

Telecommuting through virtual office; good but not for everyone

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I'm writing this article, sitting in the comfort of my home, watching the snow pile up outside. While I rarely work outside the office like this, I was thinking appropriately about past articles I wrote for NEREJ about how "telecommuting" was here to stay. The articles build upon one another. But my conclusion had been that there would be more telecommuting, and thus less needed office space. Yes, in my last article, I gave a small nod to problems with working outside the office, but I had already made up my mind. The facts were that over the last ten years, required work space for employees had decreased from 250 s/f to 185 s/f according an analysis provided by CoStar.

Yet, as I sat comfortably at my desk writing, I felt a little lonely and even somewhat guilty in my telecommute. It became clear that some were not the right personality to work outside the office, and that there must be more to the negative side than I had given credit for.

For example, as mentioned, it takes a certain personality to be out there on ones own, however well connected technologically. The telecommuter needs to be a self-starter confident enough to not need feed-back and mentoring. As you look around your own office, you'll realize that not everybody is geared that way. Many thrive on the social interaction within the office. Some overdo it, but it is clear that many benefit from the "water cooler effect." The concept is that spontaneous meetings around the cooler or the coffee machine often produce conversations that lead to creative and intuitive thinking. Office designers are on to this, recognizing that while personal office space may be decreasing, "group" space is increasing. More common space, including recreational areas, gyms, etc. is on the increase. Ultimately collaboration is the goal; perhaps both the traditional office model and telecommuting both are detrimental to this goal?

A second problem to working outside is job security and promotion. There are studies that show that people working outside the office often lose enough contact with their bosses that promotion is less likely than for those inside. This is particularly true in recessionary times such we have had, where promotions are few and far between. The adage out-of-sight out- of-mind can be dangerously true, when it relates to an employer feeling connection and loyalty to an employee. According to research done by Jones Lang LaSalle, during recessionary times, management often reverts to the old model about how to measure worker productivity, and becomes an employee clock watcher instead of measuring results.

A third problem area is one of actual and perceived distraction. People working outside of the office must be very focused. If they are distracted by children, spouses, door bells ringing, telephones,

traffic, road rage, bad restaurant service, it can in fact lead to a discouraging and unproductive day. Nothing is worse than to be on a conference call from home with other people inside the office, and to have your child crying or your dog barking in the background.

In studies by the University of Pennsylvania Wharton School, faculty members have tried to analyze the pros and the cons. The school's director of the work/life integration project feels that "one-size-fits-all policies" don't work. They believe that, while "virtual office" is good for some, or good at certain times, it is less good for example when new projects are being launched or when a company is trying to solve various problems. The research further indicates that there may be a position between "all virtual, all the time is good" to a more nuanced position of: when does virtual work and when doesn't it?

So from a real estate perspective, it may be that less office space will not be the answer. Despite the trend, a pendulum could swing towards the creation of better office space. Open plans with conducive social and recreational areas, combined with smart design and smart technology may produce a welcome relief to the lonely telecommuter. As I now sit in my "real" office, having left my house as soon as the snow stopped, I realize there are many alternatives in our future.

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