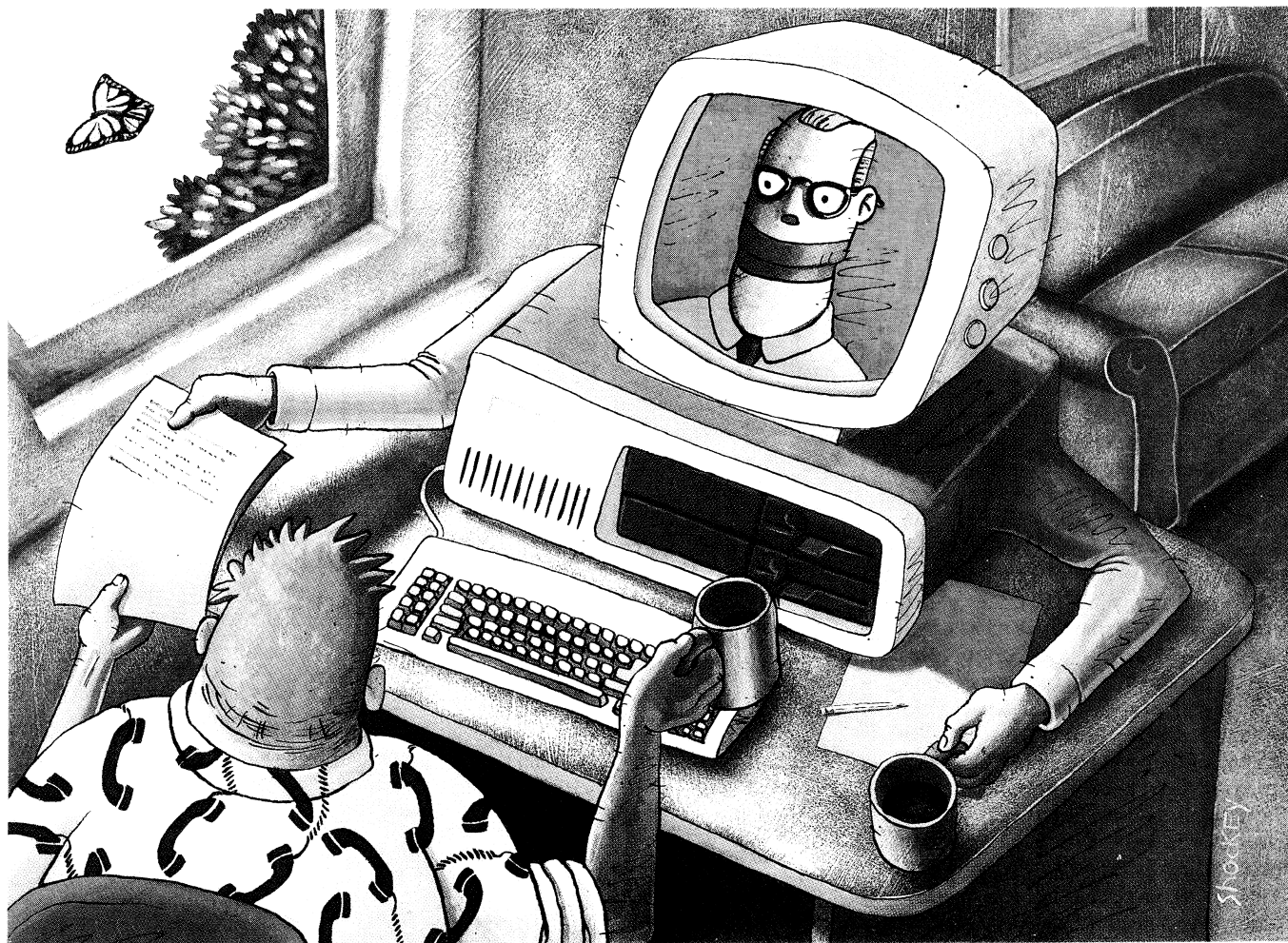


The Home Office

Telecommuting gives working at home a whole new meaning. By Frederick L. Pilot



BOB SHOCKEY

Bob Ruderman, an actuary for the state of California's Department of Health Services, was miserable. Being stationed in the state's capitol, Sacramento, had aggravated his allergies to such a point that he was considering quitting his job.

A program that allows certain state employees to work from their homes using computers and telephones persuaded Ruderman to stay. He moved to the coastal town of Pacifica, adjacent to San Francisco, where he uses his computer and modem to send his work electronically to Sacramento. The state benefited

as well, since skilled actuaries are difficult to recruit.

Telecommuting proponents predicted that by this year, 10 percent of the white-collar work force would forsake the downtown office for the home office. But those forecasts did not materialize. Just as Ward Cleaver and the comic strip character Dagwood Bumstead have done since the 1950s, most white-collar workers still begin each weekday with a journey to the office.

Estimates of the number of workers who regularly telecommute one to four days per week range from 100,000 to 6

million nationwide; about half of those are believed to reside on the West Coast.

The research firm Link Resources reports that the number of companies offering telecommuting programs has nearly doubled, from 200 in 1984 to 350 in 1989. According to the firm, only 20,000 corporate employees worked out of their homes in 1982; in 1989, at least 600,000 did.

DESPITE SLOWER-THAN-predicted growth, the concept of telecommuting continues to be driven by powerful technological, social, business and environ-

mental forces. The implications of telecommuting are equally, if not more, powerful. Social observers say that if telecommuting is widely adopted, it could redefine the model of work, family and community life that has reigned since the dawn of the Industrial Age to one that resembles pre-industrial society, when work was performed close to home in widely dispersed communities.

Given the enormous social change issues at stake, the growth of telecommuting appears unlikely to keep pace with the rapid advances in telecommunications and personal computers that drive the trend, allowing virtually anyone to set up a fully functional office almost anywhere.

"I figure it is going to take 40 years before telecommuting is commonplace," predicts Jack Nilles, the Los Angeles-based consultant who coined the term back in 1973. "We're at year 16 now."

By the year 2030 or so, he expects that a major portion of the current urban work force will be telecommuting from home or "satellite offices" adjacent to their homes. By the turn of the century, Nilles says, between 10 million and 20 million workers will be telecommuters. In the last two years, he adds, there has been an "explosion" of interest in telecommuting in the public and private sectors.

Nilles, who helps organizations to design and implement telecommuting programs, points to increased access to personal computers, stress and productivity losses caused by rush-hour traffic and associated air pollution as the major catalysts. "The congestion and commute time will go up 3 to 5 percent a year for the foreseeable future unless something else happens," Nilles forecasts.

Air pollution, he says, is an even greater issue than traffic. "The EPA is telling L.A., 'We're going to shut you down in five years unless you do something.'"

Los Angeles and other West Coast-based governmental agencies are leading the transition from commuting to telecommuting. Close behind are the quasi-public regional telephone companies such as U.S. West and Pacific Bell. The South Coast Air Quality Management District, which establishes and monitors air-quality standards in four Southern California counties, has passed a regulation requiring employers with 100 or more employees to consider using telecommuting as a method of reducing employee trips to the job site. A similar regulation is about to take effect in San Diego County.

In May, the county of Los Angeles launched a telecommuting program that encourages selected members of its 80,000-member work force to telecom-

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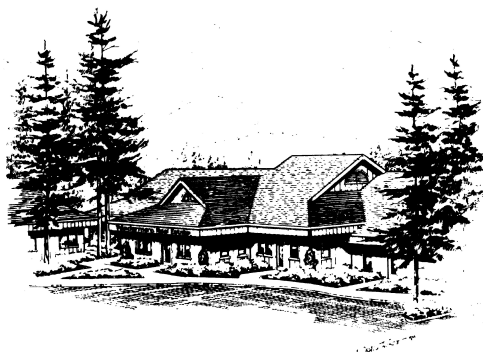
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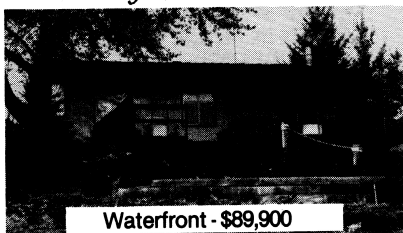
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mute one to three days per week.

"We're faced with problems of spending too much money on space for parking and being under the gun from the air-quality plan to cut traffic," says Margery Gould, a management analyst in the county's chief administrator's office. "To buy affordable housing, our employees are driving 50 to 60 miles each day to Riverside, San Bernardino, Lancaster and Palmdale," Gould notes, adding that the average house in the city of Los Angeles costs \$213,000.

"Hopefully, telecommuting will allow us to reduce our costs for buildings and office space and increase our productivity," Gould says, predicting that telecommuting will result in productivity increases of approximately 20 percent and less utilization of sick time. "We are a major employer, and we want to set an example."

County contract monitors, planners, administrative staff, and deputy probation officers seem to be among those best suited for telecommuting, Gould reports.

The state of California's Department of General Services began a two-year pilot telecommuting program in 1988 that now has more than 150 workers participating. A report issued last April recommended expansion of the program to other state agencies along with monitoring, prescreening and training of employees and their managers.

In September, California Governor George Deukmajian ordered the program accelerated as part of an overall effort to reduce traffic snarls in the Golden State. A week after an earthquake shook the San Francisco area in October, Deukmajian called a special meeting in the city. With many roads and bridges in need of repair, telecommuting was not only feasible, but necessary for some.

LAST JUNE, WASHINGTON Governor Booth Gardner convened a conference in Seattle designed to bring together business, labor and government leaders to examine and discuss the merits of telecommuting.

Washington's four-county Puget Sound region will kick off a telecommuting pilot project this year to gather data on the impacts of telecommuting on individuals and organizations, traffic congestion, air quality and energy use. Encouraging the development of policies that encourage telecommuting is a major objective. Ten to 15 private- and public-sector employers will be recruited to participate in the 18-month project.

Brad Schepp, author of *The Telecommuter's Handbook—How to Work for a*

Salary Without Ever Leaving the House, scheduled to be published in March by Pharos Books, identifies small and large companies as those most likely to have telecommuting for their employees. Smaller firms, according to Schepp, are frequently short on office space and other resources and welcome ways to lessen their costs. Large companies generally have a higher level of management sophistication that allows for better measurement of the impact of telecommuting on employee productivity, as well as the ability to offer a greater degree of flexibility.

But in order for telecommuting to work, Schepp cautions, there has to be mutual trust between employees and their managers. To have trust, Schepp says, there must be an objective, mutually agreed-upon way of measuring performance.

"You need a lot of trust on both sides," Gould concurs. "Telecommuting requires a certain management style that measures by what is accomplished, not by when [a worker] is at her desk." Gould observed that many managers are initially quite anxious when they begin to supervise telecommuting employees. Their thinking runs along the line of "If you can't see them, how can you supervise them?"

MANAGERS' FEARS OF losing control of employees who could theoretically be catching up on the soaps instead of their work are the single most powerful obstacle to the growth of telecommuting.

Managerial wariness of telecommuting is so strong that it singularly outweighs a long list of reasons in favor of it presented by telecommuting advocates, ranging from increased produc-

*West Coast
government agencies are
leading the transition
from commuting to
telecommuting.*

tivity, reduced costs for office space, improved retention and morale, and fewer sick days taken.

Such concerns are more apparent among private-sector employers, which have been slower to warm to the idea of telecommuting.

But Gil Gordon, a Monmouth Junction, New Jersey-based consultant to businesses implementing telecommuting programs, predicts telecommuting will soon be viewed as dental insurance

was in the early 1980s—although it should not be considered a benefit. Those companies that don't offer it, he says, will be viewed as less than desirable places to work, while those that do will be more able to recruit well-qualified candidates for job openings.

In order to retain software engineers with hard-to-find skills, Palo Alto-based Hewlett-Packard Co. has used telecommuting as an informal employer-employee arrangement. "We have a very high cost of housing in the Bay Area," says one company personnel representative. "A lot of our people have very long commutes. We try to negotiate an arrangement where they work at home one to two days a week."

But Hewlett-Packard's official policy on telecommuting reflects the widespread ambiguity toward it found at many companies. In response to a letter from an employee recently published in an employee magazine requesting that the computer and instrument manufacturer consider formalizing telecommuting company-wide, Hewlett-Packard officials said the firm has "no plans" to do so in the near future.

"From the company's viewpoint, telecommuting is not the best working arrangement, although it may be appropriate as a temporary solution to an

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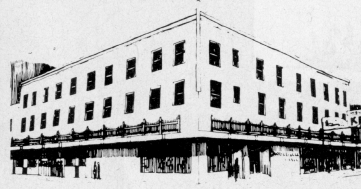


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individual's situation," was the reply given by Ed Truitt, corporate compensation and benefits manager, and Art Young, corporate benefits manager.

According to Schepp, there are many "guerrilla" telecommuters who do so with the approval of their managers but without the blessing of top management.

San Francisco-based Pacific Bell has allowed management-level employees to telecommute since 1984 and has established satellite offices located in employees' neighborhoods in San Francisco and the Los Angeles suburb of Woodland Hills.

Steve Coulter, a Pacific Bell area vice president for external affairs, oversees the San Francisco satellite facility, which contains 18 personal computers. "The company is taking a serious look at telecommuting," he reports, noting that Pacific Bell does not have an official telecommuting policy covering all the utility's employees.

According to Coulter, an internal team headed by the human resources department is surveying workers and managers to measure the benefits of telecommuting and to establish standards for a more formal program.

Nilles cites several key factors in successful telecommuting. Employers should establish guidelines and criteria to measure the expected results, he says. A telecommuting program should start small—maybe one or two days a week—and be gradually fine-tuned to the company's culture.

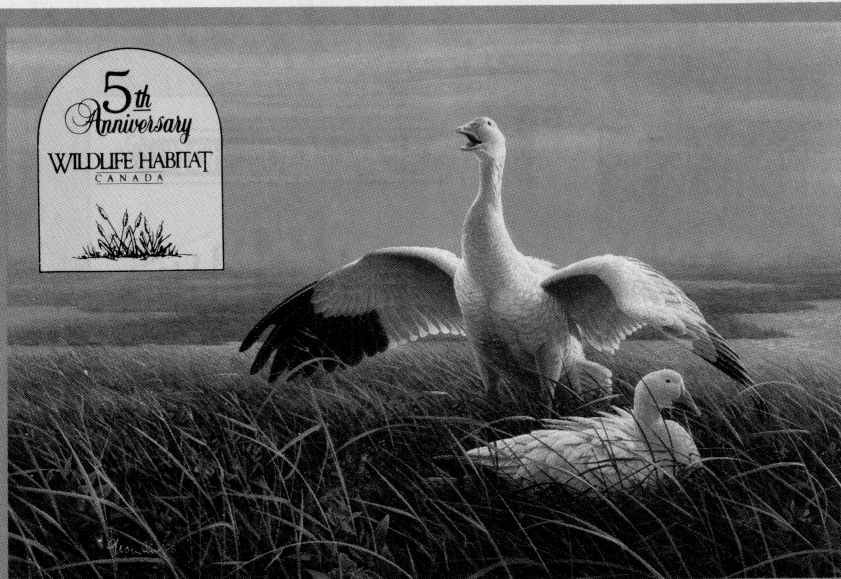
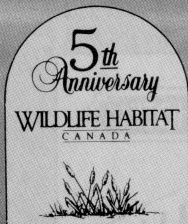
Employees and supervisors should be trained on the ground rules and guidelines before beginning a telecommuting program, Nilles says. Furthermore, employers need to evaluate the telecommuting program frequently.

For managers who are uneasy about supervising employees working at home or in satellite offices, Nilles advises "concentrating on what your subordinates are producing rather than the process to produce it."

Larry Rowe, a supervising telecommunications engineer in California's Department of General Services, says managing a staff of 50 telecommuters has made him a better manager by forcing him to manage by objective.

"As long as they are productive, that's all I care about," Rowe says of his employees. "In fact, I think having them telecommute has actually improved their performance because it has required them to organize their work." ▲

Frederick L. Pilot is a Novato, California-based free-lance writer.



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