

THE BENEFITS OF MOVING OUT OF YOUR HOME OFFICE

Article by Herb Rubenstein, President, Sustainable Business Group, Denver, Colorado

Introduction

The day after the first draft of this article was written, an unusual commercial appeared on TV. It was four adults sitting in a bedroom waiting for a conference call while a teenage daughter in a bathrobe greeted her boyfriend in the presence of the adults. It was an ad for Fed Ex Office, a new response to exactly the message coming across American in waves today. While there are distinct advantages of working out of your home, there are also distinct disadvantages.

Fed Ex's move into the temporary office space market (by the hour, by the day, by the week, by the month) is a brilliant move, with office space cheap and everyone trying to cut overhead costs. After moving our consulting firm out of the home offices of our staff, we have seen more business deals and opportunities than we would have ever seen in our houses. We have experienced greater client appreciation and satisfaction with our work. And have enjoyed the amenities of office life in downtown Denver that eludes those who work exclusively from their home office.

This article presents a balanced view toward the benefits of a hybrid approach, working out of your home office some of the time, but also having full access to an office outside of the home for the benefit of your clients, your work habits, and most surprisingly, for the benefit of achieving a good balance between your work life and your home and personal life.

There are great benefits of working from your home office – no rent, no commute, no wasting time chit chatting at the office, no direct supervision, improved productivity, better ability to balance work and family responsibilities, and on and on. These benefits are huge, but they do not tell the whole story.

Five years ago I asked an employee at IBM how many professional staff were assigned to a new building they were building in Bethesda, Maryland and how many offices they would have for these professionals. Obviously, I wanted to know the ratio of number of professional staff per office. I expected a six or eight to one ratio of professional staff to offices. I was wrong. It was 20 to 1! Recently, in the summer of 2008, before the big recession, I heard that HP was cutting back by 33% on its office space since it had determined that it could dramatically increase the ratio of professional staff to offices they had for this staff.

Telecommuting is a great leap forward. This article is being written by a lawyer and business consultant who has for years recommended accommodating every employee who wanted to telecommute and encouraging every employee to telecommute who did

not want to do so. In fact, I am writing this article at 3:43am at my home computer, in December in Denver, where I can set the programmable thermostat to 62 at night downstairs that keeps me cold enough to stay awake long enough to work until this hour three or four nights a week. You sure cannot do that at the office downtown which is eight miles from your home.

In spite of the personal benefits to workers of working from the home office, plus the societal benefits in terms of improving the sustainability of the planet through reducing traffic, gas consumption, avoiding 2,000 calorie lunches, paying for parking, and the like, this article makes the argument that there are also huge benefits of being able to go the office on a regular basis. The New Hybrid or Blended Approach

I am not suggesting that you unplug your computer at home, although if you did you'd probably get a lot more sleep. I am not suggesting that you stop working from home. What I am suggesting is that, especially in a down economy when office space is as cheap as dirt, that you seek out some office space that you can rent for yourself, or use on a one, two, three or even four day a week basis in some sort of shared arrangement where you schedule your time in the office and coordinate your schedule with the person you share the office with so that there is either no or little overlap with this other person or group of persons.

The reasons I believe an office outside your home is beneficial are as follows and pertain equally to the sole consultant, or a person who works in a company with 10,000 people. It pertains equally to the person who works in Seattle while her company is located in Denver. And it pertains to people starting out their careers just as much as it pertains to people who are "retired" but still working occasionally to supplement their income, keep up their skills and knowledge, or who just want to get a little aggravation every now and then. The benefits of having an office to go to when you want to include: You never have to meet someone at a Starbucks again

You do not lose social skills by being hermitted in your house

You attract more business, a better chance for a promotion, and can identify more opportunities by occasionally showing up at the office and interacting with people

You gain energy by having people around you who are doing interesting things and being successful

You learn by associating with others who are successful

Going to the office fosters going to seminars, meetings, participating in civic activities in close proximity to your office

You have a place to go to get away from your house

You almost never lose power at your office building which can shut down home operations

You don't get distracted doing home chores while you are at the office

You create a new sense of balance because if you work at home you might be prone to work "all the time."

You have access in some offices to a real library (although the web is amazing and is the biggest library ever built)

You aren't pestered by your pets in the office

You can invite others more freely to come and work with you on a project

And, most importantly, as my friend Joel Finkelstein once stated, "You have the privilege of getting dressed up and going and getting some aggravation whenever you want it."

These are not all of the reasons why a hybrid existence of having an office and the capability of working at home is so beneficial. There is credibility that comes from an office with a business sounding address. If you nothing about two consulting firms other than in one consulting firm everybody worked out of their homes and the other firm had an office in the World Trade Center in Denver, and you were a serious buyer of consulting services, from which consulting firm would you purchase consulting services?
Making The Transition

For many, making the transition from the office to a home work environment was easy. For some, it was not. Many people today already have a hybrid home and office existence. For those who have a home only work existence, this article has some suggestions about how to build the suggested hybrid home and office solution. This blended solution is similar to the time share arrangements many make for a vacation place. With real estate prices so low, if you want the right to be in an office one to two days a week, then you should pay twenty to forty percent of the rent you would pay if you wanted to be in the office full time. In good times, landlords do not need you and will not even negotiate such a deal. Today, and for the foreseeable future, they will love such an offer because their marginal cost of having a person occupy an office on a part time basis is basically zero and whatever you pay them either is profit to them or reduces their losses, both very good things for landlords, business owners and business management companies these days. Since you will in all likelihood be getting a sub-lease, you will be helping a company that now has excess space, and that is a good thing.

In our situation, we are a network of consultants called The Sustainable Business Group. For 25 consultants and 25 college interns, plus a few high school interns spread across two cities, we have subleased three offices in one city and one office in another city. This

is our way of inviting our consultants to come into the office, use the conference rooms, the training rooms, the kitchen, the computers, phone, fax, and all off the amenities of an office setting, as often as they like to supplement working at home as each one does independently now.

This transition can be made with equal ease by a solo practitioner, an author, a person who works in a group or company or nonprofit. Most subleases come with furnished offices, phones lines, even T-1 lines, wireless, and other amenities already installed and offered to you at either no extra charge or a nominal charge. Conclusion

For as little as a few hundred dollars a month for yourself or per employee, you and fellow employees can gain the benefits of having an office without losing the benefits of working from your home. Of course, if you want your office to be decorated to the hilt, that will be your choice and will run up the bill.

Overall, society moves in one direction (everyone worked at an office, store, campus, or factory and not at home) to now larger and larger numbers of people working exclusively at home. This hybrid approach may work in two separate ways. First, it may bring the person exclusively at home out of their home office closet and, on an occasional basis, back into the mainstream of work life. Second, this hybrid approach may open up the possibility for the first time of trying working at home for part of the work week for someone who has feared working at home because of the potential of losing all of the benefits of working in an office setting that I described earlier.

This hybrid approach is a sensible middle ground that promotes sustainability for society, promotes work-life balance, and promotes the credibility of businesses that lose some of that credibility by only having a home office address or a post office box. We are about to embark on this hybrid approach for our new consulting firm. We will see how it works and the next article might be: “What Do You Say to Your Co-worker Who Puts Gum Under YOUR Chair Every Monday and Wednesday?” There is no guarantee this arrangement will benefit everyone, but it is at least a viable option to both the person working exclusively from home and the person who is working exclusively from their office

About the Author

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