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At Home in the Virtual Office

By Jack M. Germain

For office workers at all levels, the idea of working from home or from an alternative office on a regular basis is in many ways appealing. Such arrangements can cut a business' expenses significantly if properly implemented. However, certain standards, policies and technologies must be put in place to make sure work gets done effectively.

Today's volatile economy is pushing more companies to consider the merits of a virtual workplace for some or all of their employees. Often, however, the idea fails to go anywhere because neither managers nor their workers are sure how to get started.

Also, attitudes among some old-school managers pose hurdles that block workers from pursuing virtual workplace opportunities. These managers hold firmly to the philosophy that working from home results in lower productivity from employees and wasted resources for the company. Some managers are resolute about having their workers in the same physical building in order to manage them properly.

However, if a recent industry study on the virtual workspace trend is valid, companies that fail to embrace the virtual office concept may find it harder to keep top talent, even in today's sluggish economy. This report builds on a study commissioned by [Citrix](#) (Nasdaq: CTXS) [Online](#) to determine the implications of the trend toward virtual workplaces. The market is clearly primed for a more flexible workplace environment.

A fifth of the respondents in the U.S. would relinquish 5 percent of their salary to be able to work away from the office just one or two days a week. However, 56 percent never get the opportunity, according to the Citrix survey.

"The notion that virtual workplaces are beneficial is very challenging to some companies. There are lots of good reasons to have workers remote. [Managers] are coming around. The tools to manage remote workers are now available," Bernd Christiansen, vice president and CTO at Citrix, told the E-Commerce Times.

Different Models

Mention virtual working in a mixed crowd and you will get a variety of responses as to what it means. For most office-bound workers, the concept of a virtual workplace is simply working on office tasks from home using a computer, fax machine and phone. Office LANs make it easy for temporarily out-of-the-office workers to stay connected to the office work flow.

Other people view the virtual workplace concept as a way to sever the requirement to report to a desk and meet face-to-face with supervisors. This part of the virtual work model has existed for years as a means for entrepreneurs to set up their own shops in a home office.

A third version of the virtual workspace involves using pseudo-corporate office space just to meet with clients or hold collaborative physical meetings. A cottage industry is growing around the service trade for virtual offices.

These companies provide answering machine and receptionist services, clerical support and other traditional back office services on an as-needed basis for virtual workers.

"The same technology kids use to stay in touch are being adapted for remote workers. All of these solutions are tech-driven and provide a toe in the water," said Christiansen.

Measuring a Must

The key to effectively managing virtual workers is setting standards for management and other staffers. Virtual workplace programs must be managed like any other business plan. Companies that do not set up the home worker environment properly cannot expect workers to succeed with it.

"The biggest challenge when working with companies wanting to transition to remote workforce is overcoming the notion that they won't get their money's worth from workers," said Jim Ball, founder and managing partner of [Alpine Access](#), one of the largest home-based customer call center operations in the country.

His response to such negative concern is that often these companies are plagued with cultural issues and have little trust in their workers. Alpine Access even employs mid-level managers who work at home.

"The company has to define how it measures workers' output. We find that many people work more hours at home than they would if they were in the office. Technology makes it easy for them to log into work and check on things," said Ball.

Familiar Format

The call center business has unique advantages over other business types in setting up a virtual workplace model. It is easier to measure worker productivity. Alpine Access developed by trial and error many of the standards it now uses. It was the first call center to work with home agents, according to Ball.

Regardless, the technology and management styles used in virtual or at-home work programs is adaptable for most businesses, according to Ball. Earlier this year, he launched a consulting group to assist companies in making the transition from at-office to at-home.

A set of guidelines recently set up by the Worldwide Workplace Council to guide virtual workplace programs is designed to sooth those typical startup jitters that managers and workers face, said Ball.

Plan in Place

The Worldwide Workplace Council is a group of advocates for a location-independent workforce brought together by Citrix Online. Citrix Online provides virtualization, networking and software as a service (SaaS) technologies for more than 230,000 organizations worldwide.

Five Simple Steps to a Virtual Workplace Program is a report issued last month that builds on a virtual work study Citrix Online commissioned.

To be successful in any economic climate, companies need a business model that is very cost-effective and takes advantage of virtual work practices, according to Chuck Wilsker, a member of the Worldwide Workplace Council and president and CEO of the [Telework Coalition](#). Everything companies need to create a virtual work environment is readily available. The strategies are simple to use and low cost, he said.

"We've been in this business for the last 15 years and have tracked the changes in the workplace since," Rob Trenck, director of business development for [Agilquest](#), told the E-Commerce Times. "Today, organizations do not have to

consider how to implement a virtual workplace because they already have one. They just don't realize how extensive it is."

Alternative Working

Over the last few years, technology has caught up with the virtual needs of out-of-the-office workers, according to Trenck. For example, workers are productive away from their assigned offices whether working from home, at clients' offices, at WiFi-enabled cafes and hotels, etc.

"This mobility is real and is measurable. The organization does not need to worry about how to get started in the virtual world because a goodly portion of their employees are already in it. Today's hot topic is how to capitalize -- i.e., cut costs -- on the fact that so many assigned desks go unused each day. They know the answer to that question is what is called an 'alternative workplace,' where highly mobile people no longer have an assigned desk, but reserve a desk when needed from a pool of shareable workspaces," noted Trenck.

So today's question is how does the organization get started in setting up an alternative workplace. That's what's on the minds of most every corporate real estate manager. For many, the bottom line is they know they should do it; they just don't know how, he concluded. His company provides software and services to better manage workplace environments.

Five-Step Plan

"A lot of people start out thinking they want to work from home but fail at it. They flounder in thinking they are missing the boat for promotions, etc., by not being in the office. They also miss the water cooler chat," said Ball. A five-step plan can remove such barriers.

The first step is to determine the specific needs of the organization. These needs impact on hiring, real estate facilities, business travel expense reductions, and more. It is important to evaluate potential remote workers' thoughts and opinions before making any changes.

The second step is to fully research best practices for managing a virtual workplace. Include as a starting point resources such as [The Future of Work](#), [The Telework Foundation](#) and [Telework Exchange](#). Another resource is [Workshifting.com](#), which provides expert information on the topic of remote working and provides help to companies looking into the prospect.

Step three identifies the technologies best suited to enabling employees to remain productive. The report indicates that most professionals who routinely work remotely rely mostly on email and cellphones, unaware of the many low-cost, simple-to-use technologies that offer far greater functionality.

Step four sets policy guidelines for managing the virtual workforce. It is critical to set terms and conditions for both employees and their managers.

Step five sets benchmarks and measurements. Include factors such as metrics for productivity, morale and retention. Also factor in revenue impacts, travel expense reductions from the use of collaboration technologies and lower overhead from having fewer employees in a central facility.

Virtual Security

For some managers, the trend to virtual workplaces heightens worries about security. Employers are generally concerned with employee-owned devices because they aren't controlled by the IT organization and might be improperly configured, Christiansen explained.

Other security concerns center on data leakage from notebooks and unauthorized or insecure access to the Intranet if the corporate firewall has been opened to support teleworkers. A few years ago, security for such things was only available in large organizations.

"In recent years, innovative technologies have emerged that make security for teleworkers affordable and easy to deploy for businesses of all sizes, including the smallest of businesses," said Christiansen.

Plugging Leaks

Data leakage can be prevented easily by the administrator switching off features like file transfer and remote printing. Another trend that enables telework is cloud computing, because service providers like [Salesforce.com](https://www.salesforce.com) (NYSE: CRM) are securely delivering applications and data to users inside of a Web browser, Christiansen explained.

"Since virtually all business Web applications are secured by [SSL](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SSL) and don't use any local resources other than the Web browser -- e.g., they don't save files locally and don't make data available in large sets -- Web applications are an effective way to support teleworkers," he said.