

## A case for home-based employment and telecommuting

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Organizational cost savings and effectiveness. People with disabilities. The environment. Individual health and family well being.

You may wonder what these disparate issues have in common. The answer is that each would be significantly enhanced by the widespread adoption by both private and public employers of home-based employment practices such as telecommuting.

What is telecommuting? Telecommuting, home-based employment, and “work at home” are all terms for an increasingly common employment practice whereby an individual employed by someone else carries out some or all of their work responsibilities from home. It can take many forms. A company may allow individuals in designated departments or positions to work from an in-home office – often equipped with a computer and work station. Employees may log into an office system that tracks their hours, and other systems can be set up to monitor output.

Another form of home-based employment occurs when a company outsources call center work, such as the processing of telephone orders, distribution of forms or information, etc.

Other examples are when an individual or “e-lancer” signs up with web-based company or other type of organization to perform a specific task at home.

According to a study conducted by the Dieringer Research Group of World at Work (2006), the number of Americans telecommuting at least one day per month grew 10 percent between 2005 and 2006, with roughly 20 percent (28.7 million) of the workforce engaged in some types of telecommuting work. It is predicted that this number will grow to an estimated 100 million workers by 2010 due to factors such as increased access to wireless and broadband connections.

For Vermont, our employers, our workers, and our environment, the benefits to be gained from promoting home-based employment are significant.

For Employers: Let's start with economic and budgetary cost savings. The reduced need for office space means reduced rent and overhead. Companies can grow without the need to create additional workstations or build new office spaces. In a cold climate like Vermont's, employers pay lower heating costs. When contractual or free lance telecommuters are used, there are additional savings in payroll taxes and employee benefits.

Financial benefits also accrue to the organization through increased employee retention, reducing the number of employees who resign because they want or need to move to a new location. For example, Merrill Lynch reported a 6 percent decrease in employee turnover as a result of its telecommuting program, along with a 15 percent increase in productivity.

Employers also benefit from organizational and staffing flexibility. Recruiting efforts are enhanced because employees can be hired from a broader geographic area. In Vermont, this means tapping into talented and available labor pools that might otherwise be unavailable because of the state's rural nature and limited public transportation.

Then of course there is productivity. Employees who telecommute from home can also work from other places, resulting in a greater opportunity for productive work hours throughout the day. Furthermore, employees who enjoy the flexible and independent work environment afforded by telecommuting experience fewer distractions and disruptions, higher morale, increased motivation and less absenteeism. In addition, there is less interference of work by bad weather – a particular consideration here in Vermont.

For Employees: Employees who telecommute experience lowered commuting costs (gas, automobile maintenance, bus fair), lowered personal costs (child care, lunches out), better work / home life balance, the ability to care for older family members in the home, and the ability to be home for children. For many individuals, child care options are often limited or nonexistent. Furthermore, for parents on certain benefits, the ability to work at home allows them to work without having to give a high portion of their earnings to expensive childcare.

For Employees with Disabilities: Telecommuting and working at home is an especially significant option for an employee who has a disability. Job opportunities can be opened up for individuals with disabilities who are unable to leave their homes, or who are hindered in gaining employment because of barriers such as lack of transportation or geographic distance. Telecommuting also allows them to customize a work schedule to accommodate fluctuations in functioning due to their disability.

For the State and our environment: Finally, telecommuting can help with the growing concern about global warming and energy conservation. One of the largest sources of pollution is motor vehicles. Telecommuting significantly reduces driving and associated automobile emissions. It also takes a load off of our highways, lessening costs for roadway building and maintenance.

Here in Vermont, there could be no better time to adopt this practice as a means of addressing the pressing economic, environmental, employment, and health issues facing our state.

Employers and the state government can save money and increase worker productivity, while improving the environment at the same time. Most importantly, for the workforce – especially individuals with disabilities and the working poor - this ability to work from home can be the key factor allowing them to secure and retain employment, achieve economic self sufficiency, maintain self esteem, give back to their communities, and lead a healthy life.

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