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Home Advantage

Converting dining room tables and spare bedrooms into remote offices — why North Shore businesses and employees say telecommuting works for them

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Denise Giangrosso's Mandeville home bustles with the usual pre-work routine on weekday mornings. Giangrosso wakes up, showers and knocks out last-minute to-dos with her husband while readying their two children for school over cereal.

But once the kids are on their way and the house is quiet, Giangrosso makes a beeline for the armoire in the dining room. There she unpacks her office — a computer, extra monitor and her cellphone. With the flip of a few switches the day has begun.

"When the computer is on and the armoire is open, it's work time," says Giangrosso, a senior field representative for Louisiana Medical Mutual Insurance Co. headquartered in Metairie.

At that point home melts away and Giangrosso joins a growing group of North Shore residents who have dropped morning work commutes and converted their dinner tables and spare bedrooms into remote offices.

Giangrosso, who started working remotely in 2006, spends most of her weekdays bouncing between her dining room and the hospitals where her clients work. She says it took a few weeks to learn to ignore the home phone and the errand list. Now, walking into her dining room office is like walking into the office.

"You put on that hat and go work," she says.

As smartphones and remote computer servers loosen tethers to the desk, more workers are seeking the flexibility of full-time telecommuting. And employers are accommodating them.

While employees spend on computer equipment, remote software and phone service for remote workers, they can cut back on office rent, transportation costs and keep valued employees, says David Wyld, a professor of management at Southeast Louisiana University in Hammond and an international management consultant.

Wyld adds that the infrastructure to conduct business outside of the office is there. Cellphones tap into office phone systems, remote servers store work files and online video conferences connect teams across the world.

"The email is replacing the handshake," Wyld says.

In October 2010 WorldatWork, a Scottsdale, Ariz.-based human resources think tank, surveyed more than 530 employers nationwide about workplace flexibility. Thirty-seven percent of employers offered a full-time telework option. Those employers were also more likely to feature telework programs in attracting talent this year.

But for some North Shore companies, industry demanded a shift to a remote work force much earlier.

For much of the decade the central hub of PMOLink in Mandeville has served as a placemaker for a roving work force.

"If there are people in the office, the company is not making money," President and CEO Geoff Hingle says.

Hingle says the technology consulting industry demands that employees work on site with clients. Employees also need to be technically adept to do their job. The two factors, he says, edged the firm into a remote work force more than five years ago.

While PMOLink has physical offices in Mandeville and in Texas, a majority of its work force now works remotely. Some employees are stationed as far away as Afghanistan and India.

Hingle notes that traditional industries have a hard time unleashing their work force and trusting that work will get done.

"You're basically empowering the employee a lot more," Hingle says. "Not every manager is comfortable with that."

Wyld at SELU expects that to change as more service industries move to electronic filing systems. He adds that increasing gas prices could also play a role in increased workplace flexibility.

In Giangrosso's case LAMMICO closed its satellite office in Covington where she had an office. Instead of spending two hours on the road each day, Giangrosso sat down with the company and drew up a telework plan.

Lisa Barber, a human resources consultant at LAMMICO, says Giangrosso is now one of six fulltime remote workers at the company, which employs 112 people.

Barber says the company's full-time remote workers range from North Shore residents to a specialized computer programmer in New Jersey. Even traditional office workers have the option to work from home one day in the week.



Denise Giangrosso, a senior field representative for Louisiana Medical Mutual Insurance Co. based in Metairie, converts an armoire in her Mandeville home into a remote office.

"We strive to be an employer of choice and flexibility is very important in that," says Barber.

But flexibility also comes with the challenge, and sometimes cost, of conducting human resources online and maintaining company morale via email and phone calls.

At PMOLink, Hingle says an online human resources firm handles the hiring process, employee benefits and training remotely. This year the company overhauled its communications system.

More important, Hingle says, is building a company philosophy that keeps remote workers invested in their work. PMOLink sends out regular communications blasts and sets up face time when needed for regional team meetings and Christmas parties.

"You can do a lot of things in the virtual world but people still need human interaction," he says.

In Mandeville, Giangrosso says she misses the day-to-day camaraderie of the office. Still she says it's easier to get work done in the quiet of her home. And, she adds, the commute is unbeatable.

"I can't imagine doing anything else," Giangrosso says. "Once you're doing it, it just makes sense. I have everything I need with the computer right there." •