworkers a day.

'This meant that the equivalent of 240,000 man-days a year were being worked outside formal systems. The personnel people were rather cross when they found out,' says Hodson.

The spread of tacit teleworking is such that some organisations are unclear how many of their employees are what might be termed 'in station' at any one time. Dr Frank Becker at Cornell University carried out a survey of empty desks in a number of companies and found 70 per cent unstaffed in some offices.

Teleworking often evolves naturally but it is sometimes triggered by an outside event. Within hours of the Los Angeles earthquake last year, thousands of telephone lines were being installed in peripheral offices allowing people to work outside the city. In the UK, the immediate stimulus may be transport problems caused by industrial action but high office rents have also driven the trend.

Digital, the US-based computer company, began introducing teleworking among its employees six years ago: now 40 per cent of its 4,000 UK workforce have modems or similar links for using personal computers and other communications equipment from home.

The latest stage in developing the concept involved closing down Digital's Newmarket office in April. The office, which used to accommodate 100 people, was replaced with a small tele-centre manned by nine staff and supporting 80 people working around it.

In-coming telephone calls are taken by the Newmarket or Welling offices and re-routed to people's homes without the caller knowing that they are speaking to anyone outside an ordinary office.

Ian Christie, Digital's marketing manager for flexible work services, said the reorganisation was saving the company about a third of a million pounds a year on direct property costs and running costs.

'Generally speaking the response has been very positive but it must be said that we have very few people who work five days a week from home. It is part of managers' responsibilities to have regular team meetings for which a three-line whip is essential,' he says.

Teleworking has been criticised for divorcing employees from their normal social contact in the office but Christie argues that it can create greater contact if people ensure that they do not isolate themselves. 'Instead of meeting the same faces around the coffee machine you make a much broader social circle.'

Christie says he often chooses to work at Digital's head office in Reading deliberately to pick up those unexpected contacts or jobs that tend to materialise in the conventional office.

Noel Hodson believes there is a powerful economic argument for teleworking. He says that 18 per cent of all office time, the equivalent of almost a full working day, is taken up with office politics. Moreover, the time saved that would be normally spent commuting can be utilised for work.

He says: 'I used to spend four hours a day commuting from my home in Oxford to north London. That was the equivalent to half a working year.'

Hodson adds that the momentum for teleworking has grown markedly in the past year. He has just completed some research which concludes that teleworking is going to increase the number of jobs by promoting what he calls the '24-hour society', already happening among some telephone sales organisations unrestricted by normal office hours. He estimates that equipping Europe with an 'information super highway' adopting Integrated Services Digital Network lines - high quality computer links - and optic fibres allowing speedy computer communications will create 3m jobs, although many of these may be outside Europe itself.

A Henley Centre for Forecasting study suggested that 50 per cent of UK jobs overall could be teleworked and predicted that 15 per cent of all work could be sourced from home by the end of the century, equivalent to 3.3m jobs.

These predictions may turn out to be over-enthusiastic because of the inherent resistance to working from home among many people and indeed some companies.

These seem manifest in a number of anxieties. There is an innate desire to be seen to be there and doing something. We dare not be away. It may not be an idle fear. Reading the other day about purges instigated by Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution it was noticeable how many party officials were denounced simply

because they were absent at the time of meetings to discuss potential recalcitrants. Corporate Britain may feel far removed from this but office plotting is not unknown.

So teleworking takes a certain hardiness and confidence. Why not try it? If you're stuck at home, strike-bound and haven't planned your day beforehand, it is probably already too late to maximise your time outside work. Hodson suggests an action plan for setting up a teleworking day:

- Prepare two days work with all the files and stationary you need.
- Organise a work area and make it clear to your family that this isn't a day off.
- Circulate telephone and Fax numbers and agree how often you need to stay in touch.

Managers, he says, should ensure that not everyone is outside the office and should afterwards review the benefits of part-time teleworking for the company.

There is a downside to teleworking among people who find it difficult to draw the line between work and home life. Parents find it hard to explain that they are not always available to their children.

Often there is also a tendency for people who cannot let go of their work to do too much. If you don't fit that description you might take another tip: turn the sound down on the TV when when you answer the telephone. The echo of tennis balls has a distinctive resonance.

For more information: Teleworking Explained by Noel Hodson, published by Wiley and Sons, price £25.