

BALANCING ACT

The Triumph of Telecommuting

A growing number of companies are offering telecommuting and remote work options—and that's especially good news for women

BY KIMBERLY OLSON

A FEW YEARS AGO, ATTORNEY Caroline C. Maxwell was working at her firm's Dallas office, mainly collaborating with a team in Washington, DC. When those colleagues left the firm for Porzio, Bromberg & Newman PC, they asked her to join them.

"I'd been working with them for so long and it was a great relationship," Maxwell says. "So I said, 'I'd love to go with you. The only thing is there's no Dallas office.'"

Although tempted, Maxwell couldn't uproot her family.

She didn't have to. Porzio agreed to let her work remotely from her home in Texas. To bring in top talent, the firm embraces telecommuting and remote work—in which an employee might live far from the office, perhaps in another state—as well as reduced and alternative work schedules. "We've always recognized the need to be flexible, to retain the people that we've spent a lot of time hiring and investing in," says Carole Mecca,

chief administrative officer at Porzio. "So we've looked for ways to enable people to have better life balance. We have attorneys, paralegals, secretaries, analysts—everybody takes advantage of that at one time or another, sometimes permanently. We want to invest in people's ability to contribute to the firm and also have a good life while they're about it."

After being hired as an associate, Maxwell was promoted to counsel last year, all while enjoying the flexibility to attend to her personal life, including her four

children. “I’ve had two children while telecommuting, and even though maternity leave has been good, I’d always have to go back and kind of juggle all of that,” she says. “Being home makes it great—I do have a nanny who’s here while I’m working—because I can be around more. All of the principals that I work for—they’re all men, and they all have families—are so understanding. They just made it work.” Maxwell’s location in the central time zone has actually benefited the firm, which has numerous cases in California and Texas.

Another Porzio attorney, Jennifer Romanski, began telecommuting when she had her children. She works around 30 hours a week, spending two days in the office and working from home for two days. “It was absolutely essential [in order] for me to stay at the firm,” she says. “I have had friends whom I went to law school with give up practicing. They walked away from it, usually after they had kids.” Romanski, like Maxwell, was promoted while telecommuting and is now a principal at the firm.

In a survey of 200 of the country’s largest law firms conducted by the National Association of Women Lawyers, 88 percent said they offer the option to work from home. That’s good news for women, who enter the profession in similar numbers as men but make up only 20 percent of equity partners. Telecommuting—in law firms and many other fields—is a trend that shows no signs of stopping.

Telecommuting: the new normal

Not long ago, telecommuters were relative oddballs. But the number of home workers has grown by 115 percent in the last decade. Millennials, who care deeply about flexibility, are largely driving the trend. “Our recent FlexJobs report points to that,” says Mika J. Cross, director of 1 Million for Work Flexibility and vice president of employer engagement and strategic initiatives at FlexJobs, a popular remote-work job site. “As we embrace a multigenerational workforce, the ability to

Making It Work: Launching a Program

A thoughtful approach to telecommuting will help ensure its success. Experts offer the following tips for rolling out a telecommuting or remote work program.

- Create telecommuting or remote work policies so that expectations are clear.
- FlexJobs can share research with companies to help them craft effective policies.
- Be cognizant of employees who might be working in different time zones, for example, by scheduling meetings at times that are convenient for all.
- Provide the equipment and materials that telecommuters need to perform their job.
- Treat telecommuters and in-office workers equally. Remember that just because you don’t see employees doesn’t mean that they aren’t producing quality work.
- Help remote workers get to know their teammates, for example, by scheduling occasional nonwork video chats over coffee or lunch, just to socialize.

offer flexible options is becoming important.” Most millennials—70 percent—say they have left or considered leaving a job because it didn’t offer flexible work options.

Older workers surveyed also value flexible work options, and both younger and older generations ranked telecommuting 100 percent of the time as their preferred type of flexible work arrangement.

“People of all ages want to choose when, where, and how to bring their talent to the workplace,” Cross says.

Companies across nearly all industries are responding. “We work with employers in over 50 occupations, from health care to customer service and high-level positions like executive management,” Cross says. “They understand it gives them a competitive edge when they’re searching for talent.”

If a company in a small city needs someone with hyperspecialized skills, there may be few local candidates who are qualified—or none at all. By offering a remote work option, however, that company can broaden the search beyond its own backyard.

Telecommuting and remote work opportunities have popped up even in the most unlikely places. “Before I started at FlexJobs, I worked in the federal government, which has a workplace culture that’s been ingrained for 50-plus years, so that’s hard to shift,” Cross says. “We just released our top 100 list of companies that offer remote work, and even government agencies are among them, like the federal Department of Commerce and the State of Virginia.” In fact, the US government is now the largest employer of telecommuters.

According to census data analysis conducted by Global Workplace Analytics, about 50 percent of the US workforce holds a position that is compatible with at least part-time telecommuting.

Meeting women where they are

Companies offering telecommuting can tap into a broader talent pool that includes skilled workers needing flexibility in their work lives, particularly women. A Boston Consulting Group survey of 6,500 employees in 14 countries across industries found that in (heterosexual) households where both spouses work full-time, women are more likely to handle tasks that are time sensitive and occur frequently. And women are more likely to be primarily responsible for everyday household



employees who reported working from home at least one hour per week ended up adding five to seven hours of work time to their week, compared to those working at the office. “Telecommuting cuts down on commuting time and makes one’s work life more flexible, but it lengthens it,” says sociologist Mary Noonan, PhD, who coauthored the research with Jennifer Glass, PhD.

Other research found that telecommuting can lead to feelings of isolation and may impact company culture. But companies are finding solutions to mitigate those risks. Jane Thompson, senior director of communications for Sage, an enterprise software company, felt somewhat detached from her colleagues when she first began telecommuting. But evolving technology has bridged the gap. “I found that with instant messaging, video conferencing applications like Webex, and communication platforms like Microsoft Teams, I could feel like I was right there with my teams,” Thompson says.

Sage’s workforce spans various states and 23 countries, so telecommuting is key. The company offers telecommuters equipment such as a company-issued computer,

licensed software, a phone and headset, and a printer. Like many remote workers, Thompson has the best of both worlds. She’s able to live in her preferred city—in her case, Austin, Texas—while keeping her career on track. Occasionally she meets with colleagues at the company’s Atlanta headquarters. “Being able to work for a company I love, without having to uproot my home life, has been an amazing experience,” she

says. “Working remotely has not affected my ability to grow with and further invest myself in the company.”

At Peppercomm, a communications and marketing agency headquartered in New York City, employees can take advantage of the company’s Work How

chores like cooking, cleaning, and laundry. What’s more, the mental load that comes with managing tasks, such as making doctor’s appointments, still falls disproportionately on women.

Happily, practices are evolving: women 45 and older in dual-income households are 2.6 times more likely than men in the same age group to perform most household chores, but women age 24 to 34 are just 1.5 times as likely to carry a heavier load. As men take on more household responsibilities, telecommuting benefits them too.

Women in the tech industry have found it particularly challenging to balance career and family life without flexible work options. The National Center for Women & Information Technology found that 56 percent of women with tech jobs leave their career at the midpoint, just when losing their talent costs their company the most. The report points out that conventional workplace conditions aren’t natural, in that they were built to suit the original working population—men with stay-at-home wives.

When Allison Robinson was on maternity leave, she learned that 43 percent of highly qualified women leave the workforce after becoming a mom. That sobering statistic prompted her to launch the Mom Project, a digital talent marketplace that connects women with meaningful work at companies that care about supporting women as they navigate the transition into motherhood.

More than 100,000 women have joined the Mom Project, which works with thousands of companies, from Fortune 500s like Nike and Facebook to midsized, high-growth companies like Pinterest. Moms create a profile on the platform—including the type of flexibility they want—and they receive coaching from the Mom Project talent team throughout the interview process.

Some women prefer project-based opportunities; others want full-time work with a parent-friendly company that allows flexibility.

Navigating the new world of work

While some employers might be concerned that their telecommuting employees will skip work to lounge at the beach, those fears appear unfounded. Research shows that employees are actually more productive and engaged when they’re able to choose how and when they work. One study, conducted by Stanford University economist Nicholas Bloom, showed that telecommuting at one company led to a 13 percent increase in productivity and a 50 percent drop in attrition.

If anything, it’s important to watch for burnout. Research published in the *Monthly Labor Review* showed that

DID YOU KNOW ...?

The average telecommuter is college educated and 45 years of age or older, and earns a higher median salary than his or her in-office counterpart.

You Want Policy. Telecommuters stay connected via video and other technology, and teams occasionally meet in person. “We introduced something called #inperson,” says Tara Lilien, chief talent officer. “As a manager, if you want everyone on your team in the office for a meeting, you have the choice to do that. Then employees know that they can’t schedule their doctor’s appointment or work from home that day.” To stave off feelings of isolation, one Peppercomm telecommuter organized a group called the Outliers Network, which gives at-home workers opportunities to gather for some face time.

Some telecommute occasionally, like CJ Griffin, a partner at the East Coast law firm of Pashman Stein Walder Hayden, who usually works from home once a week. “I use that day to do work that requires a more intense focus,” she says. “It is hard not to be interrupted by the noise of a busy office, by coworkers with questions, or by telephone calls. I can answer my cell phone through an app that makes it appear to others as if I am in the office, and I can remote desktop in and access all of our programs.”

Griffin says working from home even one day a week makes a difference. “There is something special about having a quiet house all to myself—it feels like having ‘me time’ while I am also accomplishing my work assignments,” she says. “As a parent and partner at a busy law firm, that ‘me time’ can be very rejuvenating.”

At companies like Porzio, employees appreciate their company’s flexibility and follow suit. “They know if there’s a reason that they need to come in to any of our offices—and they do it,” says Carole Mecca. “They like the arrangement they have and they want it to work, just as we want it to work. So it’s been good for employees, and it’s definitely been good for us.” **DW**

Kimberly Olson is DW’s managing editor.

Tips for Would-Be Telecommuters



If your job can be done from home, or mostly from home, you may have visions of becoming a telecommuter, with the freedom to pick your kids up from school or do your grocery shopping during nonpeak hours. Here’s some advice for doing it right.

JUST ASK.

If you want to telecommute, put in a request. “People are sometimes unwilling to ask because they’re afraid of how they’ll be perceived or of someone saying no,” says telecommuter Jennifer Romanski. “People don’t want to lose people they’ve invested in, especially if you’ve added a lot of value.”

MANAGE DISTRACTIONS.

“What time of day to you bring your best focus to work?” asks Mika J. Cross, director of 1 Million for Work Flexibility. “Sticking to a regular, set schedule helps first-time remote workers to maintain productivity and collaboration with their team. And have a dedicated work space that gives you more structure and routine.”

STAY ON THE RADAR.

Put thought into which business hours you plan to hold, how you plan to remain accessible, and how you’ll keep your work visible to colleagues. “It’s important to stay in communication and be available,” says Caroline C. Maxwell, who works remotely. “It’s no different than if I were just down the hallway. That might mean I need to have my cell phone on so my principals can shoot me a text or call me on my cell phone when I’ve stepped away from my home office.”

BE MINDFUL OF YOUR SCHEDULE.

“I often get lost in email at night and lose track of time,” says sociologist Mary Noonan, PhD. “People who work from home should try to keep tight boundaries on their time and not just work more because they can.”