

BUSINESS TIMES

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

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No need to commute

More companies are allowing employees to work from home, reducing time in the car and adding more time with the family

BY JENNIFER CURRY

When a snow and ice storm struck last month, Janet Devlin, an accountant at Bookminders Inc., wasn't worried about facing a long and treacherous commute to work or finding a sitter for her three young boys who were home from school.

Instead, she sent the boys out to play in the snow, went into her Upper St. Clair home's office and began to work. Later, she spent time with her kids and made the work up in the evening.

"I can be here if they are sick, for school delays and school holidays," she said. "With a normal job, I would have had to call off those days or figure out some sort of alternative."

Devlin is one of a growing number of people nationwide who are working from home rather than the office. Although she still has to meet with clients and go into the office on occasion, she's able to enjoy flexible hours, fewer interruptions and cost savings on gas, dry cleaning and parking.

Nationwide, an estimated 26 million people who are not self-employed and work full-time are currently working from home at least one day a week, according to Chuck Wilsker, president and CEO of The Telework Coalition, a telecommuting advocacy group based in Washington, D.C.

According to Wilsker, the average employee that works from home is 20 percent more productive. Yet, at the same time, many businesses are hesitant to adopt the programs because of concerns that employees can't be observed to tell whether they are really working.

"To manage a remote work force is very important," Wilsker said. "They still need managing, mentoring and help. Trust is No. 1."

Some local companies, such as North Side-based Bookminders, designed the company with the telecommuting concept in mind, offering it as an employee benefit.

Locally, about 40 so-called bookminders such as Devlin, who perform outsourced accounting

services for clients, work from home rather than in the office. They attend training in the office and visit clients each week, said Thomas Joseph, president and CEO of Bookminders.

According to Joseph, developing the trust that workers truly are working when they should be is one of the biggest challenges for companies that allow some workers to telecommute from home. Having quality control and training systems

in place are important to build that trust and ensure that the work is getting done from home. In addition, there tends to be more trust when the work-at-home employee has worked with the manager for a few years in the office.

"If they hire somebody with the intent of working from home, I think it's really challenging," he said. "It's easier for somebody who has had somebody for three or four years."

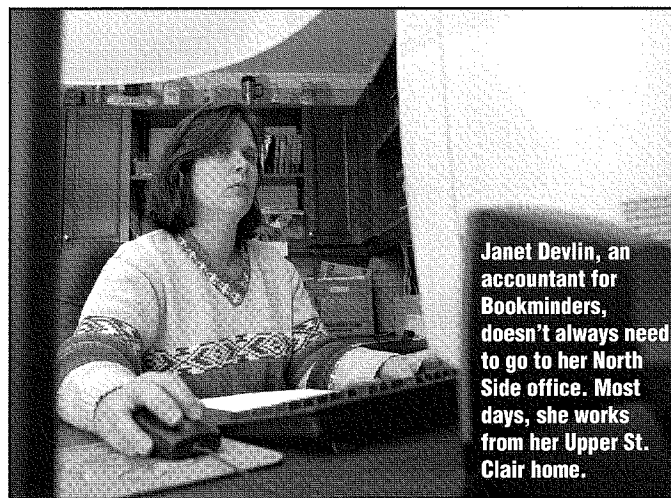
Bookminders has had an easier time because the company has built its model around people who work from home, Joseph said. The company also offers a flexible schedule -- if employees don't want to work as much, they can scale back the number of accounts they have and work fewer hours.

And, Comcast Corp. recently implemented a new program in Pittsburgh that allows some of its customer account executives to work from home. Employees, who are selected for the program based on their performance, are set up with devices including chairs, computers and phone service. They work from home four out of five days, coming in the fifth for meetings.

The company now has 18 employees who work from home, with plans to have 40 more join the ranks this year, according to MaryAnn Spirnak, vice president of customer service for Comcast's Three Rivers region.

"We thought a work-from-home program would promote work force flexibility, retain employees, improve performance and improve employee morale," Spirnak said.

All employees in the program have either maintained or improved performance, a require-



Janet Devlin, an accountant for Bookminders, doesn't always need to go to her North Side office. Most days, she works from her Upper St. Clair home.

JOE WOJCIK

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ment to continue working from home, and they rarely call off sick. Spirnak said performance hasn't been an issue because the company only allows its top performers who are most dependable to work from home.

In addition, overall employee performance in the office has improved because many employees want to get in the performance-based program and work from home, Spirnak said.

"I love working from home," said Ava McCary, a customer account executive for Comcast who lives on the North Side. "You get to save on your gas; you can save on your lunch costs, and you can do chores around the home on your lunch break. Working at home is real quiet. You get so much more done."

And, McCary added, she's now able to keep an eye on her 12-year-old daughter, Ebony, when she comes home from school in the afternoon.

"She was always a latchkey kid," McCary said. "Now, I'm here when she comes home, and she no longer has to always come to the after school program. I get to spend more time with her."

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