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Telecommuting: Pros and cons

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TUCSON, Ariz. - More than 40 percent of this company's workers don't come to the office every day.

But managers don't mind when or where employees work - as long as they get the job done well.

That's the IBM way of work-life balance.

"When employees have flexibility and autonomy on when and where they work, they're more productive and more committed to the business," said Andre'a Jackson, IBM's manager of work-life, flexibility and mobility.

In fact, workers say flexibility is the second-highest reason - behind compensation - they stay with IBM, Jackson said.

Mike Solan is a longtime IBM finance and marketing professional in Tucson who has worked from his home since 2001.

In the office, "I was the sort of person who would go down the hall and talk to somebody rather than call them on the phone," he said.

Now, Solan said he would have a hard time working from an office again. He spends a lot of time on the phone, but also in chat rooms and in a virtual meeting room where team members can see a common drawing board.

"It's like being in the same room with the folks," he said. "I certainly don't miss the commute," which was at least a half-hour each way.

Working from home provides Solan more flexibility in his work schedule, like when he has to get up early to take an early call from Brazil, he said.

IBM is evaluating the pros and cons of telecommuting through a study by Jay Mulki, assistant professor of marketing at Northeastern University in Boston.

Mulki said that telecommuting presents two major challenges: a feeling of isolation and achieving a work-life balance.

Engineer Jose Chavez is one of the highest-ranking technical professionals at IBM and has worked from home for the past four years.

Communicating with co-workers over instant messenger keeps him from feeling isolated. But it's not an exact replacement for face-to-face contact, he said.

"You have to be a little more careful of what you type," Chavez said, because the online chatting includes no non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions or tones of voice.

Isolation happens when telecommuters can't get the support they need, Mulki said. When face-to-face communication isn't possible, workers need a substitute - and voice mail isn't it, he said.

The other aspect is a feeling that work isn't being recognized. Employees appreciate managers who "toot their horn," Mulki said.

Other best practices included starting meetings by asking where everyone spent his or her weekend.

And those who successfully manage telecommuters differ from traditional office managers, Mulki said.

"Managers are not the traditional command-and-control managers; they're more like coaches," he said. "They say, 'Tell me what you need, and I'll go get it,' or they run obstacles for their employee."

Mutual trust is key to this work situation, Mulki said. Employees resent managers who give the impression of monitoring them, he said.

And when it comes to work-life balance, working from home can be good - or bad.

"On the employer side, when you're at home, you're always available," Mulki said. "On the employee side, you wanted to be there to pick up your kid, or whatever the case may be."

When you're commuting to an office, the drive is a transition time, he said.

"When you're working at home, if you're not careful, you're never disengaged. You're always involved," Mulki said.

People who overcome the problem of work overtaking life have a separate room or workspace, they dress for work instead of staying in their pajamas and they take scheduled breaks and sick days when they need to.

Solan said he had a hard time learning when to quit work at the end of the day.

Breaks also have changed. If water-cooler conversations start over the phone, it's easy to excuse yourself, Solan said. Now breaks are for stretching or letting his dog outside.