

JUNE, 2007
USA TODAY

Companies help workers save on gas costs
Stephanie Armour

The breathtaking cost of gas has companies adopting programs to curb commuting costs and employees developing more economical alternatives to driving to work.

Employers are taking action as average national gas prices persist above \$3 a gallon.

Nearly 90% of employees drive to work, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Thirteen percent of companies offer transit subsidies, and 7% subsidize carpooling, according to a 2006 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management. Twenty-six percent allow telecommuting on a part-time basis.

For example:

- The University of Portland has launched an initiative to provide a Flexcar (which allows users to share access to vehicles) to faculty and students. The university subsidizes the first four hours of personal use of the car a month.

"We almost doubled (users) in the past month because of rising gas costs," says Jeffrey Rook, environmental health and safety officer at the Oregon university. The school also subsidizes bus passes, and last August launched a shuttle bus program.

"At some point," Rook says, "the cost of gas becomes too uncomfortable to drive."

- Ernst & Young's Houston office has adopted flexible work options to eliminate peak commutes. It also allows flexible work schedules, which enable employees to avoid costly commutes. About 10% of the firm's 25,000 U.S. workforce works on a formal flexible work arrangement.

"There are people who rarely darken the door of our office," says David Bruesehoff, director of human resources for the Southwest area. "There is an increased level of interest (in flexible work) because of gas prices."

- PAN Communications, a public relations firm in Andover, Mass., has launched a gas-saving program for employees. If employees commute with one or more of their colleagues, the company reimburses them for a portion of their commuting mileage.

In last week's Federal Reserve beige book report on regional economic conditions, the Philadelphia Fed noted that some businesses are giving employees prepaid gas cards.

Many employees are interested in finding alternatives to costly commutes. Fifty-five percent of workers who are interested in flexible work arrangements and telecommuting wanted to do so because they wanted to save the time and money spent on commuting,

according to a new study commissioned by Microsoft.

Some employees also are taking matters into their own hands — and legs. Jamie Hampton, an account executive with Bailey Gardiner in San Diego, bikes the 15-mile round trip to work instead of driving. Her fiancé, Adrian Ortiz, 35, an ad salesman, also bikes to work several times a week.

"I feel so much better when my coworkers come in and say how much it costs to fill up the tank," Hampton, 28, says.

"And I get the best parking spot, because I can just bring my bike inside."

Has your company done anything to encourage you to cut the energy cost of your commute?