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virtualOFFICE:

Working Smarter, Not Harder

By Scott Smith

Are you worried about the high cost of maintaining an office you're seldom in? Join the growing ranks of professionals who are working remotely. From the employee of a Fortune 500 firm to the owner of a small, home-based business, a high percentage of entrepreneurs are "just saying no" to high overhead and working on their own terms. In return, their firms not only save money, but they also cultivate a more productive, satisfied workforce and help relieve the nation's traffic congestion and air quality problems.

A new study from AT&T and *The Economist's* intelligence unit found a significant upswing in tele-working in 2004. Of the 254 executives surveyed, two-thirds reported having employees who regularly work at home, up from just over 50 percent the year before—a 33 percent increase in just one year.

Those employees who are taking advantage of flexible work choices perform better than their

counterparts, according to a recent *Workforce* magazine study of Fortune 500 firms. The magazine reported a 75 percent improvement in productivity, a 75 percent improvement in response to customers and a 63 percent rise in operating efficiencies among those working remotely.

Here are three business owners who maximized their company's success by forgoing high-cost real estate and instead relying on Boulder, Colo.-based Intelligent Office, which provides office space and services in a unique la carte way to businesses of all sizes—from the home office to the large corporation.

Traffic Solutions...

As the owner of a defensive driving school that assists clients with court-ordered and corporate driver-safety classes, Anthony Young was led to believe that he needed a big, expensive location in which to run his business. He quickly found out otherwise, and in 2004 scaled back his overhead

by downsizing that location and using Intelligent Office's remote receptionist and appointment scheduling services.

No longer tied down to a large, underutilized location, this owner

Remote Offices Growing in Popularity

Here's some more on what the recent business press has said about working remotely:

"...there's no perk more popular with employees than allowing them to work remotely."

-BusinessWeek SmallBiz

"Improved technology and cost-cutting pressure is leading more companies to consider telecommuting and other strategies to reduce the amount they spend on office space."

-The Wall Street Journal

"It's amazing how working at home can make you much more productive in less time when there are not unnecessary interruptions from co-workers."

-Gannett News Service

of Denver-based Traffic Solutions saves about \$48,000 a year in rent and employee costs. He can also do more business on the road, where his business often takes him, thanks to the flexibility that Intelligent Office offers. "The cost and time savings has been tremendous," says Young. "To think we achieved those savings while also becoming more efficient and productive is pretty amazing."

A.M. Recht & Associates, Inc....

Anne Recht isn't about to be complacent about her firm's early success, but she also admits that Garden City, N.J.-based A.M. Recht and Associates "had a first few years that most other companies don't have." A geriatric care manager who helps seniors and their families grapple with the issues facing the nation's elderly, Recht credits an early decision to create a virtual office with helping to stoke her firm's success.

With several case managers, one assistant and a home-based office, Recht uses Intelligent Office's remote receptionist, mail services and business meeting rooms to present a professional image to her clients and business partners. "I like the convenience of working from home," says Recht, "but through the Intelligent Office I also get a prestigious address and top-notch receptionist services. It's invaluable."

Virtual Office, Anyone?

Virtual offices are on the increase. In addition to Intelligent Office, there are numerous options for working at home. Windows XP business users are probably familiar with Microsoft's Universal Document Converter for working remotely. There are other, more encompassing virtual office programs. Here are a few:

Remotelyanywhere.com: This is a sophisticated online management system that allows remote administration and communication. In addition to secure remote control and integrated administrative tools, it offers file transfer and wireless PDA support.

GoToMyPC.com: If you have to travel, you can easily access your home office with this highly-rated, real-time program, designed for the individual or the small business. You can send and receive files, print locally from your remote PC, and a self-launching component allows you to see your PC. Free trials and demos are available.

There's even an "EZine" devoted to perfecting the art of working remotely. Janet Barclay publishes "The Organized Assistant Resource," which, according to her web site (organizedassistant.com), is dedicated to "maximizing your time and space." Her newsletter is free.

Direct Window Coverings...

When Shem and Melody Isaac decided to revamp their business model in January 2005, one of the first places they approached for help was the Intelligent Office. As owners of Napa, Calif.-based Direct Window Coverings, which sells and installs shutters, shades and blinds, the pair were determined to simplify their operations and reduce the time Melody spent on the phone, setting appointments and dealing with customer requests.

"We resolved to implement

new procedures and processes, and streamline our company this year," says Shem Isaac, president. And with that, the Isaacs contracted the Intelligent Office to handle that aspect of their business. From the very first month, they say they save thousands of dollars each month in overhead by not having an office location and employees. More importantly, Melody selects which calls she answers immediately, and which ones can wait. "I'm not the front man anymore," she says, "and it's

working out great."

But don't confuse Intelligent Office with one of the myriad of "executive suite" companies out there, because the firm is really anything but. In recent years, for example, while the traditional executive suite industry suffered from bankruptcies and diminishing revenues, Intelligent Office has grown 800 percent since 2000.

Founded in 1995, the nationally franchised company provides clients with a prestigious business address for mail services, drop-off/pick-up courtesies and meeting space. Phone calls are answered live and seamlessly announced and connected to clients, regardless of their current location.

"Telephonically, clients are 'in the office,' but physically they're not, so there's no rent, furniture expense, phone system cost or even a business phone bill," says company founder Ralph Gregory, who's further expanding the franchise internationally in 2005. "People are leaving the traditional office behind. 'Going to work' is becoming old school, and work is now something you do, and not a location where you do it."

Scott Smith is a business writer and media consultant. He can be reached at scott@bizstarz.com. For more information on Intelligent Office, go to intelligentoffice.com.

Selecting a Virtual Office

By Jimmie Mesis

Location - Make sure the VO is located in a modern building or at the very least in an area that projects a good professional image. It should be convenient for your clients to visit when necessary. Visit the office and evaluate your first impression. This will be the same impression customers will have when they come see you. Most virtual offices are very luxuriously decorated and project a very positive and professional image upon you.

Live receptionist - Almost every virtual office provides a live receptionist that will greet visitors and answer your incoming telephone calls using your agency name. The receptionist can be instructed to take a message or transfer the call directly to your cell or home phone. The process is seamless to the caller and provides you immediate contact with the caller no matter where you are. The capabilities of this service may vary depending on the individual VO.

Mail forwarding - In most cases, mail will be addressed to your agency name followed by the street address and the suite number for the actual office suite. The receptionist will then sort the mail and forward it to your home at least once a week or more frequent for a minimal fee.

Conference room time - Your monthly service fee will probably include at least one hour of conference room usage per month with additional usage billed in 15-minute increments. This offers you the opportunity to meet clients or conduct interviews in a very professional setting.

Private office - Many virtual offices will provide you with temporary office space that includes a desk, executive chair and two client chairs. You are only charged for actual usage time by the hour, day, week, or month.

Lobby signage - Many virtual offices will add your name to the lobby directory of tenants for a minimal monthly fee (\$15 - \$50/month). In many this service is included in the monthly fee.

Be sure that you read the contract so that it details everything that the office manager has agreed to. Remember, the person you made the deal with may not be there six months from now. If it's not in writing, it's your word against someone who may no longer work there.