



"My team would go for days or weeks without calling me at all," he says of his managers. "That's one of the disadvantages of telecommuting, because you [don't] hear things immediately when they happen—[unlike] when you're physically in the office to hear it first-hand," he admits.

Middleton realized he needed to correct this management problem, so he told his coworkers that part of their jobs would be to keep him informed and up-to-date on projects and office gossip. When he travels the office, he makes it a point to spend more time mingling with the staff, too. And, he'll make a phone call, rather than sending an e-mail. "Phone calls help to spur conversation," says Middleton. "You can't call in enough—but I learned you have to be nice, but persistent, to engage people in warm conversation on the phone. Everyone is so used to e-mail these days."

—Jeffery D. Zbar

Commuters' Choice

Though the Clean Air Act of 1990 was developed with the best intentions—to help companies turn to commuting alternatives to ease severe traffic congestion—the act fizzled due to a lack of commitment. But a new and stronger initiative has surfaced. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is partnering with large companies, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and state and local government to cut air pollution through the Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative.

The initiative gives employees the option to exchange employer-provided parking spaces for cash, take advantage of transit-fare subsidies, telecommuting, flexible work schedules, and car- and vanpooling.

What makes the EPA sure this program will work where others have failed? According to the EPA, employers will have a new category of benefits to work with, such as the ability to recruit and retain employees who have stressful commutes; reduced facility parking costs; and reduced employee and employer tax burdens.

Participants include Geico, Intel, Kaiser Permanente, Nike, Pitney Bowes, the Walt Disney Co., the states of Georgia and Maryland, and the city of Fort Worth, Tex.

The EPA uses data from New York City's Department of Transportation to underscore the advantage of choosing telework. The data says that if 15 percent of the workforce in the city telecommuted 3.7 days a month, the potential impact would be 95,000 fewer vehicles on the road each day.

The EPA will support each company by appointing an "account manager" for each firm to help implement the programs. For more information on the initiative, go to the Commuter Choice program site at www.epa.gov/otaq/transp/comchoic/ccweb.htm.

—Marilyn Zelinsky Syarto

Face Time

Keeping up with goings-on in the office takes work, but it's worth it to cultivate relationships with coworkers and colleagues so they can give you updates and tidbits, plus information on when and why meetings are being called. Here are some tips to make sure you don't get left out.

Touch Base Call in and send e-mail every other day to your key colleagues.

Schedule Phone Time Write it in your agenda to spend at least five minutes each week on the phone with team members.

Schedule Deliberately It's a job in itself, but arrange extra time before and after in-office meetings to spend time with coworkers.

Do a Walk-Around When in the office, don't be shy—force yourself to walk around so everyone sees your face and has a chance to say hello.

Ask About Parties Ask colleagues to let you know ahead of time when office parties are scheduled, so you can make a point to come in that day, or rearrange your schedule so you work on-site that day.

Throw a Party Don't wait to get invited—get involved in planning an office event. It can be as simple as gathering colleagues for an after-work drink.

—J.D.Z.

