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Home is where the work is

Federal teleworkers navigate the ins and outs of life in a home office environment

By Judy Welles
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Editor's note: This story was updated at 1:30 p.m. Feb. 20, 2008. Please go to [Corrections & Clarifications](#) to see what has changed.

Home offices — those rooms, nooks and spaces in houses and apartments where people do their work — are becoming commonplace. That's true for many workers in private industry.

And as teleworking takes hold in government, it's also becoming the case for federal workers.

According to the American Home Furnishings Alliance, seven in 10 Americans now have offices or designated workstations in their homes, a 112 percent increase since 2000.

How do federal teleworkers set up their home offices and handle working from home? The key to working at a home office, federal teleworkers say, is to establish a routine.

Mike Simitoski, a patent examiner who has worked for the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office for five years, has been teleworking from his home office four days a week for the past year. He makes a point of working the same hours at home as at the office.

Simitoski described his routine: "First thing I do is turn the computer on, start coffee and have breakfast. I'm up before six every morning, and I get to the 'office' about 6:10 a.m. I usually check e-mail and phone messages in my pajamas, and I get working about 7 a.m."

Simitoski lives outside Fredericksburg, Va., a location he chose when he learned that USPTO might offer patent examiners a telework option. He is about 50 miles from USPTO's Alexandria, Va., office — a 50-minute commute during nonrush hours, when he normally traveled.

Simitoski picked one of the bedrooms of his four-bedroom house to be his office and bought new, modular-type office furniture from a large office-supply store. "It looks like wood, but I can actually afford it," he said. The primary piece is a U-shaped desk that takes up much

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of the room, giving Simitoski space to lay out his papers and put his computer, two large-screen monitors and a printer. He also erected book shelves and set up files in the closet.

"I wanted the room to look different from the rest of the house so I could feel like I'm working," he said. Simitoski even hung his framed college diploma on the wall as he had at his USPTO office.

USPTO provides him with computer equipment and a printer and reimburses him for his Internet access costs, but Simitoski was happy to pay for the office furnishings himself. "I wanted to telework and I wanted to be comfortable when I work.

It is totally worth it to spend a day in a comfortable surrounding."

Simitoski's job is amenable to telework.

As a patent examiner in the computer engineering field, Simitoski does most of his work on the computer, searching for inventions similar to the one he's reviewing.

When he needs to collaborate, he keeps in touch with colleagues through instant messaging and phone calls via the Internet. "I type more than talk," he added.

On the one day each week when he goes to USPTO, he spends most of the time communicating with his supervisor and meeting with colleagues. "My older colleagues would rather meet me in person than send e-mails or talk by phone," Simitoski said.

For Simitoski, there are other differences between working at home and working at USPTO. At the Alexandria office, he listened to music with headphones while working.

In his home office, Simitoski doesn't have to worry about bothering fellow workers.

There are no governmentwide requirements or guidelines for home offices, but most agencies promulgate telework policies that address matters such as security and safety. For example, the Defense Department requires its teleworkers to designate an area in their homes as an official work area, then complete and sign a safety checklist.

Policies also set parameters for reimbursement of costs teleworkers incur. For example, the Labor Department's policy states that telework may result in an increase in an employee's home utility costs, which the department does not cover. However, the policy observes that such operational costs are usually offset by savings the employee realizes "by reducing the cost of the weekly commute to the traditional worksite, reduced lunch money and clothing."

Some agency policies address more mundane issues, such as avoiding distractions while teleworking or assuring that teleworkers are accessible by phone. Others deal with more critical matters, for example, cautioning that working at home is not a substitute for providing daycare for kids.

Danette Campbell, USPTO's telework and space utilization program manager, said teleworking represents "a paradigm shift for families. You have to keep your routine and take your children to daycare or a sitter. You can't have a child in your office when you are trying to get a job done."

Campbell, who works two days a week from her home office in La Plata, Md., has made it clear to her family that her presence “doesn’t mean that I am home and accessible to you. With the door closed, they know I am working.”

Campbell has a large desk in her home office that accommodates computer equipment and still provides enough workspace.

“I have a comfortable, ergonomic chair and an upholstered chair and hassock that give me a change of space.”

She uses an agency-provided laptop PC with a 21-inch monitor and a docking station.

Like other USPTO teleworkers, she has a voice-over-IP connection so anytime someone calls her office phone, it also rings at home.

USPTO’s training for its teleworkers stresses the importance of taking periodic breaks, avoiding repetitive stress injury and adopting good nutritional habits while working at home.

“When you work remotely, you tend to work a lot [because you’re] often just 20 steps from your bedroom,” Campbell said.

“Teleworkers may have a tendency to work longer hours, and that may impair productivity or [their health]. We want to make sure they stay healthy. Another thing I think is important is keeping a routine, such as an exercise plan. And the refrigerator is not your friend.”

At the end of 2007, more than 3,600 USPTO employees — 41 percent of the agency’s workforce — were teleworking.

They included 1,008 patent examiners and 334 trademark-examining attorneys who work from home four days a week.

The agency’s goal is to add 500 new patent examiners a year to the telework roster.

“Telework is a business strategy for USPTO, and we are constantly tweaking, nurturing, growing our telework program,” Campbell said.

At the General Services Administration, Chief Information Officer Casey Coleman said working from home is her “return to the future.” Coleman came to government five years ago from private industry, where she got used to working out of a home office.

“For me, it’s great.”

Depending on her travel and meeting schedules, Coleman tries to telework on alternate Fridays. “It’s a very productive work environment [at home] because it gives me an opportunity to focus and think about things,” she said. “I have far fewer distractions than in the office.”

“When I work at home, I get started earlier because I don’t have to drive to work,” she said. “I save at least two hours of a commute, and that’s time to focus. I get things done that require a quiet work environment, such as a little long-range planning and cleaning out e-mail.”

As the agency’s telework coordinator, Coleman is concerned with striking the right balance among productivity needs, costs and security for work at home.

“We have to make sure [the] equipment [teleworkers] are using doesn’t compromise data,” she said. “We have a draft policy that calls for providing laptops with encryption and tracking software that will allow us to remotely erase or wipe the hardware — a double measure of security — if a laptop is stolen.” Coleman said she also plans to have card readers on laptops to authenticate users and make the equipment more secure.

GSA Administrator Lurita Doan has set a goal of having 20 percent of GSA’s workforce teleworking by the end of 2008. The agency will provide teleworkers with laptop PCs, personal data assistants, and — if the job requires — integrated phone and e-mail devices.

Technology will be the critical facilitator for effective teleworking, including collaboration among workers at GSA, Coleman said. “Technology has come so far that we’d like to get to desktop videoconferencing and collaboration spaces so we can work on documents together,” she said. “We have a distributed workforce, so we really have to embrace this work model to be effective.”

Coleman is aware that teleworking is an attraction for technology savvy young people entering the workforce today. “It’s their standard, and to retain the best workers, we have to be forward thinking.”



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