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Confessions of a Telecommuter

by Mary H. Simmons

I enjoy my job too much. For starters, I get challenging work. I work with great people. Usually, I only have to fight traffic one day a week. Last, but not least, my office has a great view of my rose garden — and the pond where our confused goldfish jump out of the water like porpoises. Most of the time, I work from an office in my home. I am a telecommuter.

Once upon a time, work meant having to be in “the office” with everyone else, chained to a desk in a cubicle. Now, more and more people are taking work home on



laptops and putting in at least some hours outside the office.

Over the last few years, I’ve learned a lot about working successfully from home, partly because my husband and I have been sharing an office. Through our experiences, and those of others we know, I’ve come to realize that working in the home impacts every aspect of the telecommuter’s life.

Before you think about moving your office into your home, even part time, I suggest that you consider it carefully. Thought and planning can make things go much more smoothly. This includes having an adequate workspace set up with appropriate equipment, getting buy-in from your manager and coworkers, and getting buy-in from your family.

I recommend having an office set up, isolated from the rest of the house in order to eliminate distractions and background noise. (It isn’t necessary, but it is

ideal.) Ergonomic furniture is important if you will be working from home. Backaches from bad chairs and tendonitis from a bad keyboard/mouse set-up can happen at home as well as the office. Also, working from home may involve more use of the telephone. A good headset can help to avoid neck aches.

It is important that you evaluate whether your work can be done from home. If so, what equipment does it take? For me, being able to be online and be on the phone at the same time is important. Is high speed network access needed? If so,

is it available? I use a regular internet connection, but I have a laptop so that I can transport large amounts of data to and from the office physically.

Getting buy-in from the people you work for and with is important. This will depend on the people you work with, the kind of work you do, and the kind of worker you are. It is a major plus if you have been with the company for a while. It is easier to continue established business relationships long distance than it is to establish new ones.

An often neglected piece of the planning is to include family in making the decisions. Moving work into your home can create havoc at home if you aren’t careful.

Most articles on telecommuting stress the importance of self-motivation. Rightly so, but that isn’t all that there is. My success on the job depends on more than my performance. It depends on my manager, my coworkers, and even people in other departments with whom I have to interface.

I faced a number of challenges early on. First of all, because I was in the

office one day a week, many people would wait until I was in the office to either answer questions or ask them. This was a real problem because it made it harder for me to do my job. These people often caught themselves saying things like “Mary works on Fridays,” as though I didn’t work on any other day of the week. I had to be persistent, but I was not able to influence some people on my own. My manager’s hard-headed determination put an end to most of the problem. Without her support, I would have been made into a lame-duck without even getting a chance to prove myself.

Another problem that I have had is that I only have one voice line. Sometimes I get work phone calls during non-work hours. This one is a double whammy. I owe it to my family to be “at home” when I am not working. However, if I do not present a sufficiently business-like attitude to the caller, they may assume that I am playing when I am supposed to be working. I’ve learned to state plainly if I am not currently working, but if the question is quick and I can answer it without my computer, I am willing to. For most people, this is satisfactory.

One of the biggest challenges that a telecommuter faces is the self-discipline to do the work without any of the structure of being in the office with others. For me, I found that I had to simply impose my own structure. I have a starting ritual for my day. I take a lunch hour. Since I allow myself slightly flexible hours, I keep a time card to ensure that I don’t lose track.

Telecommuting influences more than just my job. Bringing work into the home has an impact on the home. While my husband’s previous job wasn’t exactly telecommuting, it was similar in that his office was at home, while his superiors and support personnel were in another location. His job was quite unstructured.

As a life insurance company actuary, I keep my work hours very close to the work hours of my coworkers in the office. My husband was able to be very flexible with his hours. He sometimes worked more after dinner than he did during the day.

Most of his coworkers had a similar schedule, or lack of schedule. This kind of freedom in scheduling can actually create more strife at home than a regular schedule can. A regular schedule makes working from home seem somewhat "normal" — like being at the office, without the driving. Lack of a schedule combined with lack of communication can lead the spouse to feel like they are being ignored. Children may not understand why Daddy is at home, but can't play.

The solution to this problem is simple. There has to be a formal office and formal office hours in the home. If possible, there should be a separate phone line so that business calls are not received except when they are supposed to be received. Most of all, all the members of the family — worker, spouse, and children — have to understand the boundaries that separate work from home and they have to respect that.

Another area where telecommuting has an effect is physical. Even with a sedentary office job, there is more exercise than you might think. Walking through the parking lot, up the steps, etc. Working from home, there is a kitchen nearby and there may not be any compelling reason to even leave the house. It takes an extra measure of awareness to stay active. On the other hand, you can put an exercise bike in your office if you want to and ride while reading memos.

I asked a few friends last fall what they found most surprising about telecommuting. The answer that most surprised me was "tired eyes." When you attend a meeting in the office with others, you probably are looking at faces rather than a computer screen. When you attend a "meeting" at home, via the phone, you are probably looking at the computer while you do it. It is important to remember to rest the eyes. I sometimes focus on

the woods — just to make sure that the deer aren't finding their way around the fence to eat my rose garden.

My husband said that the thing that most surprised him was how much he missed the non-verbal communication of talking to someone face to face. Over the phone, he felt that communication was incomplete. Not all of the people that he worked with were very reliable. He couldn't always tell whether he was being lied to over the phone. It is harder to tell a lie face to face.

For me, there have been various surprises. I take less sick time. Partly because I get sick less — less exposure to the guy down the hall who should have stayed home instead of sharing his cold with others. Partly because there is less reason to take sick leave. I don't have to drive an hour through rush hour traffic and then climb four flights of stairs to get to my office. I'm not getting as tired as I would otherwise.

I have been through two pregnancies while telecommuting. In both cases, I would have had to go on full time disability at least one month prior to delivery because of complications. However, since I worked from home and could rest as needed, I was able to continue working reduced hours. In one case, I was able to wrap up my year end work before going on disability.

I was also surprised by the different types and levels of stress. I thought initially that working from home would prove less stressful. Sometimes it is, but mostly there are different stresses and there are different ways of dealing with the stress. For example, working from home I have to do things that I don't have to do in the office. There is no secretary to stock the supply cabinet and no technician to fix my computer. Normally it isn't

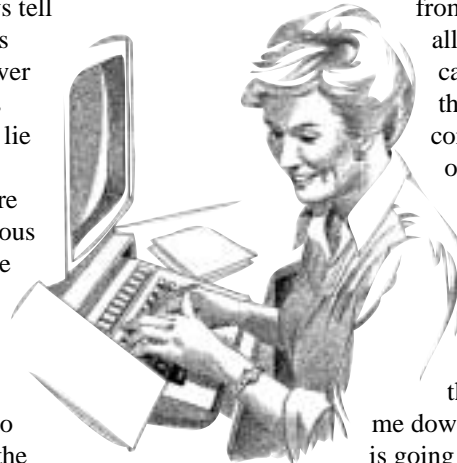
that bad, but in one day last month, I got a computer virus that locked up my machine. Meanwhile, my printer was out of toner and I was out of printer paper.

In the same way, if there is something going wrong at home, it is hard to leave it behind when home is in the next room. Laundry piling up? Sick children? Leaking roof?

Sometimes I miss the drive home from work. After working intently all day long, a little alone time can be nice before walking into the living room to be confronted with all the realities of being wife and mother.

The best part of telecommuting though is that the stress doesn't have to accumulate. I can take a real break and get completely away from all the work problems that have me down. On a day when everything is going bad, I get to go outside at lunch and blow bubbles with my son. I can refocus and get back into a productive state faster than I could in the office. I love that part about my job.

The worst thing? I don't get to go out for Chinese food often enough.



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