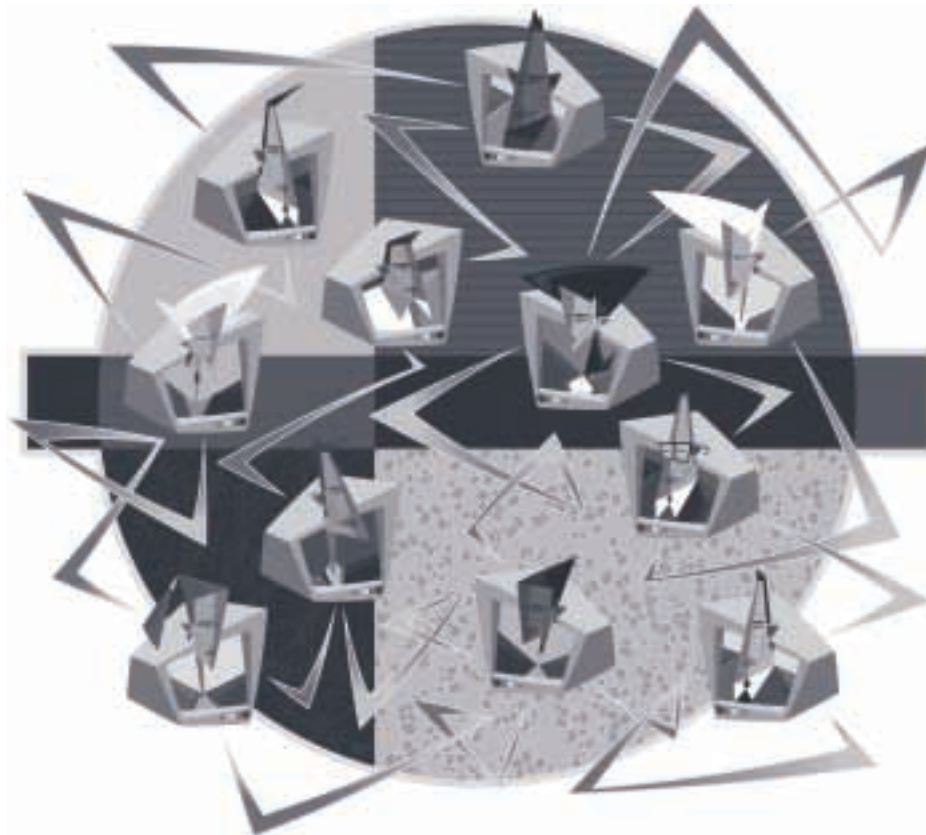


# Telecom



Telecommunication technology lets telecommuters transform almost any space into a workplace. Instead of going to work, many telecommuters let work come to them. Welcome to the age of the portable job.



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by Matthew Mariani

Some employees skip their commute to work 1 or more days a week. Instead of traveling to their primary workplace, they bridge the gap using telecommunications technology. These workers telecommute in an age when information moves faster than highway traffic.

Most telecommuters in the United States work at home when they do not go to their primary workplace. But many people working at home are not telecommuters. So, how do you know a telecommuter when you see one? It's hard to say. Experts vary in their definitions of telecommuting.

For the purpose of this article, telecommuting occurs whenever an employee is paid for work done at an alternate worksite and total commuting time is thereby reduced. Probing this definition helps illustrate telecommuting in the first section of this article. This prepares the way for examples of the pros and cons of telecommuting. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey (CPS) are then used to make a partial count of telecommuters. The next two sections examine what characteristics

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make jobs and people suitable for telecommuting. Wrapping up is a look at how workers enter into telecommuting arrangements.

The sidebar on page 13 compares telecommuters to self-employed home-based workers. Use the self-assessment on pages 16 and 17 to find out if telecommuting might be a good work arrangement for you.

## Telecommuting in action

Understanding how telecommuting works requires a look at the variables defining it. These include work status, worksite, extent of telecommuting, telecommunication, commute time, and formality of the program.

**Work status.** To qualify as a telecommuter, an employee must receive pay for work done at an alternate site. This excludes two groups from the ranks of telecommuters: the self-employed and employees who take work home without extra pay. Despite being excluded, some self-employed workers do act very much like telecommuters. See the sidebar on page 13.

**Worksite.** Alternate worksites for telecommuters include the home, satellite offices, telecenters, and just about any-

place else. Most telecommuters in the United States work from home.

Like many telecommuters, Sandy Holland and Casey Green let work come to them. Holland manages eight commission-based salespeople for AT&T. She works out of an office in her Gainesville, Virginia, home 2 or 3 days a week. Working a full day at home, she eliminates as many as 3 hours of commuting time to and from her primary worksite, an office in Washington, DC.

Green sells software and technical support services for Summit Software. Although the company is based in Syracuse, New York, Green only sets foot in its primary offices a few times a year. He spends about half his time in a small satellite office in Plano, Texas, about 10 miles from home. He also works from home about 5 percent of the time and travels extensively to meet with customers. Time spent at a customer site does not qualify as telecommuting because Green would do business during such visits even if he were based in Syracuse. But Green does telecommute while between sites. "My office is wherever my laptop computer is," he says. "I can work on a plane, on a train, in a cab, or in a hotel room."

Telecenters, which are satellite offices



shared by more than one employer, provide one additional telecommuting option. Employees may still have to commute to work every day, but the convenient location of the telecenter makes for a shorter trip.

**Extent.** Most telecommuters telecommute 1 or 2 days per week. Some alternative definitions of telecommuting require that the worker telecommute on a regular basis or spend a minimum amount of time telecommuting. Such definitions might exclude workers like Jolene Perry. Perry does medical transcription for the Southwest Washington Medical Center in Vancouver, Washington. She currently works from home less than 1 day a week, spending the rest of her time at the center.

Perry is 1 of 4 medical transcriptionists whose telecommuting hours vary from one week to the next, but this pattern will soon change. Perry looks forward to working from home 75 percent of her time under a new arrangement. This new plan will maximize the time spent

telecommuting while assuring coverage at the primary worksite.

**Telecommunication.** Telecommuters use similar telecommunication and computer

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*When coworkers and supervisors do not occupy the same office space, they rely more on telephone, fax, e-mail, and the Internet to coordinate work.*

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technologies to accomplish work at the primary and alternate worksites. However, these technologies have greater importance while telecommuters are working at alternate sites. When coworkers and supervisors do not occupy the same office space, they rely more on telephone, fax, e-mail, and the Internet to coordinate work.

When Holland works from home, she

uses two conventional phone lines, a cell phone, and e-mail to stay in touch with her sales professionals, all of whom also telecommute. Conference calls often substitute for face-to-face meetings—but not always. “We have weekly team calls every Monday at 11 a.m. to do a roundtable discussion by phone,” she says. “And we have monthly face-to-face meetings.”

But what about work-related conversations around the office water cooler? “We have what I call an ‘electronic water cooler,’” Holland says. “There’s a shared drive on our LAN we can dial into for chat, rumor control, and exchanging information through the grapevine.”

**Commute time.** Telecommuting reduces total commute time by altering commuting patterns. Telecommuters usually save time by making fewer trips to and from their primary worksite or shorter trips to and from their alternate worksite. In some cases, telecommuters travel the same distance but still save time by avoiding traffic. Holland, for example, sometimes begins a workday in her home office. She answers e-mails, makes phone calls, and does other tasks readily accomplished from home. Leaving for her primary office late in the morning, she avoids rush hour traffic into Washington, DC, and thus arrives more quickly.

**Formality.** Some employers establish telecommuting programs with formal policies and procedures. In other organizations, telecommuting occurs informally. Employers with formal telecommuting programs are more likely to provide their home-based telecommuters with computers, extra phone lines, Internet access, technical support, and other work-at-home necessities. Having a formal program may also coincide with a restructuring of the primary worksite.

Janice Daquila-Pardo, a Web and multimedia developer, works for TManage, a company that helps other firms create and maintain formal telecommuting pro-



grams. Daquila-Pardo herself telecommutes from home according to her employer's established telecommuting policy. If her computer at home crashes, her employer sees that it gets fixed.

In contrast, Perry telecommutes under less formal arrangements with her supervisor at the Southwest Washington Medical Center. She currently uses her own computer at home and relies on a technical support contract she paid for herself. But the medical center has begun to formalize its telecommuting practices. Perry will soon have a company-provided computer and technical support.

Organizations having many home-based telecommuters in a formal program need fewer workstations than they have employees, so the primary office may serve as "drop-in" workspace. Daquila-Pardo, for example, works from home more than 90 percent of her time. She does not need a workstation reserved for her in the Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, offices of TManage. Instead,

she and her telecommuting coworkers arrange to use whatever workstations are available when they need to come to the primary office.

### Perks and problems

Telecommuting offers benefits and poses challenges to both employees and employers. Among other things, employees enjoy greater flexibility, reduced stress, and fewer distractions from work. But there's also a down side. One worker's perk can be another worker's problem. For employers, increased productivity, lower real estate costs, and improved recruitment often justify the effort required to manage a more dispersed staff. The perks and problems of telecommuting vary somewhat by type, but home-based telecommuters are emphasized here because of their larger numbers.

**Employees.** Working at home gives employees more flexibility in many ways. "You can take care of personal things without interrupting your work so much," says Perry. "You can schedule a repairperson to come your house, and you don't

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*"We have what I call an 'electronic water cooler.' There's a shared drive on our LAN we can dial into for chat, rumor control, and exchanging information through the grapevine."*

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Sandy Holland

have to take time off." Many home-based telecommuters find this flexibility enhances their personal lives. "It helps me balance my work and home life," says Holland. "I can get a load of laundry done and get other things out of the way so that

## Telecommuters and the self-employed

Self-employed workers do not count as telecommuters. But certain self-employed workers make their living under nearly the same conditions as employees who telecommute. Self-employment situations that resemble telecommuting thus offer another option for those seeking a telecommuting workstyle.

According to CPS data, almost 6.5 million self-employed workers did some work at home in May 1997. Of these, about two-thirds ran home-based businesses. The self-employed do not qualify as telecommuters because they lack employee status. In addition, home-based business owners do not work at an alternate worksite. For them, home is the primary worksite, and working at home means no commuting.

So why do some self-employed workers have so much in common with telecommuters? Think about an independent contractor who works on contract for a single client company. This contractor might commute to the client's offices to work each day, or he or she might work from home instead. The second alternative resembles a telecommuting work arrangement.

Some self-employed workers find themselves in similar circumstances. Janice Daquila-Pardo, for example, became a telecommuter on a technicality. She used to work at home developing websites on contract for a company called TManage. Then TManage hired her as an employee. She continued to work at home doing the same tasks as before. But her new work status rendered her a telecommuter, a subtle change to the casual observer.





explaining why she telecommutes. “That’s it in a nutshell.”

Many telecommuters cite the avoidance of distraction as the best reason for home-based telecommuting. Green knows other telecommuters who concentrate better at home, but he prefers his satellite office. “If I’m at home, I find myself fiddling with home improvement projects or landscaping,” he says. “It’s easy for me to be distracted, so I come into the office to force myself to focus on the job.”

Holland has the opposite problem. “The toughest thing is to identify an end to my workday,” she says. “When the home office is only a few feet away from the rest of your home, it’s really easy to work straight into the night.”

**Employers.** Under the right circumstances, telecommuting can enhance company profits. Employers clearly benefit if telecommuting makes their workers more productive. But does it? Many managers resist implementing telecommuting arrangements because they fear a decrease in productivity. Having workers scattered at remote sites challenges employers to manage their workers according to the results they produce. In some cases, telecommuting on a trial basis will reassure an employer that productivity will not plummet if employees work some days at alternate sites.

Telecommuting may cut the high cost of office space. Suppose a company has 1,000 employees and 500 of them telecommute on an average day. Such a company might need to rent only half as much office space as it would otherwise. Of course, the employer must also weigh the cost of providing employees with office equipment and technical support at the alternate worksites, if necessary.

Telecommuting sometimes helps employers recruit and retain qualified employees. Survey and anecdotal evidence suggests that many workers regard the

when the kids are home in the evening, I’m spending time with them instead of doing home chores.”

But telecommuters understand that not all aspects of their personal lives coexist with work at home. “You’re able to balance your family’s needs with your own and still get your work done,” says Nancy Kurland, an assistant professor of management and organization in the University of Southern California’s Marshall School of Business, “but telecommuting does not substitute for child care.” Kurland speaks as a researcher who studies telecommuting and as a telecommuter with a baby daughter. On days when Kurland works from home, she still has someone else care for her daughter. “If you have older children who come home after school,” she adds, “they need to learn to stay out of Mom or Dad’s way.”

In addition to increasing flexibility,

telecommuting helps many workers reduce stress. Not having to drive in heavy traffic calms the nerves of many workers—

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*“You’re able to balance your family’s needs with your own and still get your work done, but telecommuting does not substitute for child care.”*

Nancy Kurland

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if only on the days they telecommute. Perry also finds the quiet comfort of home conducive to productivity. As a medical transcriptionist, she must produce a set quota of work each day. Working more productively without interruption eases deadline pressure. “I’m more relaxed,” she says,



option to telecommute as a benefit. Telecommuting thus gives recruiters an additional carrot to offer potential employees. And that extra carrot sometimes makes all the difference. Green, for example, would not have accepted his current job had he been required to move to Syracuse. “I don’t have to uproot my family to meet the needs of an employer,” he says, “when I can do what I need to from where I am.”

### Counting telecommuters

CPS data do not identify telecommuters as such. A periodic supplement to the survey does count workers who spend time working at home for their primary job. According to the supplement, more than 3.6 million wage and salary workers received pay for work done at home in May 1997. (See table.) These workers make up about 3.3 percent of all wage and salary employees. The employment situation of these workers probably meets the definition of telecommuting used in this article, but the number of workers who actually telecommute is higher.

The figure cited above represents only a subset of all telecommuters for a couple of reasons. First, the survey only accounts

### Wage and salary workers paid for job-related work done at home for their primary job, May 1997

(thousands)

<b>Total</b>	<b>3,644</b>
<b>Occupational group</b>	
Professional specialty	969
Executive, administrative, and managerial	867
Sales occupations	640
Administrative support, including clerical	611
Service occupations	256
Precision production, craft, and repair	116
Technicians and related support	112
Operators, fabricators, and laborers	73
<b>Industry</b>	
Services	1,616
Manufacturing	517
Wholesale trade	343
Finance, insurance, and real estate	330
Retail trade	289
Transportation and public utilities	205
Public administration	196
Construction	136

for telecommuters who work at home. It was not designed to identify workers whose alternate worksites are satellite offices, telecenters, or other sites outside the home. Second, the survey asked respondents if they had a “formal arrangement” with their employers to be paid for work done at home. Workers telecommuting under informal arrangements were not specifically identified.

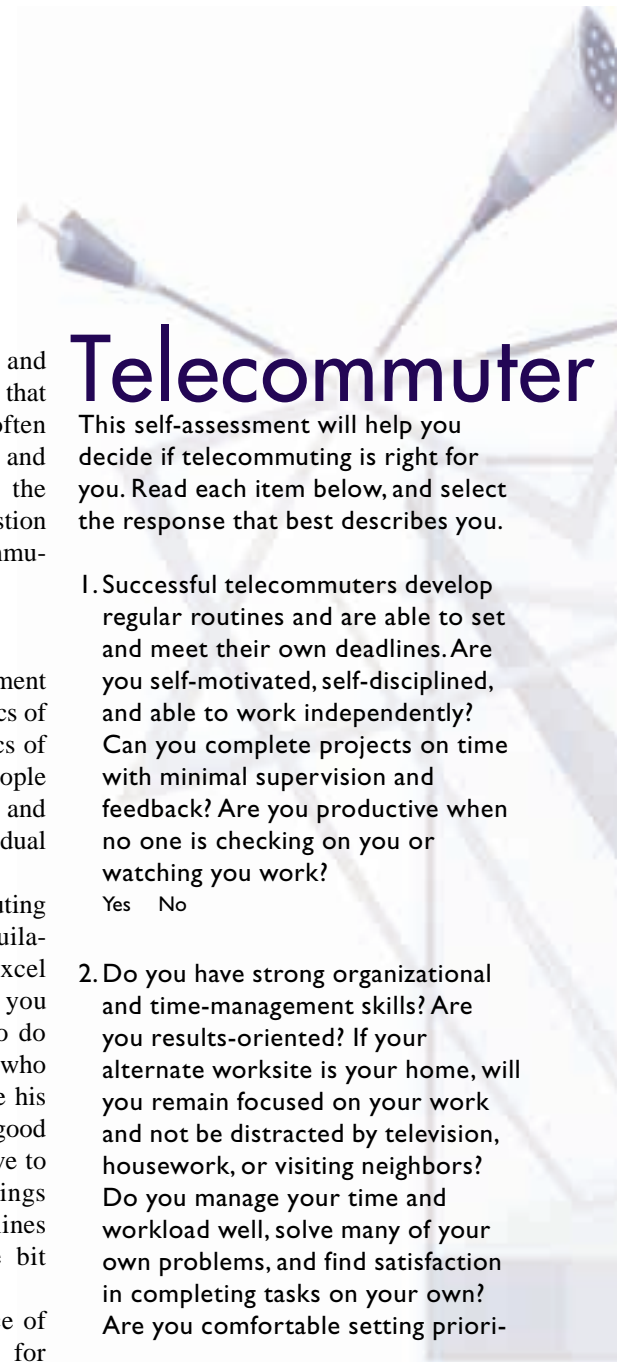
No one knows how many workers telecommute informally. But some experts like Patricia Mokhtarian believe the number is significant. Mokhtarian, a professor of civil and environmental engineering at the University of California at Davis, has studied telecommuting patterns and the reasons people choose this mode of working.

“I think the informal version of telecommuting is far more common than the formal kind,” Mokhtarian says. “It’s quite common for a trusted employee to be able to work at home for a few days to finish a report or when the kid is sick. It doesn’t happen on a regular or frequent basis, but a lot of people are probably doing it.”

### Telecommutable tasks

Certain kinds of tasks lend themselves to telecommuting. Jobs and occupations including many of these telecommutable tasks have the most telecommuting potential. But most jobs include some work that can be done at an alternate site. According to TManage, telecommutable tasks:

- ◆ Require concentration and large blocks of uninterrupted, independent time
- ◆ Have well defined beginning and end points
- ◆ Are easily portable
- ◆ Call for minimal special material or equipment



# Telecommuter

This self-assessment will help you decide if telecommuting is right for you. Read each item below, and select the response that best describes you.

1. Successful telecommuters develop regular routines and are able to set and meet their own deadlines. Are you self-motivated, self-disciplined, and able to work independently? Can you complete projects on time with minimal supervision and feedback? Are you productive when no one is checking on you or watching you work?  
Yes No
2. Do you have strong organizational and time-management skills? Are you results-oriented? If your alternate worksite is your home, will you remain focused on your work and not be distracted by television, housework, or visiting neighbors? Do you manage your time and workload well, solve many of your own problems, and find satisfaction in completing tasks on your own? Are you comfortable setting priori-

keep them focused.”

Before deciding to telecommute, take the self-assessment to see if the telecommuting workstyle might agree with you.

## Telecommuting routes

Most telecommuters begin in their jobs as nontelecommuters. After proving themselves as valuable employees, they enter into telecommuting work arrangements. Only rarely do employers hire new workers as telecommuters.

“By and large, the employers want to know who their workers are, acquaint

- ◆ Can be done with limited, spontaneous face-to-face communication and little supervision.

As the table shows, most telecommuters belong to one of four major occupational groups: professional specialty; ex-

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*“I think you need to be pretty self-disciplined to [telecommute]. You really have to be conscientious about getting things done.”*

Janice Daquila-Pardo

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ecutive, administrative, and managerial; sales; and administrative support, including clerical. From an industry standpoint, the services industry employs by far the largest number of telecommuters. Many telecommuters in this industry belong to the professional services subcategory, which employs many workers in professional specialty occupations.

Jobs in some occupations have an especially high level of telecommutability. For example, web developers and medical transcriptionists like Daquila-Pardo and Perry may find they can do most—if not all—of their work at an alternate site. Their employers have no trouble evaluating their work because both women produce such tangible, measurable work products. Daquila-Pardo posts the web pages she develops to a secure server for review by her boss and by clients. Perry turns in pages filled with the medical notes she has transcribed.

Most jobs include some telecommutable tasks, making part-time or part-day telecommuting possible. “There have to be tasks well suited to being done remotely,” says Mokhtarian, “but they don’t have to be the entire job. There have been telecommuters even in occupations like

police officer, restaurant inspector, and home health-care worker.” She notes that jobs in occupations such as these often have some information processing and other duties that can be done at the employee’s home. “It’s really a question of what parts of the job are telecommutable,” she says.

## Typifying the telecommuter

A successful telecommuting arrangement depends as much on the characteristics of the employee as on the characteristics of the job. As Kurland says, “Some people go crazy working out of their house, and others just blossom. It’s a very individual thing.”

Is there an identifiable telecommuting personality? Probably not. But Daquila-Pardo thinks telecommuters who excel have some common traits. “I think you need to be pretty self-disciplined to do this,” she says. “You need someone who can work independently and manage his or her time, is trustworthy, and has good communication skills. You really have to be conscientious about getting things done. As a telecommuter, your deadlines are yours to worry about a little bit more.”

Green emphasizes the importance of tact and communication skills for telecommuters who are not dealing face to face with clients, coworkers, or bosses. “There’s an additional challenge in communicating ideas,” he says. “Sometimes, it’s difficult to understand where someone stands on an issue. If you receive an e-mail from somebody, you’re not getting the visual and nonverbal cues. So, if they’re rolling their eyes while they’re typing, you don’t see that.”

Sometimes workers learn after a trial run that telecommuting does not suit them. “We’ve had cases like that,” says Holland. “Usually, it happens when individuals realize that they need the energy of others around them to motivate them or



# self-assessment

- ties and deadlines? Do you keep your sights on results?  
Yes No
3. Are you comfortable working alone and disciplined enough to leave work at quitting time? Can you adjust to the relative isolation of working at an alternate worksite? Do you have the self-control to work neither too much nor too little? Can you set a comfortable and productive pace while working at the alternate worksite?  
Yes No
4. Telecommuters should have a good understanding of the organization's culture. Are you knowledgeable about your organization's procedures and policies? Have you been on the job long enough to know how to do your job in accordance with your organization's procedures and policies? Do you have well-established work and communication patterns you can maintain when you're not at the primary office?  
Yes No
5. Have you and your supervisor discussed whether coworkers would have additional work when you work at the alternate worksite and, if so, how the work would be handled? Have you determined how to provide support to coworkers while working at the alternate worksite? Do you have an effective working relationship with coworkers? Have you evaluated the effects of your telecommuting days and those of your coworkers on maintaining adequate communication?  
Yes No
6. Are you adaptable to changing routines and environments? Have you demonstrated an ability to be flexible about work routines and environments? Are you willing to come into the primary office on a regularly scheduled telecommuting day if your supervisor, coworkers, or customers need you there?  
Yes No
7. Are you an effective communicator and team player? Do you communicate well with your supervisor and coworkers? Are you able to express needs objectively and develop solutions? Have you developed ways to communicate regularly with your supervisor and coworkers when you telecommute?  
Yes No
8. Current job performance is a strong indicator of your potential success as a telecommuter. Consider how any problems or developmental needs evident in your last performance evaluation might affect your telecommuting experience. Are you successful in your current position? Do you know your job well? Do you have a track record of performance?  
Yes No

If your answers to questions 1 through 8 are all "Yes," you're the kind of employee likely to succeed at telecommuting. These questions were adapted from a self-assessment devised by the Oregon Office of Energy.

them with the corporate culture, and establish trust before letting them out of sight for very long," says Mokhtarian. "The best advice for most situations is to find a conventional job first and make the case for telecommuting later."

Some workers interested in telecommuting might seek employment in firms having established telecommuting programs. Working for such a firm might make it easier to become a telecommuter later on. Many other workers whose employers do not offer a telecommuting program propose informal telecommuting ar-

rangements to their immediate supervisors.

Winning supervisory support for telecommuting is essential, regardless of whether the organization has a formal program. As Mokhtarian points out, "It all boils down to the immediate supervisors and whether they are comfortable with the idea."

Some legitimate employers may hire new workers as telecommuters from the start. In such cases, having a proven record of accomplishment and reliability in previous jobs is vital. Beware web-based services offering to match workers

with work-at-home opportunities. These "opportunities" may be employment scams.

To learn more about telecommuters and how to become one, visit your local library and look for resources on telecommuting. In addition, there are online sources available. Websites vary in content but may include sections on frequently asked questions, warnings about employment scams related to telecommuting, and links to other telecommuting resources.

