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## Telecommuting Troubleshooting

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by Joanne Kuzma

Telecommuting, part- or full-time, is a popular and successful trend for Americans looking to log in from their homes. While the benefits of telecommuting abound, businesses must address a number of issues if they are planning to allow their employees to work in this fashion. The following is a short list of a few problems that may arise for the telecommuter.

### 1. Difficulty in training/learning

Integral to the learning process is direct observation of peers and supervisors. In an office or cubicle environment, it is easy to watch others and quickly adapt to new concepts. Telecommuting does not allow for this learning process to take place as employees are generally isolated from each other. This makes it especially difficult for new employees to learn the "nuances" and subtleties of a new company's work environment as well as undocumented policies and procedures.

### 2. Lack of verbal communication/reliance on e-mails

An office environment allows co-workers and supervisor/subordinates to have impromptu verbal discussions about work-related (and personal) issues. Home-based work does not foster a way for the quick office drop-in or informal chat. Working from home, co-workers often end up playing phone tag with others. With the convenience of e-mail, voice mail can be perceived as a hassle and keep people from trying to talk in-person. As a result, telecommuters can waste time e-mailing a topic back and forth between various co-workers rather than arranging a quick conference call. In these instances, e-mail becomes a wasteful "crutch".

Another problem with e-mail is that the tone of the messages can be misconstrued without verbal cues and face-to-face communication. In general, it is difficult to ensure that e-mail messages will communicate what the sender intended in a professional manner. Often due to a lack of "team" feel, these matters may languish in a work-at-home environment without any face-to-face mediation to discuss communication problems.

### 3. Isolation and lack of "team" environment

Without regularly scheduled weekly meetings or outings, group members may feel isolated and lack a "team" attitude. It is hard to get to know and trust co-workers if they are merely phone voices. This lack of a team environment will break down the lines of verbal communication, which will accelerate the trend to isolate team members.

### 4. Separation of work and home

Let's face it - most of us enjoy getting away from the office. However, telecommuters never leave the office. It is too easy to get into the mode of hearing the phone ring or the fax machine work at night, and run into the office just to see what is happening. This converts the living environment into a 24-7 office.

### 5. Residential zoning issues

With the growth of deed-restricted neighborhoods, having a full-time office at home may be a legal issue. Some associations or cities have strict policies that restrict home business practices (i.e. prohibit signs, deliveries, customers, etc.). Telecommuters must be sure that they meet all legal-zoning requirements. Most telecommuters ignore this issue until a neighbor ends up reporting them to the city or association.

There are several things companies can do to ensure that telecommuting is a win-win for both employees and the firm. Here are just a few suggestions:

#### 1. Care in hiring/choosing telecommuting employees

It is critical that companies carefully screen potential telecommuting employees. Several important questions to ask are: Why do you want to work from home, what makes you think you will be successful working from home, tell me what the cons of telecommuting are and how you plan to avoid them. If an employee answers something like, "I want to work from home because I can stay home all day and baby-sit my three kids," you can thank that candidate for the nice interview and move onto the next person.

The prospective employee must be independent, self-motivated, and have the right personality to work in this type of environment.

#### 2. Weekly meetings

It is crucial to have weekly face-to-face meetings. At the bare minimum, a half-day once a week should be dedicated to a business meeting (combining it with an informal lunch or dinner is also a good idea).

#### 3. Partial telecommuting option

Another good way to overcome telecommuting problems is to combine working at home several days of the week with working in the office for the remainder. This situation provides best of both worlds - the flexibility to have several days to concentrate at home without any major distractions, and office time to attend meetings, catch up on critical business and establish that much-needed team environment of a successful firm.

*Joanne Kuzma is the founder of a telecommuting recruiting firm in Florida which specializes in ERP and e-commerce markets. She has been in the recruiting business for the past five years. She has also been a consultant for Andersen Consulting. You can reach Joanne at 727-530-3090 or by e-mail at [MK6281@aol.com](mailto:MK6281@aol.com).*

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