



Selling your boss on telecommuting Ten tips for negotiating some work-at-home time

By Andrea Coombes, CBS MarketWatch.com
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SAN FRANCISCO (CBS.MW) -- U.S. workers are often afraid to ask for benefits that might improve their lives, especially during a weak economy. But this may be the best time to ask for one perk: Working from home.

Companies eager to save money often welcome the chance to consolidate office space, reduce absenteeism and pump up productivity. You may just have to convince them.

"A prime opportunity to (propose telecommuting) would be when there's a company meeting and they announce sales are not where they thought they would be," said Debra Dinnocenzo, author of "101 Tips for Telecommuters."

If they say, "We need to tighten our belts, look for ways to lower costs." I would leap on that," she said.

So, thinking of collaring your boss in the hallway tomorrow to tell her you want to work at home? Think again. While some companies are ahead of the curve in setting up such programs, others are not yet rid of the notion that "out of sight" is dangerously out of mind, and that employees will squander their highly-paid hours watching Oprah or walking the dog.

Benefits for employers

At such companies, you need a well-presented plan, on paper, detailing how your telecommuting will benefit the company. Mention that experts say at-home workers exhibit increased productivity, and lower absenteeism and turnover rates.

A survey by AT&T of 1,500 of their teleworkers found an average 10 percent gain in productivity on telework days. That means roughly one more hours' worth of work per employee per telework day for a combined \$65 million a year in increased productivity, said Jeff Zbar, author of "Teleworking and Telecommuting: Strategies for Remote Workers and Their Managers."

One call center's turnover rate dropped to 5 percent from 60 percent after instituting a telework option, and absenteeism generally falls 50 percent, said John Edwards, president of Telework Network, Inc., which offers consulting services to companies seeking to offer telecommuting programs.

"Instead of taking the whole day off because the cable guy's coming, you can work from home," he said. If someone feels sick "normally they'd say I can't go in today, whereas if they're working from home they'll throw on the fuzzy slippers and get on with it," Edwards said.

An estimated 28 million Americans did some form of work outside of the office last year, and 21.7 percent of those worked from home, according to the International Telework Association and Council.

Some companies encourage their employees to telecommute, such as McDonald's, which recently sent almost 800 quality-inspection workers to home offices, Dinnocenzo said.

If you don't work for a company like that, yet you're eager to telecommute, there are strategies to better your

chances of literally heading straight to work upon finishing breakfast.

Here are 10 tips for convincing your employer why allowing you to telecommute would be in both your interests:

1) Avoid statements like "I want to work at home so I can take care of my kids." And don't try to do that during worktime if you do telecommute - it's not fair to your employer. The experts' mantra? "Telecommuting is not a substitute for child care or elder care."

2) Offer to "time shift," Edwards said. Working at home for just two hours one morning a week can help your employer adjust to the idea, and allow you to add more work-at-home time later.

3) In your formal proposal, list potential cost savings. If your telecommuting will free up office space -- maybe you and another telecommuter can now share a desk at the office -- find out from the administrative office how much money one less office space will save your employer, Dinnocenzo said.

4) Point out that your job is ideal for telecommuting. "Anyone that goes into an office and spends the bulk of their time on the phone or on the computer probably doesn't need to be in the office five days a week," Dinnocenzo said.

5) Outline the character traits that make you a good candidate for telecommuting, such as your ability to set goals, work independently, and stay focused.

6) Detail your home-office situation. Let your boss know that you have a quiet, dedicated space to work, and that your barking dog will be locked in the garage while you work.

7) Tread carefully when requesting money to set up your home office. If you've got all the equipment already and you work for a company that's already leery of the idea, consider covering the costs yourself, at least until you've proved yourself as a telecommuter. But don't cripple your chances of successfully telecommuting. One phone line and a dial-up modem is not enough, and you may want to request your employer cover some up-front costs.

8) Propose telecommuting on a trial basis for, say, three months. That gives your employer an easy out, and may make him more likely to approve the idea. Also, you might recoup some of your start-up costs by making a successful trial the basis for reimbursement of the money you spent.

9) Clarify how productivity will be measured for your home-based work, and set goals that should be met in the trial run.

10) Make it clear that you will be available via phone, e-mail, instant messaging, fax, etc. Your boss may be worried about an inability to stay in contact with you if you're not in the office. Once you're at home, stay in touch. Instead of resorting solely to e-mail, make an occasional phone call to maintain voice contact and make regular visits to the office, Dinnocenzo said.

Some of these tips are from Dinnocenzo's Web site, www.allearnatives.com, which offers a "free resources" section for those considering teleworking.

Soon enough, though, these points will be moot. When college kids, raised on e-mail, IM and cell phones, enter the workforce en masse, telecommuting will be taken for granted.

Said Dinnocenzo: "When I talk to young people, it is in no way a preconceived notion that they have to be in a certain place or be with the people they're working with, to work."