



TELECOMMUTING

Telecommuting: An Option for Oregon Workers With Disabilities

Difficulties working a straight eight-hour day. Severe mobility impairments. Lengthy commutes on the Tri-Met Lift. Hassles relying on others for rides to the office. Rehabilitation appointments close to home. Chemical sensitivity to office environments.

For all of these reasons and more, telecommuting — working at home at least part of the work week instead of commuting to the employer's work site — is a valuable option for Oregon workers with disabilities. Telecommuting gives them more control over their lives. It allows them the flexibility to get their work done efficiently when and where it makes sense and reduces the transportation hassles many must deal with.

Telecommuting gives Oregon employers better access to a diversified workforce, tapping the talents and skills of Oregonians with disabilities who might otherwise be shut out of the 8 to 5, office-bound job market. It also is a tool that can help some employers comply with the requirements of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA).

Because it conserves fuel and reduces air pollution and traffic congestion, telecommuting is good for the environment and the community too.

PROVIDING THE FLEXIBILITY OR SPECIAL WORK ENVIRONMENT SOME WORKERS WITH DISABILITIES NEED

The 1990 census uncovered a 73 percent national unemployment rate for the disabled — higher than the 1980 figure. Telecommuting can help



Therapist Allison Rose-Gold telecommutes from her home in rural Corvallis using adaptive equipment for people with visual impairments: a video magnifier, a "Talking Book" cassette player, a computer that runs with an InLarge program, and a keyboard with large type and high contrast.

reverse that trend. "It opens the pool of potential employees that employers have not necessarily had access to before," points out Eugene Organ, executive director of the Oregon Disabilities Commission.

"As a person who has never driven," says Organ, who is blind, "the idea of working from one's home is very attractive. You don't have that commute. It's difficult to find a bus to get yourself to work. I think telecommuting is an answer to a major portion of that problem.

"I also think it's an important option for people who need to be home at a particular time for treatment or for a period of rest during the day," adds Organ. "They can still perform a function for an employer but may not be able to work a full eight-hour stretch. It's

also true for people with mobility impairments and for people who find it difficult to travel and to relocate during the course of the day.”

“Workers with disabilities have gifts to give, and don’t necessarily have to do that in an office setting,” says Susan McNaught, executive director of Technology Access for Life Needs, a program administered by the Commission. “I see technology and telecommuting allowing us to focus on what people can do, not what they can’t do.”

According to Kem Marks, who through the Oregon Client Assistance Program advocates on behalf of clients of state rehabilitation programs, telecommuting is going to be the “wave of the future” for people with major mobility problems, people who have to control their environment — lighting, odors and chemical exposure, for example, and people who need an almost sterile environment because they have an immune deficiency. “For anybody who is home-bound,” says Marks, “this is going to be the way that they can get employment.”

INCENTIVES AND ASSISTANCE FOR OREGON EMPLOYERS

A 35 percent Oregon Business Energy Tax Credit can offset the cost of purchasing and installing equipment at the telecommute site. Computers, facsimile devices, modems, phones, printers, software, copiers and other equipment necessary for telecommuting are eligible. The employer takes the credit over five years against Oregon income taxes owed. Equipment must be used for telecommuting at least 45 working days per calendar year. Expenses for home-based businesses are not eligible.

Oregon companies also can obtain low-interest loans from the state for telecommuting projects. Current interest rates for the Oregon Small Scale Energy Loan Program range from eight to ten percent. Because of financing costs, loans of \$25,000 or more are most cost-effective.

The Oregon Department of Energy administers the tax credits and loans and offers training and technical assistance. Free video tapes and publications are available to help Oregon employers decide if telecommuting is right for them and to guide them in developing successful telecommuting programs. To learn more, call the department toll-free at 1-800-221-8035. In Salem, call 378-4040.

Don McKay, severe disabilities specialist with the Vocational Rehabilitation Division, has helped many quadriplegic clients get set up to work at least part-time from home. “People with severe disabilities can have commuting problems,” McKay points out. “Many are in situations where they have to take extensive breaks. Working from home they can work for a while, then rest. They’re not as likely to be restricted to 8 to 5. Many have attendant care. In an office setting it can be pretty awkward.”

Two of McKay’s clients are working for small manufacturers: One handles the purchasing and paperwork for his family’s manufacturing company in Oregon City. The other handles sales of a variable hub for a wheelchair that his father and he developed. The manufacturing plant is in Halfway, Ore., but he works out of his Portland area home.

Another of McKay’s clients is working part-time from his home and part-time at the office as a claims examiner for an insurance company. McKay is setting up another client to work exclusively from his home for a large medical cooperative, phoning patients to remind them of their appointments. The dialing of phones and the computer input will be voice actuated.

BENEFITS FOR EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES

Telecommuting can be an important tool to integrate into the workforce people with a wide range of disabilities and medical conditions.

Employers who use telecommuting to employ and retain workers with disabilities benefit from having a “better crosscut of society,” according to Kem Marks. “All the stats show that people with disabilities tend to work harder, be more productive, not miss work as much, and have higher loyalty to their employers — as long as the employer treats them in a respectful manner.”

Employers also benefit from having telecommuting employees with access to “greater spheres of influence,” points out Lynnae Ruttledge, assistant administrator of Rehabilitative Services, Vocational Rehabilitation Division. “If you have people outstationed in Lebanon, Sweet Home and Albany, you have employees who have connections to more people.

“It’s a real method of getting work done,” says Ruttledge, “so long as the employer’s needs are met regarding the timeline, quality, and level of interaction that may be needed to contribute to and review a work product.”

“It also may pull some employers into the technology age,” adds Eugene Organ, “particularly those who are reluctant to invest in new technology. It may be very beneficial for their business. The addition of a telecommuter could encourage the development of their technological capability.”

Telecommuting can help some employers comply with the ADA. According to Susan Webb, who worked with the Bush Administration on rulemaking for the ADA and is now the executive director of the Arizona Bridge to Independent Living (ABIL), “Employers who look to telecommuting as an option under the ADA are going to be the employers who have access to a better work pool.” But, cautions Webb, “Telecommuting should not be an alternative to an inaccessible office or transportation.”

Besides expanding the labor pool to better include people with disabilities, agencies and companies that have adopted telecommuting have documented:

- Increased productivity - Telecommuters report fewer distractions working at home and improved concentration. They tend to be more relaxed at the start of the day than they are after a stressful commute.
- Improved job satisfaction - Happier, more relaxed telecommuters feel better about themselves, their employer and their performance.
- Less sick leave and absenteeism
- Reduced office and parking space requirements - When there are fewer people in the office, less space is needed inside and out. Telecommuting may allow employers to reduce costs for office and parking space.
- Enhanced public image - Because it allows employees greater flexibility and reduces gasoline use, air pollution and traffic congestion, telecommuting shows that the employer cares about its workers, the community and the environment.

Employees also appreciate the advantages: opportunities to be more productive and to better balance their work and home life, reduced stress, and less money and time spent commuting. Telecommuters with disabilities report greater independence, better health, and improved morale.

NOT FOR EVERYONE, NOT FOR EVERYDAY

Not everyone has a job that's suitable for telecommuting. Some workers need daily, face-to-face contact with managers and customers. Others miss teaming with coworkers on projects, access to files and equipment, and meetings. But many employees have tasks that can be done away from the office. They include accounting, analysis, auditing, computer programming, data entry, design work, editing, evaluations, graphics, preparing budgets, project management, reading, research, sales and writing.

Good candidates for telecommuting are employees who are self-motivated and results-oriented, need minimal supervision, and are able to plan and work on their own time.

Managers of telecommuting workers must set milestones, deadlines and objectives, and focus on results. Managers also must be able to delegate responsibility and forego direct oversight.

“We get a lot of calls from people saying telecommuting is perfect for people with disabilities,” says Susan Webb, who is piloting a temporary employment agency for people with disabilities through her organization Arizona Bridge to Independent Living. “Nothing is perfect for people with disabilities. Telecommuting is right for some, not right for others.”

Some disabilities aren't conducive to telecommuting. For example, Dan Irwin, Vocational Rehabilitation Division, works with people who have traumatic head injuries. “The model that works the best in terms of employment is more of a supportive work environment,” says Irwin. “Memory problems are the issue. They need someone to help keep them on task.”

Advocates for people with disabilities suggest that employees who are able to work in the office part-time should do so. Spending part of the work week in the office provides better interaction with coworkers and supervisors that pays dividends in teamwork and promotion.

“We don't see telecommuting as an all the time thing,” says Webb. “People with disabilities have been isolated long enough. We discourage people from looking at telecommuting as a full-time option.”

AUTOCAD TECHNICIAN CONNECTS TO CITY OF PORTLAND NETWORK

James Carlton does computer-aided drafting for storm, sanitary sewer and water quality sites for the City of Portland Bureau of Environmental Services. After an accident, he worked with Don McKay at the Vocational Rehabilitation Division to adapt his job to his new situation.

Carlton's home office includes a computer, printer and modem to connect with the city network. He has no finger function, so he uses a typing splint to type at the keyboard and a track ball instead of a mouse. He'll soon have an ISDN line that will provide a high speed connection to the city network.

Carlton works four 10-hour days. "I go downtown one day a week at the most," he says. "At least three of the four days I telecommute."

He saves at least 60 miles a week by telecommuting. "It saves me a lot of time too," adds Carlton. "I'm a quadriplegic in a wheelchair. I have a van with a loading ramp. Loading up and driving, finding an adequate place to park, and the return trip all take a lot of time. Telecommuting saves me an hour and a half a day."

Carlton likes the flexible work schedule that telecommuting allows. "I spread my time out throughout the day. I take a two-hour break for lunch and exercise and an hour for dinner. I start at 8 a.m. and work 'til 9:30 at night."

Telecommuting also ensures that Carlton will be able to work a full day even if his care arrangements falter. "I have somebody come out to the house everyday to help me get up and get going. I'm lucky now that they're showing up at 6 o'clock so I can be at work at 8. But I can imagine a time where they can't get here until 8 and I wouldn't start work 'til 10. There wouldn't be enough time to work a full day at the office, or I'd leave the office too late to be desirable."

CHILD THERAPIST HAS INDEPENDENCE, MORE TIME WITH HER OWN CHILDREN

As a therapist of abused children and their families, Allison Rose-Gold spends much of her work week face-to-face with clients, conducting counseling sessions and parent support groups. Her home office allows her to focus on case management — planning, documentation and follow-up. She's also able to conduct phone sessions with clients from home and have easy access to computer



Allison Rose-Gold avoids a 26-mile round-trip twice a week by telecommuting. It frees her from relying on other people's rides and gives her more time with her sons, Devin (3) and Torrin (5).

files on the spur-of-the-moment when she's called by a client or colleague.

Rose-Gold was born with *Retinitis Pigmentosa*, an incurable, degenerative eye disease that has left her legally blind. Telecommuting avoids the transportation hassles of relying on Dial-a-Bus, her husband and neighbors to get to work from her rural home, 13 miles from the Children's Services Division (CSD) office she works out of. And it reduces the time demands of commuting, leaving more time for work and her two young sons.

Rose-Gold is in private practice, primarily contracting with the non-profit organization Childsafe. She works one day a week at the CSD office and two half-days from home to accommodate her children's needs. "I want to be closer to them and have more time with them," says Rose-Gold. "If my office was in town it would be harder.

"Transportation is an issue," she says. "I live out of range of many services. My home office frees me up to concentrate on work because I don't have to depend on other people's rides. I can be more independent."

Rose-Gold is partially sighted, so her home office includes a video magnifier for reading and completing forms. Her computer runs with an InLarge program and a keyboard with large type and high contrast. She can "read" professional journals and books on tape using a "Talking Book" cassette player.

"I can arrange the office the way I need it," says Rose-Gold. "It's a very peaceful setting and productive work environment. And my clients like to come here. They see it as a relaxing, out-of-the-city environment."



Technology Information Specialist Mike Clement works part of each business day at his Portland home. Telecommuting allows him to work a full eight-hour day without spending the whole day at the office.

TECHNOLOGY SPECIALIST SPLITS TIME BETWEEN CAMPUS AND HOME OFFICES

Mike Clement is a technology information specialist for Technology Access for Life Needs (TALN). He works out of TALN's Portland State University office and his home on Portland's east side, providing information referral about technologies and conducting research and training on assistive equipment to help people with disabilities gain access to the technology they need for education and employment.

"I have muscular dystrophy and very little arm movement and no leg movement," says Clement. "I have a computer at home that lets me write by myself. I have a Headmaster mouse emulator (that allows him to use his head instead of his hand to move the cursor around the screen). I primarily use the computer to connect to bulletin boards, Compuserve and for e-mail. I do a lot of information gathering that way. I send and receive faxes. I do everything I can do in an office without having to get up and move around."

Much of his work requires face-to-face meetings with clients — conducting training and sleuthing installation problems, for example. He currently goes to the office every workday, and works two to four hours at home. But, says Clement, "There's no reason that we couldn't change this to three days in the office, two days at home."

He used to use the Tri-Met Lift to get to the TALN office. It took an hour to an hour and a half to get to work everyday because the route ran from the east side to Beaverton, then to Oregon Health Sciences

SAIF ACCOMMODATES TEMPORARY HOME CARE THROUGH TELECOMMUTING

When Mickie Casebier's husband was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, she figured she would have to take a leave of absence from her job at the State Accident Insurance Fund (SAIF). "I was saying, 'I don't know how long I'm going to be able to do this job. He's going to be at a point where he can't dial the phone. I have to be with him.'"

Casebier, a legal assistant, worried that she might not be able to return to the same area she was in before. And she knew a leave of absence would be financially difficult for her family. SAIF made it possible for her to keep working. "They said, 'Look, we're going to put a computer and modem in your house. You're a valued employee.'"

Casebier works part-time from her home, taking care of business and her husband. She interviews witnesses, organizes how they will testify at hearings, and requests investigations and surveillance. She goes to the Salem office most mornings to get documents and take care of photocopying, printing and mailing. "Working out of my home — I like it," says Casebier. "I feel like I can get a lot done."

Telecommuting allowed another SAIF employee, Customer Billing Representative Jerri Abney, to keep working after she fell and broke her heel. "It's enabled me to avoid using up all my sick time and not get so far behind at work," she says. "For someone working in an office like ours, who was off work because of an injury, I think it would be strategic for the insurer and the business."

Abney is a member of a team that sorts through the work that needs to be done and identifies what she can do at home. "I help keep them current, keep them moving. It's helped all of us."

Abney figures she's able to do 80 to 85 percent of the work she does at the office at her home in Oregon City. She calls customers to collect balances and payroll reports they owe and prepares transmittals, adjustment sheets and data entry forms. She communicates with the office by e-mail, and modems correspondence to a printer in the Salem office. A colleague does the mailing and follow-up.

"I think productivity is higher at home because of not having interruptions," says Abney. "Work at home is possibly more error-free."

University, and finally to his office on the west side. He never knew when he'd arrive. Now he uses his own vehicle and gets to the office in about 10 minutes.

Clement has been telecommuting for eight years, first working for the Forest Service, then at Portland Community College, and now with TALN. "It's been a very effective means for me to stay employed," says Clement.

"Transportation and aid issues are difficult in a work environment for me to be full time. Telecommuting allows me to do a complete work day without spending the whole day at the office. I can work a lot on one day and not on the next. You're not governed by the clock."

Susan McNaught, executive director of TALN, praises Clement and his telecommuting arrangement. "He's a sensational employee. We've tried to give him flexible hours so he can get work done at home or at the office. I would like to see us do more of that."



Laurie Schwartz, an advocate for people with developmental disabilities, connects to the Internet from her home office to do research and discuss advocacy issues with professionals worldwide. She avoids a 100-mile round-trip three days a week by telecommuting.

AN ADVOCATE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES ADVOCATES TELECOMMUTING

Laurie Schwartz is a self-advocacy and resource specialist with the Oregon Developmental Disabilities Council, providing advocacy, ADA training and personal assistance training.

Schwartz lives in Milwaukie. Her office is in Salem. She saves 100 miles round-trip each day she telecommutes. On the days she goes to the Salem

office, a coworker meets Schwartz at her home and they drive together in Schwartz's van. Because of her physical disability, Schwartz is unable to drive herself.

"Normally I work at home three days a week, and I'm in the office two," says Schwartz. "I can work at the office all day. But because the office doesn't have much space, I work at home part-time. I also have a daughter I like to be with."

Schwartz has a child care provider in her home while she's working who also provides some of Schwartz's care.

Schwartz has federal funding for innovative projects for people with developmental disabilities. Her home computer is connected to her office network and to America On Line. She keeps on top of developments on line from home, reading the Federal Register and getting information off the Internet that her organization can use.

"I can connect with people all over the world and talk about advocacy and disability," says Schwartz. "It's a neat freedom. It's opened up a whole new aspect. I'm in an environment where people don't know I have a disability. Because to them I'm just somebody else on line. I don't have a disability."

Schwartz makes it clear that she doesn't mean to hide her disability. But she says it's a nice break not to have to deal with people's attitudes about it all the time.

ACCOMMODATING TELECOMMUTING UNDER THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT

The ADA is designed to remove barriers to employment for people with disabilities. It specifies such employment options as modified work schedules, part-time work, and allocations of functions among employees. But is an employer required to allow an employee to telecommute if because of a disability he or she cannot be at the office full-time — so long as the job is amenable to telecommuting?

That's for the courts to decide, according to attorneys at the Oregon Advocacy Center, a private, non-profit organization advocating for the rights of people with disabilities.

"A very little bit of case law is starting to form around this," says Meg Nightingale, who directs the center's Protection and Advocacy for Individual Rights (PAIR) program. "Telecommuting will have to meet test

situations before it will be considered a reasonable accommodation under the ADA.”

According to Eugene Organ of the Oregon Disabilities Commission, “It’s a reasonable accommodation if it does not pose an undue burden for the employer or fundamentally alter the basic nature of the business the employer is undertaking. There clearly are businesses where having a telecommuter would not be a problem in either of those aspects.”

Nightingale believes that the courts will be looking at the nature of the business and the employer’s and employee’s needs on a case by case basis: “Can you shift or rearrange job functions among coworkers? Do essential job functions have to be performed at a specific job location to be effective or productive? Do they need to be performed under direct supervision? Do they require other coworkers to be accomplished?”

According to Nightingale, “If the job function is portable, if it doesn’t need direct, daily hands-on supervision, and if it doesn’t require daily interaction with team members or if that interaction could be accomplished with technology, then you’re looking at the disability and you’re saying, ‘Can this person with a disability perform this job function with reasonable accommodation?’

“If all essential job functions could be performed at home, and the employee couldn’t come to the job site to do them, then it’s a reasonable accommodation to allow the employee to work at home,” says Nightingale. “But if the employee with the disability could do the job at the normal work site, it would be hard for them to argue for telecommuting. You’d have to show that it affects the employee’s stamina, concentration or motor coordination, or that a fatigue factor sets in, for example.

“When you’re most effective can relate to reasonable accommodation,” adds Nightingale. “You might be

more effective at night, or you might have a medication cycle where you’re productive in the morning and evening but your afternoon is worthless, or you might have a physical therapy appointment every afternoon.”

Would the employer be required to provide the necessary services and equipment to enable the employee to work at home? “If the employee is asking the employer to provide delivery service of documents and technology, then you have to ask if the employer can meet this without undue hardship,” responds Nightingale. “You have to look at the nature of the business and the cost.”

Nightingale also points out that telecommuting can help employers meet the requirements of the Family Medical Leave Act, which requires accommodation of employees who are pulled away from work when they or a family member face a serious health condition. Oregon’s “mini-ADA” – Chapter 659 of the Oregon Revised Statutes – applies to employers smaller than those covered by the federal ADA, adds Nightingale, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act provides for accommodation of workers with disabilities at federal agencies or organizations that receive federal financial assistance.

Another attorney at the Oregon Advocacy Center, Glennis Gold, offers practical advice: “Workers with disabilities should be creative as they consider how the employer might provide a telecommuting option,” she suggests. “They should do as much research as possible with regard to efficiency, effectiveness and costs and present that information to the employer.”

“It doesn’t hurt to suggest things on a trial basis,” adds Nightingale. “Win them over by demonstration.”

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May 1995

