

Telecommuting Trend Gets Serious

*Forget the bunny slippers -- WorldTravel home workers' productivity has taken off.
By Bob Francis, PC Week Online, June 29, 1998*

Telecommuting: It's inevitable

Telecommuting employees shuffling around in house slippers and bathrobes may make "Dilbert" readers laugh, but travel agency WorldTravel Partners is getting serious productivity gains from sales agents who are taking part in a new telecommuting program.

WorldTravel is a Dallas-based travel services provider that is ranked seventh nationwide with \$850 million in sales. As the company has doubled in size in the past four years, it turned to new networking technology to enable telecommuting and to provide rapid-fire service to new corporate customers in various cities.

Telecommuting is helping companies the size of WorldTravel even more than larger companies, said Ray Boggs, an analyst at International Data Corp., in Framingham, Mass. "It's the small and medium-size firms that are really taking advantage of it," Boggs said, estimating that more than 63 percent of Telecommuters are with smaller companies. "There are a couple of reasons for that. One is that, unlike large companies, these smaller firms can't always afford the real estate. If they can use their worker's home, that problem is solved."

A Booming Trend

Telecommuting among all companies is growing rapidly. Last year, more than 9.1 million workers were telecommuting, up from just 6.4 million in 1995. That number is expected to balloon to more than 10.7 million in 2001, according to IDC.

In Kansas City, Mo., 13 WorldTravel agents are now working from home using ISDN lines and a product called Extender from MCK Communications Inc., based in Newton, Mass.

Extender allows companies to give users access to the same voice and data at home that they have at the office. One switch module connects to the PBX and remote LAN access server at the office. The Extender modules integrate voice and data over a single phone line by digitizing the voice channel and sending it down the line, and then turning the voice packets back into data on the other end. MCK uses a proprietary method of compression, called Interactive Voice Protocol, so the voice stream can be processed as data.

So far, telecommuting is working at WorldTravel, said Sparkie Davis, telecommunications manager at the travel agency. "We're seeing a 20 percent increase in productivity in terms of the number of tickets those agents have booked and the number of their phone calls," Davis noted.

"It's not really the technology that is giving us the productivity, but it is enabling it," said Davis, a former accountant who moved into telecommunications just over three years ago.

"It's the working at home. The only difference is they're doing a job in a different location," she said. "They tend to do work even if they're a little sick. If you have an hour drive time and you're sick, you

may not come in, but if you can telecommute, you can work for half a day or more, so that keeps them more productive."

That's one of the payoffs of telecommuting, said IDC's Boggs. "It can be difficult to measure productivity of telecommuters, but when it's a job that involves keystrokes, such as a call center, you can determine accurately what you're getting from those telecommuters," he said.

WorldTravel is also saving on long-distance charges and on real estate, Davis said. The long-distance charges are saved because the system has a call-on-demand feature. If a line isn't in use, it doesn't incur long-distance charges, she said.

Long-distance Information...

WorldTravel's telecommuting initiative grew out of its use of MCK equipment in a remote access application that allowed travel agents stationed at a client's offices to service other customers around the country.

"On-site agents tend to have boom-and-bust cycles," Davis said. To make the agents productive during quiet spells, the company wanted to route travel requests from other customers to them.

MCK's Extender system allows companies to use NEC Corp. phone systems to provide off-premise workers the same features as NEC's NEAX PBX system.

When Davis asked NEC to find a remote call center solution, the Extender was untested. (It has only been shipping commercially since April.) Still, Davis decided to try it, becoming one of the first users of the system. In its Dallas call center, WorldTravel has almost 180 phone lines and 200 toll-free numbers.

At the call center, the MCK Extender device attaches to a Motorola Inc. UTA220k ISDN terminal adapter, which connects to the company's ISDN line. At the remote location, an ISDN line is attached to a Motorola BitSurfr Pro remote ISDN module and the Extender's remote module. The telephone attaches to the remote module. At the remote location, the agent dials the call center in Dallas, entering a four-digit code. That lets the call center know the agent is available for calls. From that point on, the system routes calls to the agent, acting as if that agent were in the office.

"Our users can't tell if they've called the call center or if they're talking to an agent at home or at a client site," Davis said. She said the cost of that seamless experience is about \$5,000 per connection, including a switch module, remote module and two ISDN terminal adapters. However, one switch module can be shared by several workers with remote modules if they are not utilizing the device at the same time, MCK officials explained. Still the equipment costs, in addition to the recurring costs of the ISDN line, were a hit on WorldTravel's pocketbook. "But it's been worth it, because if the worker has the same experience working at home that they would have at the office, they're going to be productive," she said.

Give Me Memphis, Tennessee

The installation itself was relatively simple. "I installed the first one with some help from NEC, because it was NEC's first installation, but I've installed the second and third myself," Davis said.

WorldTravel plans to continue to use the systems as it expands its telecommuting program, she said. "We're going to be installing one in Memphis soon," she said.

But don't expect to call WorldTravel and hear screaming children or pets in the background as plans are made to travel the world. "We have some codes. The children have to stay in day care and they need a separate room to work at home," Davis said. The workers may save on dry-cleaning and travel, but they've got to be professional, she noted.

So while the "Dilbert" cartoon image of telecommuters may be good for laughs, she said, it's not going to happen at WorldTravel.

Case File:

- Company: WorldTravel Partners
- Headquarters: Dallas
- The need: To provide travel agents with the ability to work at home with the same information access they would have at the office. Also, to allow travel agents at customer sites to service corporate customers in other locations. Expand the company's network to accommodate workers in various locations.
- Status report: WorldTravel is rolling out a system that allows the company's central call center to direct calls to agents in locations around the country both in remote offices and at home.
- What's next: Expansion – WorldTravel will bring the system to more locations in the coming year.

Toolbox Products Used:

- The basics: MCK Communications Inc.'s Extender system for remote voice solutions.
- Phone system: NEC America Inc.'s Dterm phones, NEC NEAX PBX, Motorola UTA220k terminal adapter.