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# How telecommuters can ease career congestion

## Tips for keeping job visibility high while working from home

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 Updated: 35 minutes ago



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Absence makes the heart grow fonder, but it can sometimes make it wander.

That's what some telecommuters fear when it comes to whether their bosses' hearts are beating fast for them during raise and promotion time.

A.C. from Denver works remotely for a Fortune 500 technology firm as a midlevel manager, but he isn't sure telecommuting is helping his career. "It's been my experience that real advancement takes visibility, managing other people, and being where the action is," he says.

"From an organizational standpoint," he adds, "it's very easy to hire and fire remote employees. After all, they are just appendages to the company and can be clipped off at any time."

This grim assessment is not that far from the truth for some of the 12 million or so employees who telecommute today.

As more and more employers look for ways to get workers out of expensive offices, off the roads and working remotely, tele-employees can find themselves in a career no-man's land wondering if managers have forgotten that they even exist.

But you can stay on the minds of the power-that-be if you take action.

Teleworkers who are proactive and get their accomplishments and their faces in front of their bosses as often as possible are actually thriving in the telework environment. And they're also taking advantage of all the technology out there making it easier for employees and managers to connect. Webcams, video and audio conferencing, instant messaging and, of course, e-mail, are all becoming telecommuter lifelines.

Daily IMs to managers, along with a host of other initiatives, helped Lawrence Imeish advance in his career even though he's been a telecommuter for five years, first with General Electric and now with Dimension Data, an IT consulting firm.

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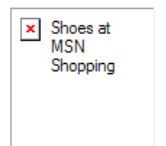
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Imeish, who works out of his home in Reston, Va., believes he was promoted from senior solutions architect to principal consultant at New York-based Dimension Data because of three factors: He's good at his job; he makes sure his direct boss and other managers are aware of what he does; and he does his own external promotion, writing technical article in trade publications that give him credibility in the industry and with Dimension Data higher-ups.

"It's the fundamentals of pride in your work," he explains.

Telecommuting has been working out so well for Imeish that he recently turned down a more lucrative job offer from a company that wasn't open to teleworking. "It would have required me to sit in two-hour traffic to drive to Washington, D.C. I would pull my hair out," he says.

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With all the benefits, you need to realize that even with the promise of flexibility, telecommuting is not for everyone, and you could actually end up working more than you did before.

"Many teleworkers overcompensate for their non-physical presence. Teleworkers prove themselves by being extremely timely in returning good results and responses to managers," says Elham Shirazi, a national telework consultant.

Indeed, Imeish often finds himself working into the wee hours. "It's a double-edged sword," he says. "I can take 15 minutes out of my day to help my wife with my 2-year-old, and then more than make up for that time after 7 p.m."

And no way around it, you'll miss out on the office socialization that many people thrive on. No more impromptu employee birthday cakes or happy hours after work.

There are also financial issues to keep in mind. In some states, teleworkers end up getting taxed twice on their earnings, according to Nicole Belson Goluboff, an attorney and author of "The Law of Telecommuting."

For example, she says, "If you're a Connecticut resident who works for a company in Manhattan but chooses to work a few days from home, New York will tax you on income for your New York days but also on your Connecticut days. And Connecticut will tax you on the income you earn at home."

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Once you take all these factors into consideration, and you're ready to telecommute anyway, be proactive in setting up the right plan, and put it in writing if possible.

Belson Goluboff suggests sitting down with your manager and discussing what the zoning issues in your community require; how overtime will be tracked if applicable; whether training will be provided; how company data will be kept secure; and the daily and weekly job requirements.

Look for firms that are committed to making telecommuting work, not those just looking to cut costs. Good signs are companies that invest in technology and firms that have telework training seminars for workers and managers.

[JetBlue](#) trains all its 1,200 reservations agents who work from home in the Salt Lake City area, and they periodically bring the agents in to interact with their supervisors and participate in team meetings.

Also, JetBlue rents out a water park once a year, inviting all the agents and their family members. This helps keep up "the face-to-face interaction," says Bryan Baldwin, a company spokesman.

Advertising agency Barkley pays for Scott Brown, one of the firm's creative directors, to fly to the company office in Kansas City from his home in Houston every other week so he can work hands-on with his team of five people.

Brown actually came up with the idea to telecommute after he applied for the job, fell in love with the company but couldn't move to Kansas City because of family obligations.

"The key is communication," says Brown, about making it work. What helps him is face time, IM, e-mail, phone and his Blackberry, which he admits, "I'm a little bit married to."

Susan Seitel, president of workplace consultancy WFC Recourses, offers this telecommuter survival list:

- Touch base with each of your co-workers at least once a week to see what they're up to.
- If you don't have any pressing business issues, just ask if there's anything new, compare notes, and find out if there's anything you can do to help them.
- Ask for a volunteer "office buddy" to take responsibility for e-mailing office news at least weekly (maybe in return for a monthly invitation to lunch).
- Be ready to reschedule telecommuting days if necessary. People won't always be able to work around your schedule, so you may have to come in on some days you ordinarily work from home.
- Take the initiative to be present at key meetings. If you can't alter your schedule, be an active participant via conference call, videoconference, or Web conference.
- Make sure you're clear about your career goals and share them with your manager. Is there a next step for you? If so, what is it and how would you like to get there?
- Make sure anyone who might need you knows exactly when they can get you, what to do if they feel it's urgent, and how long it will be before you return their voice mail or e-mail message.
- Watch the tone of your e-mail messages. Without a smile or vocal inflections to soften what may be perceived as criticism, feelings can be hurt and colleagues irritated.
- Keep checking out the perceptions of your in-office colleagues. Telecommuters tell of suddenly noticing relationships cooling with no warning, perhaps the result of a perceived slight, a little jealousy on the part of someone who had been wanting to telecommute, or the sense that the telecommuter just didn't care any more. There's no need to wait for signs and symptoms.

Ask this question regularly, she advises, "Do you have any thoughts about how this arrangement is working?"