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**MANAGEMENT
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LETTER A NEWSLETTER FROM
HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PUBLISHING

ARTICLE REPRINT NO. C0002A

**The Ten Commandments
of Telecommuting**

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The Ten Commandments of Telecommuting

LOOK AROUND YOU. Don't see as many coworkers as you used to? They may be telecommuting. If you work for a Fortune 500 company, as many as 10% of your colleagues may be at home, working virtually. Or are they lying on the sofa, watching TV and working their way through a six-pack?

You just don't know, do you?

In an effort to relieve the anxiety that telecommuting can cause both those who still go to the office and those who don't, here are the Ten Commandments of Telecommuting. Send them to your absent colleagues and breathe a little easier.

Thou shalt remember that trust is the basis of telecommuting.

The law of unintended consequences strikes again at the heart of the employer-employee relationship. Telecommuting began as a response to

expensive real estate, worker scarcity, technological advances, and worsening congestion on the highways. But it has become the chief tidal pull underlying a sea change in how employers treat their workers. The old model was based on supervision. You put your posterior in a chair, and your boss saw that you kept it there for 40 hours—or more—per week. With telecommuting, the focus shifts from time on task as a measure of worker performance, to the quality of the end product. And that takes trust. The boss has to trust that the workers are getting the job done even though she can't see them.

Thou shalt not install keyboard monitoring software to keep track of your remote workers' productivity.

Re-read the first commandment if you don't get it. When a relationship is based on trust—and results—you can't micromanage the process. That would

Telecommuting: Good News for the Phone Companies, At Least

An ever-rising stock market. Non-existent inflation. The "Baby Bust" generation entering prime working age. It all adds up to a very competitive marketplace for employees. If you want to attract and keep the best, you have to be prepared to offer telecommuting to your talent.

"It's a matter of necessity. This is a survival tactic," says Kathie Lingle, national work-life director at consulting and accounting giant KPMG in Montvale, N.J. What used to be an unusual, specially negotiated arrangement is now an expectation on the part of prospective employees. Indeed, employees may

ultimately decide not to telecommute, but companies need to offer the possibility anyway, to send out a message that they are worker-friendly places to join.

A survey by the Denver-based communications firm USWest found that some 32% of more than 2,200 companies polled in 11 states had full- or part-time telecommuters. How well does it work? No data on that, but given that lots of telecommuters will be burning up the phone lines either way—busily working or looking for a new job—the phone companies, at least, are smiling.

strike at the very essence of the relationship, damaging it beyond repair, with very little potential gain. Instead, set clear goals for your telecommuters and regularly monitor their progress. And by the way, that works well for regular employees, too. It's time to stop obsessing about who's in the chair and who's not.

Thou shalt not blame telecommuting first for an individual's mistakes.

Whenever a business tries a new way of working, the brain-dead among its ranks instinctively blame everything that goes wrong on the change itself. In fact, when telecommuting experiments go wrong, they usually do so for the same reasons that office workers screw up: poor communication, unclear goals, or poor execution. Telecommuting exchanges group time for solitary time. Workers may legitimately find that they can't handle the increase in solitary time or the decrease in group time. But the rest is business as usual.

Thou shalt honor the weekend and keep it free.

OK, so every job involves some weekend hours these days. But the telecommuter has to learn increased discipline in separating work life and home life, or risk a complete merger of the two. It's inevitable that sooner or later a new telecommuter will find his home life imperiled by self-imposed—or boss-imposed—extra work hours and days. Set some limits or lose all perspective.

Thou shalt treat company property—both physical and intellectual—as if it were still at HQ.

In this case, possession is not nine-tenths of the law. Just because the company has set you up with a fax machine, a computer, and high-speed Internet access doesn't mean that those items—or the knowledge residing in them—become yours. Keep a strict division

between home stuff and work stuff. It's ethical, it's professional, and it keeps you sane.

Thou shalt not malign the telecommuter when she is not in the office.

It's always tempting to gossip about those not present; indeed, it's probably the second oldest human activity. Resist the temptation to equate absence with inactivity. Office workers need the telecommuting experiment to work just as much as the telecommuters do. Remember, you're both working for the same company, and competition between corporations is as fierce as it has ever been. Telecommuters can go to work for someone else by simply changing the direct dial numbers on their telephones.

Thou shalt not freelance on company time.

Frankly, it's easier to moonlight from a home office than the workplace. But it's no less unethical. Render unto the company what is due to it. The same rules

apply still, even though you're sitting at home in your bathrobe contemplating yet another inane directive from your boss whose inability to type is now painfully obvious through e-mail. If you don't like the company, find another.

Thou shalt not long for the office when at home.

If you've made the decision to telecommute, commit yourself to making it work for at least six months. If at the end of that time you find yourself talking to the spider in the cobweb under your desk, go back to the office. But give it a fair trial for long enough to adjust to its rhythms and practices. Telecommuting is not for everyone, and it can get lonely. But don't call your colleagues at the office to moan about how much you miss it. They'll hate you for your whining, because most of them wish they were at home, too.

Thou shalt not pretend telecommuting is working when it isn't.

Some companies have jumped on the telecommuting bandwagon because they've discovered that they can save millions on office leases by sending all their workers home. If you're part of one of these ill-planned experiments, give it a try, but be prepared to stand up and demand the old office back again.

One of the most common traps telecommuters fall into is technology envy. You can spend the greater part of your workday scanning for new technology, testing it, demanding it from your company, installing it, and complaining about how badly it's working.

Some jobs, and some work teams, need daily face-to-face contact to make them succeed. Just as it is the company's responsibility to think through big social changes like telecommuting, it's

Profile of a Telecommuter

Experts say the best candidates have the following in common:

Communication know-how. An effective telecommuter is computer savvy, well organized, and self-motivated, and has exceptional communication skills. These skills help to placate nervous managers who fear that out of sight equals out of mind. If you're going to be a telecommuter, you have to overcommunicate.

A real office. It has to be more than the kitchen table after the breakfast dishes are cleared. Workers need space that affords privacy and freedom from distractions. Living next to a golf course probably isn't a good idea. Telecommuters also flirt with danger if they look upon the home office as a way to avoid paying for child care. It's usually not productive for a person to try to work at home while taking care of his children.

Access to technology. Companies can go a long way toward fostering a proper work environment by picking up the tab for a computer, phone line, and high-speed Internet connection.

Awareness of the dark side. No matter how diligent or motivated an employee might be, those who enjoy kibitzing around the water cooler will likely find telecommuting a lonely undertaking. "We've had some who do it for a year and then want to come back to the office because of the need to socialize," says Julia Abell, vice president of human resources at Empower MediaMarketing in Cincinnati. Similarly, KPMG employees who want to telecommute first must fill out an extensive questionnaire to see if they are well-suited and know what telecommuting entails. That process alone acers out 50% of those who apply.

every individual's responsibility to test the validity of the experiment. Corporate-wide decisions don't absolve individual workers of their own commitment to telling the truth as they experience it.

Thou shalt not obsess about the technology.

One of the most common traps telecommuters fall into is technology envy. You

can spend the greater part of your workday scanning for new technology, testing it, demanding it from your company, installing it, and complaining about how badly it's working. Technology is, after all, your lifeline to the corporation and your fellow workers. But in truth, the only real essentials are a telephone, a computer, a fax machine, and some kind of e-mail system. There are many choices; go with the time-tested ones. With those tools, you can

make telecommuting work. To be sure, the latest gadgets may offer benefits the basics don't provide. But ask yourself, does the time it takes to shop for, acquire, install, and get up to speed on the new technology really get offset by increased productivity? Stick to the fundamentals: get the tools you need to do the job, and then get to work. The rest is noise.