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Telecommuting isn't for everyone

Employee needs to be self-disciplined; manager needs to offer feedback

By DANIEL SCHROEDER, *For Small Business Times*

Question: We are a recruiting firm for computer professionals. About four years ago, one of our employees, a man in his 30s, decided he wanted to operate out of his home. Part of his reasoning was that his productivity would increase if he saved time commuting and avoided all of the distractions in the office. After four years of this, he has decided he wants to come back inside. He tells us that he's gotten tired of ducking into the laundry room to field phone calls while his babies are screaming in the background. Wasn't telecommuting going to solve his productivity problems? What are the keys to productivity that he evidently is missing?

Answer: While some people adapt well to working from home, telecommuting isn't for everyone. Still, more and more people are working from home — the Bureau of National Affairs tells us that at least 15 million Americans do so everyday. Being self-starting and self-disciplined is the foundation for being successful working from home. Absent these attributes, people can really struggle with the lack of structure offered by a home-based office. Additionally, as your

question points out, home is not always the most professional setting. Conducting telephone conversations or interviews with crying babies in the background simply does not send the right message.

How could this employee have been more successful? Five suggestions come to mind:

Act as if you work in a traditional office: Establish a regular work routine in terms of starting time, break time, lunch time, quitting time, etc. Get dressed and establish a part of your home as your workspace.

Stay in touch with your traditional office: Maintain communication with your colleagues and attend meetings on-site, as needed. Don't wait for the phone to ring - initiate contact with your teammates.

Separate your personal life from your professional life: Babysitting, watching Oprah, visiting with neighbors, etc., should be done outside of work hours. Make time for your personal life - it's very important - but recognize that it normally doesn't lend to staying productive.

Take regular breaks: One of the traps of working at home is to simply be "on" from morning until evening. Unless you're careful, you can become a prisoner of your home office. Schedule times to get up and get away from the task at-hand.

Use information technology to stay in the loop: You can make use of software programs and Internet search skills to access and use a variety of information. Working at home does not mean that you have to be isolated.

All employees, whether they work at home or in the office, can benefit from reflecting on the techniques they are (and are not) employing to be productive. Think about it. What if you could get even 15 minutes more productive work done each day of the week? Simple math tells us that would bring a gain of 75 minutes each week and five hours each month. That's a significant improvement. What if each of your colleagues realized the same gains?

Undoubtedly, you'd be setting performance standards for the rest of the company.

To become more productive, here are some factors for employees to consider:

Begin each day with a distinct sense of purpose: Each day when you enter the office, decide what must be accomplished. What's the goal for today? How does it impact tomorrow? The next day?

Work as efficiently as possible: Rather than simply plunging into your work, spend a few minutes planning the approach you will use and making sure that you have the necessary tools and resources.

Keep your workspace clean: At the risk of stating the obvious, clutter is unproductive. Time spent looking for misplaced items is simply wasted time. At the end of each workday, clean up your workspace. You'll feel better in the morning confronting "clean" rather than "chaos."

Be on time: Another simple truth - you cannot be productive if you are not present. Joining the meeting after it has started slows everyone down and beginning your day late means that you have less time to accomplish the day's work. Rule number one for personal productivity should be, "Be on time."

Avoid procrastination: This is an obvious suggestion. You can't be productive if you don't get started. To avoid falling into this trap, start with the worst task first. In this way, subsequent tasks will serve as rewards.

Avoid workaholicism: Just as obvious is the suggestion to avoid having work become the focus of your life. While some workaholics can be high achieving, productive, and healthy, over time, for most people the outcome of a steady diet of work and more work will be stress and burnout. Learn to balance your personal and professional lives.

Prioritize: Focus on what's important by attaching a level of significance to each task with which you are confronted. Is it important? How important is it compared with what else is on

my desk? Must I take care of this now? What happens if I wait until later? Learn to realize that not everything that comes across your desk needs to be attended to now.

Stay in control of your desk: Check your mail box/in-basket twice per day. Handle each document only one time — take action on it, file it, or pitch it. Do not create stacks (remember the suggestion to keep your desk clean?). Same thing for e-mail. Check it twice per day and scan what requires action and what can be put in the trash. Permanently delete messages that you will not refer to in the future - they are nothing more than clutter—the electronic equivalent of stacks of paper on your desk.

In order for your employee to become as productive as possible, he will need to incorporate these (and other) strategies into his behavioral repertoire. To do so, will require him to receive feedback and coaching about how he is doing. That is an important role that you can play. From my way of thinking, this is one of the most important things a manager can do: Offer feedback about the processes employees are using, as well as the outcomes they are achieving. By focusing on both the how and the what of their functions, employees can become more productive regardless of where they carry out their work.

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