E-Commuting – Reducing Costs and Improving Productivity

A recent review of surveys and course discussion in the Association Management Education (AME) Program, suggests more and more association staff are getting involved in e-commuting, also known as telecommuting, teleworking and e-working. E-commuting reduces travel to the office primarily through the use of telecommunication tools and techniques. E-commuting is, in effect, working at home on a full or part-time basis.

For many, e-commuting began with staying home to work on major projects where disruptions were minimized. Advances in technology have accelerated the pace of conversion. It has since grown to meet the needs of those who don't want to spend up to two hours in traffic during bad weather or want more work flexibility. There are two types of e-commuters: those who go to the office occasionally, and those who e-commute once or twice a week.

One AME student now stays at home with her new daughter and still contributes to association publications and other key deliverables. Even though she wanted to spend more time at home with her daughter, she did not have to go on leave. The organization retained her knowledge and involvement and did not incur recruitment or training costs. Another, who e-commutes one day per week lives 45 minutes from the office, saves 1.5 hours by not getting in the car and 20 percent of the weekly travel budget. This individual prefers to drive a mouse rather than a car. Another is able to walk the dog at lunch while a load of laundry is underway. These individuals believe effective communication between the office and the employee are not compromised by e-commuting, nor is the quality of member service or administrative activity.

The biggest downside to e-commuting has been the issue and approach to control. Some employees are unable to maintain the necessary discipline and, therefore, work has to be converted into tasks that can be measured with performance indicators such as deliverables and timelines.

E-commuting can involve the use of complex technology arrangements such as fax, computers, scanners or video cameras, or it may involve a pen and a phone. I can visualize the number crunchers calculating the number of people times the cost of a complex home computing and communications set up. However, it doesn't have to require the cost of extensive capital equipment. Some like the idea of e-commuting so much they offer to use their own equipment. Why would they do this? It's likely because they are capable of maintaining the necessary work connection but want the benefits that e-commuting can provide.

All work is not suitable for e-commuting. Jobs such as composing minutes, preparing reports, reading, research or talking on the phone fit well with e-commuting. A self-screening process with the following type of questions will help individuals assess their readiness to participate.

- Can you handle the technology required to access and transfer information?
- Can you break work into tasks and assign performance requirements?
- Can you motivate yourself and apply self-discipline to achieve targets on your own?
- Can you work well without supervision?
- Can you solve problems on your own?
- Do you have strong communication skills and the ability to maintain team relationships?
- Can you minimize or eliminate distractions at home?
- Can you leave work at quitting time?

If you answered yes to the questions and you are not e-commuting now, try one day a week for those special, analytical and future focused tasks that require concentration. Try to stay away from the day-to-day tasks that involve many others. Save those for when you are in the office. Full time e-commuters can always attend emergency or other required meetings.

Individual Benefits

- Better work and family balance
- Reduced stress and improved morale
- Greater job satisfaction
- Reduced commuting time and expense
- Fewer interruptions, greater focus and enhanced productivity
- More flexibility on residence location and times or days worked

While e-commuters enjoy the benefits, they also talk about the need to maintain discipline, to prevent excessive hours of work, and maintaining the necessary separation between home and work. Some individuals, depending on personality types, can get lonely and feel they are being left out of the loop in the office action.

Association Benefits

- Helps with recruitment and retention and reduces related costs
- Reduces space requirements and overhead costs
- Improves productivity
- Reduces sick leave
- Improves moral and job satisfaction
- Accesses expertise beyond the community

Another bonus? In addition to individual and association benefits, the community also benefits from reduced traffic congestion and pollution.

Computer ownership in 2000, according to an AC Nielsen survey, is up to 69 percent of Canadian households. 55 percent of Canadians have web access. Improved Internet speeds, costs and a general shift to working with information will see more employees e-commuting as well as more seeking similar arrangements. As associations increase activity in this area, there are some issues they may want to consider.

E-Commuting Considerations

- E-commuting policy/guidelines
- Readiness self-screening
- Letter of understanding or agreement
- Availability to calls and timing
- Off- site operating costs and office supplies
- Insurance
- Connections, data and security
- Confidentiality
- Dependent care arrangements
- Taxes
- Health and safety issues
- Planning and managing tasks
- Reporting and evaluation
- Trial runs
- Team development and maintenance
- Appropriate and necessary home office equipment
- Access to workplace resources
- Non e-commuter jealousy and suspicion

There can be challenges in implementing e-commuting in your association. Check out telecommuting expert Gil Gordon's web site at http://www.gilgordon.com/telecommuting/downloads.html, particularly if you are looking for responses to objections such as:

- There's no way to know what employees are doing at home;
- This won't work for all employees;
- We just don't have the resources to manage telecommuting;
- Telecommuting just won't work around here; and
- Telecommuting costs too much.

The Canadian Society of Association Executives has a sample Telecommuter policy which can be accessed by searching the site www.csae.com for telecommuter. For more information on e-commuting, teleworking or telecommuting, check out these sources:

Canadian Telework Association www.ivc.ca/cta/part3.html, or the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/telework.html.

This column features innovation and practical solutions applied to challenges, trends, issue and opportunities for the association community. Column editor Jim Pealow, MBA, CMA, CAE is a consultant and the Association Management Education Program Lead Instructor/Coach for CSAE. He can be reached at jim@amces.com.