

The Boulder County BUSINESS REPORT

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Desire to work from home simply a primal human urge

Going to work" is becoming old school. "Work" is now something you do and no longer a location. The growth of telecommuting, home-based businesses, cellphones, laptops and other mobile means is mute testimony to the idea that more and more people are leaving the traditional office behind.

An AT&T Telework white paper in April of 2003 states, "A significant increase in remote working is taking place," and John Challenger, chief executive of Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc., an international outplacement consulting firm, predicts "telecommuting will be the predominant workplace trend in the next 20 years."

This socioeconomic shift that is quietly under way promises to literally alter not just the entire commercial landscape but also the where and how people choose to live. The forward-thinking businessperson would be well advised to consider how this would alter every aspect of running a business in the very near future.

We are returning to a primal way of life that we are all hard-wired to prefer. Modern technology and the Information Age are allowing us to return to a lifestyle where we live and work in the same place, just as it used to be.

For the first 500,000 years or so of our existence we were all farmers or hunter-gatherers, and we lived and worked in the same place. Then along came the Industrial Revolution, and we had to go to where the jobs and machines were located. We started "going to work." We brought that thinking into the dawn of the Communication Age and built tall buildings filled with individual workspaces called offices. "Going to work" evolved into something we now call a "commute," which meant putting on a "uniform," getting into a fossil-fuel burning vehicle, leaving our home space and driving to another space where we replicate a chair, desk, phone and roof over our head. And our workspace and our home space were more divided than ever. When we were at work, we couldn't do much about home life, and at home we couldn't do much about work issues.

Then along came the Information Age, and our jobs became the sharing of information. Our days were filled with communications, phones, faxes, computers and a diminishing amount of face time with customers. The "back office" idea flourished with its attendant Dilbert culture, but we were all still "going to work."

The advent of modems begat "telecommuting." Phones were already everywhere, but now data could be shared from anywhere. Workspace didn't have to be centralized and could be done from anywhere, even from home, and management took notice of the idea "that just because you hired them doesn't mean that you have to house them."

At first it wasn't easy, but ultimately, progressive companies like IBM began to figure out how to work remotely. The saving in infrastructure cost is obvious, but "productivity gains are the most significant benefit of telework," according to the AT&T Telework white paper. In a properly supported, independent work environment, most people were better managers of their own output than those who worked in traditional "line of sight management" settings. As a result, a lot of middle management jobs were no longer needed.

While those at the top of the organizational chart love the idea of working remotely, so too do those on the bottom of the organizational chart. We want to go home. We want the flexibility and independence to blend our work life with our personal life. We want to choose the "when" and "how" of working. We have family care issues and commute issues and self-esteem issues.

When the kids go to bed at 8:30 at night we do not get the urge to leave home and drive to our traditional office, but we might be inclined to wander down the hall to that home-based workspace because the quiet time of night is more conducive to our work style. Even if our paycheck comes from a Fortune 500 company, working remotely still serves the American Dream of being your



GUEST OPINION

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own boss. It feels right and touches something primal within all of us to live this way; the way it used to be for so long.

The seismic shift is by no means confined to corporate culture. It has been the individual and very small business pioneer that has really advanced the frontier of working remotely. Lone Eagles, home-based businesses and “virtual” companies reap the largest rewards in terms of their bottom line and personal quality of life. However, without the resources of a large company, many of these organizations have suffered from a diminished professional presence and the very real discrimination of a “mom and pop” image.

Working remotely and professionally can go hand-in-hand. The Intelligent Office provides services that combine the necessary professionalism of a traditional office with the benefits and freedom of working remotely. Our company’s growth during the “office glut” of the last four years is evidence of the strength of this

movement. Working remotely is coming because to people it feels right, works better and costs less.

If I were investing in an office building with a shelf life of 50 to 75 years, I would certainly want to be aware that 30 to 60 percent of the current market was expected to disappear within the next five to 10 years. In fact, if I weren’t already working remotely, I sure would want to know how to do it for both personal and business reasons.

Change causes stress, but the only constant in our free enterprise system is change. Business at every level will be dramatically affected by these changes and, as always, those who recognize and embrace positive change will win the race.

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