

Telecommute!

Go to Work without Leaving Home



**Lisa
Shaw**

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***Go to Work without
Leaving Home***

LISA SHAW

JOHN WILEY & SONS, INC.

New York • Chichester • Brisbane • Toronto • Singapore

*For Agnes,
the best telecommuter around*

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Shaw, Lisa Angowski Rogak.

Telecommute! : go to work without leaving home / Lisa Shaw.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-471-11820-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Telecommuting—United States. I. Title.

HD2336.35.U6S53 1996

331.25—dc20

96-1326

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Introduction

When I first started writing for a living, I used a trusty IBM Selectric typewriter—remember them?—the same kind that I learned to type on when I was a kid. When I used it to write magazine articles in the early to mid-1980s, the idea of using a computer to write was just starting to get some ink in the national media. But having suffered through a primitive programming course in high school and witnessing what a friend had to go through to organize his files on his computer—it took about ten hours to set it all up, which seemed to me a colossal waste of time—I consigned myself to being one of the technologically impaired.

Then the Macintosh came along. I watched as a boss primarily checked his bank balances with it and used it as a Rolodex. Again, it seemed like a waste of time as well as an expensive toy.

Then I had to write a 6,000-word magazine article that went through about six drafts. As my wrists began to tingle, I thought, there must be a better way.

The same thought has undoubtedly crossed your mind about your job as you sit endlessly in rush-hour traffic, buy

your seventh pair of pantyhose of the week—and it's only Tuesday—or are confronted with the office grump the minute you step off the elevator. You like your job, but you hate everything that you have to go through in order to do it properly. A light bulb may have appeared over your head at these times: Why can't I just work at home and save myself the aggravation?

The truth is that you probably can. Like the computers that facilitate telecommuting for many employees, flexible work arrangements began to catch on in the 1980s as more people began to see that there was more to life than working eighty hours a week.

In the 1970s women entered the American corporate work force in record numbers. In the 1980s they began to demand flexible work arrangements to meet their personal needs, which often included child care.

In the 1990s, technology has enabled millions of employees—both men and women—to work out of their homes for their companies for at least part of the work-week. With a computer, phone, and fax machine, it's almost as if the employee is in the next cubicle, not several towns—or states—away.

Corporations are more receptive to telecommuting in part because it helps to cut down on the amount of office space needed. And as more states enact trip-reduction laws specifically aimed at large corporations, more companies are going to be required to tell an increasing number of employees to work at home.

In a sense, even though I am self-employed, I've always been a telecommuter. I work out of my home, and different companies send me work through the mail, over the fax, and on the phone. One of my specialties is consulting with people who want to move to the country. Their biggest concern is that they can't find a good job in the rural area to which they want to move. Then I mention telecommuting to them, and their eyes light up.

If you're thinking about moving three hours away from your company, you'll probably want to work at home more than one day out of the week. But I've heard lots of horror stories about people who move to rural developments in places like eastern Pennsylvania and then spend three hours each way commuting to and from their jobs in Manhattan. Every day! What a waste. As someone who's always worked from home, I'd rather try hard drugs or poverty first.

By its very nature, telecommuting appeals to people who want to work at home but who don't necessarily want to start a business. They want to start living their own lives, but they don't want to give up all of their security—yet. Sometimes telecommuters are able to see the independence they get from calling their own shots, and a few years later they are confident enough in their abilities to start their own businesses. Many become independent consultants working for their previous company.

But this is jumping the gun. Although some people welcome the chance to work at home, many will view the opportunity with apprehension. Telecommuting will work for you if you are self-motivated, you work for a company that is not stuck in the mud when it comes to employee options, and/or you want to move to a rural area but would like to hold onto your current job in the city.

With this arrangement, unless your main duty is data entry, you'll probably have to live within a few hours of the office to maintain a satisfactory working relationship. Many telecommuters will still need to check in with the office at least half a day each week, and most feel less isolated if they're able to do so. However, I have heard of an attorney who moved from Chicago to Vermont and is still considered a full employee at the firm. She does fly back once a month to spend several days with her associates, bringing them up to date on her progress and vice versa. Her

primary function is legal research, so armed with a fax machine, computer, and telephone, she can feasibly perform this work anywhere she wants—all with the blessing of the law firm.

Telecommuting works most often when you are already working for a company. If you were to move to a rural area and then approach a company in the area about a job in which you could work at home, the chances are that you'd be turned down flat. At the very least, they'd want to try you out in-house first to see if you're a good employee and to get a sense of your strengths and weaknesses. So the person most likely to agree to a telecommuting arrangement is your present boss.

The benefit of telecommuting most often cited is an increase in productivity. Just think—no more wasted meetings or hours spent listening to the office drone who just won't take the hint and leave you alone. No more ringing phones breaking your concentration, unless you plan to spend a good part of your workday at home on the phone anyway. If you don't necessarily have to work from 9 to 5 and your home situation allows for it, you can work at the times of day when you work best and are most productive.

The first thing you should do is make sure you're cut out for telecommuting—not everybody is. Before you move, try working from home a couple of days each week. Over the course of several months, you can then make the transition to full-time telecommuting.

Telecommuting is beginning to shape up as one of the major changes to affect the American workplace in the 1990s. As such, employees are going to find that their employers, increasingly, are on their side.

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Why Telecommuting Now?

These days trends seem to come from out of nowhere and garner a lot of press overnight. All eyes turn toward whatever happens to be hot at the moment, from new concepts in the business world to expensive sports cars that look like throat lozenges. Such fads are usually very popular for awhile and then either fade into the background as consumers become blasé about them or disappear entirely as their primary appeal wears off.

On the surface, that's how it would appear to be with telecommuting, in which an employee works most often at home or in a branch office away from the corporate headquarters. "Yeah," you may think, "it's great to work at home and still pull in a paycheck, but you just wait and see, it'll never catch on." Such perceptions are understandable but probably inaccurate. Though telecommuting in any form is a radical departure from the traditional corporate structure Americans has slavishly followed for the last 100 years—work in an office, relax at home—all the signs suggest that this flexible work option will catch on permanently.

What Is Telecommuting?

Many people define a telecommuter as anyone who works outside of a traditional office, whether at home, in a satellite office, or even out of a car. Sometimes a telecommuter will refer to his or her work environment as a "virtual office," generally recognized as a nontraditional space from which one telecommutes. The Midwest Institute for Telecommuting Education, a group that consults with businesses by conducting feasibility studies and implementation seminars, defines telecommuting as the following:

Telecommuting is an off-site work arrangement that permits employees to work in or near their homes for all or part of the work week. Thus they "commute" to work by telephone and other telecommunications equipment rather than by car or transit.

Some people still regard telecommuting as a radical concept. But the U.S. economy is converting from a manufacturing base to an information-based one. Workers who process information tend to work by themselves a good part of the time anyway, which is a prime indication that telecommuting may be here to stay. The equipment necessary to telecommute on a regular basis has been coming down steadily in price, enabling more employees and businesses to pursue the advantages of telecommuting. This increase in technology also means that fewer traditional manufacturing jobs are available, and displaced employees must look for jobs that involve processing information. Link Resources, a New York consulting firm, reports that approximately 58 percent of the U.S. work force had information-based jobs in 1990, and the company predicts that a whopping 70 percent of workers in the United States will be solely employed in the processing of information by 2030.

Three Types of Telecommuting

Though telecommuting commonly refers to working from home, there are actually a couple of variations on this theme:

1. *Working from home.* In this situation employees work from a home office that may contain the same kind of equipment they use back in the central office. However, they may not need such equipment at all if they use telecommuting days to catch up on reading and research or to make phone calls.

2. *Working from a telework center.* Telework centers are typically satellite offices located some distance from the company's main office. These may be used by employees who live nearby and don't want to commute to the main office. The company may also lease part of the space to other companies that have employees who live in the area. Telework centers have an advantage over home offices in that technology and computer equipment can be shared rather than purchased separately for each telecommuter. This makes economic sense for the company, which ends up buying less equipment and using it more efficiently. Telecommuting employees work a couple of days a week from the telework center on a rotating basis, ensuring that computer terminals and workstations are in constant use. By contrast, equipment in home offices lies dormant when the telecommuter comes to work at the main office.

In some cases, companies that opt for telework centers don't have to lease space at all; they may rent space for telecommuting employees as needed. The vendor in the forefront of this trend, Kinko's, offers copying services, computer rental, conference facilities, fax machines, and other office equipment, all on an as-needed basis, which is attractive to smaller companies.

3. *Hoteling*. This form of telecommuting is used most often by sales staff who don't need a fixed desk in an office, but must land somewhere once a week or so to pick up mail, plug into the company's main database, or meet a client. It doesn't really matter which office a hoteling employee lands in; he or she may check in at an office in the southern end of the district one week, typically using a vacant desk or conference room for a couple of hours, and telecommute from the northern part of the region the next week.

These three kinds of telecommuting are defined by location. Two other kinds of telecommuting are defined by structure. One kind is conducted under a formal in-house corporate policy; another, more common kind develops in response to individual employee needs. These informal types of telecommuting are often temporary arrangements agreed upon by both employee and supervisor.

Jack Nilles, known as the father of telecommuting, is credited with coining the term back in 1973. Today he runs a consulting firm, JALA Associates, and he refers to telecommuting as a form of telework, which he defines as work conducted via telecommunications instead of in person. In an article he contributed to the journal *Transportation Research*, Nilles broadens his definition even more:

Telecommuting is not a technology or collection of technologies. Rather, it is a work option that reduces dependency on transportation by increasing dependency on information technologies. Telecommuting can be accomplished with no more exotic a technology than a telephone (Transportation Research 22A, no. 4, (1988): 301-317).

Telecommuting—also commonly referred to as *flexiplace*—applies to everyone from an employee who occasionally works at home during busy periods to minimize interruptions, to a person who regularly spends certain days of the

week working from home. The full-time telecommuter is rare; most people say they need to have contact with other people and check in at the office at least once a week. Some small businesses, however, take it to the extreme, with the boss and all the employees working out of their homes. They may get together once a week just to touch base. Such contact in this kind of company often is social and informal.

With telecommuting, the home becomes only one of several work sites employees can choose. Telecommuters can also use satellite offices if the corporation is large enough to have a number of them. Some telecommuting is not voluntary in companies that need to cut costs. For example, IBM recently started closing down leased and owned space and ordering some employees to work from home. By cutting out leased space, companies can transfer real estate costs to their employees. Right now the idea works because many employees are dying to work at home. But the balance could be tipped if some employees don't have households where it's possible to work or don't do well working alone.

Telecommuting: A Growing Trend

Telecommuting is catching on across the country for a number of reasons.

Futurist Alvin Toffler, author of *Future Shock* and *The Third Wave*, frequently foretold that millions of U.S. workers would work at home in what he dubbed "electronic cottages." He also predicted that massive urban office buildings would stand empty, but this hasn't come to pass—yet.

One surprising ally of telecommuting is the current Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich. In a panel discussion on National Public Radio about the future direction of the United States, Gingrich cited Toffler's model of transforming