

## Remote Control

*Remote control:* (a) a device, deployed mainly from the couch, considered essential to select television and DVD programming in a way that makes personal energy expenditure unnecessary. (b) what a supervisor has very little of in managing an employee who works primarily or exclusively outside the office, sometimes at a great distance. What you do with the remote control in (a) is certainly your business; just try to avoid losing it under the sofa cushions. We at Solution Corner suggest that what managing editors and others in editorial positions do with respect to (b) is worth some discussion. This topic was addressed in a *Science Editor* article back in 2003 by Judith McIntosh White (Vol. 26, No. 2), and it remains relevant. Do you have one or more employees who work remotely, do you have a chief editor who is remote, or do you regularly work remotely yourself? Is that a trend that is accelerating in your organization? Chances are that your answer to one or more of those questions is yes. In many ways, the technology that now allows remote employment is nothing short of miraculous. In the past, if a great employee had to move out of the immediate geographic area, there was no alternative to cutting ties with him or her. Now, the needs of both employer and employee can be met in such a circumstance. But working remotely is no panacea. Issues of monitoring productivity and social isolation often need to be addressed. Sometimes, the remote employee does not receive all the information that is available to staffers working on site. And there can be the fear lurking somewhere below the surface that remote employees are more vulnerable if staff cutbacks are necessary. For this column, we asked a production services manager and a managing editor to discuss how the ability to work remotely is affecting them and their staffs and what (if anything) they would change to make the remote-employment dynamic more effective for themselves or their staff.

### From a Production Services Manager

#### Background

Dartmouth Journal Services (DJS) provides full-service issue management, copyediting, composition, and image processing for print and online journals and books. We employ 78 production staff, of whom 50 are in positions eligible for teleworking. Of those 50, 17 are full-time teleworkers and seven are part-time teleworkers. We also have 12 technology staff, of whom one is a full-time teleworker and the rest are part-time teleworkers.

#### The trend

Teleworking has increased at DJS. In 2005, we had two full-time teleworkers. In early 2007, the number had increased to 10, representing about 25% of eligible staff. Currently, 36 of 62 production and technical support staff, or nearly 60%, work remotely. The aspect of this trend that we like at DJS is the increase in part-time teleworking. Half our teleworkers are on site 2 or 3 days a week. There are definitely tasks that are easier to accomplish on site than at home (training, team meetings, large file transfers, hardcopy workflow tasks, and tasks requiring collaboration). Some responsibilities are more suitable for the quiet den (customized reporting; singular project-based tasks, such as copyediting or issue release; and fully electronic workflow tasks). An increasingly robust infrastructure, aggressive development of paperless workflows, better communication technologies, and the desire to retain our highly skilled staff have contributed to our trend toward teleworking.

#### Thorough policy

Although we've had a basic policy in place since 2005, we recently recognized the need for a more comprehensive approach. The goal is to attract and retain a highly skilled workforce to support our growing volume and prestigious customer base while keeping operational costs to a minimum. Our policy in revision reflects a telework program and now includes sections on eligibil-

ity, schedules, performance expectations, on-site requirements, communication, training period, employee-incurred costs, equipment, safety and liability, security and confidentiality, data integrity, technical support, and home-office setup. Regardless of the details, it is important that all expectations and responsibilities of both the employees and the company are communicated clearly in advance of granting the teleworking option. In addition to our policy statement, we have further developed our eligibility assessment criteria, teleworker–company agreement form, and teleworker performance evaluation. We continue to expand our methods to evaluate, maintain, and improve this program as we expand our pool of teleworkers.

## Positives

Most of our teleworkers claim higher efficiencies and greater productivity, but we are still implementing detailed metrics to assess this. Nonetheless, staff say that they experience fewer distractions and interruptions than in the office setting, so the ability to focus is improved. We do require a professional office-like setting, environmentally and ergonomically, because household distractions must be kept to a minimum. Particularly for companies in rural settings, such as Vermont (where DJS is based), the teleworking option broadens our applicant pool and allows us to have a “greener” operation. Eliminating the commute to the office saves time, money, and the environment, and our paperless workflows have reduced our material costs. Although teleworkers need to be available for customers, there is more schedule flexibility and independence than in working in the office. In addition, improved technologies for remote training and troubleshooting are available (such as GoToMeeting, Webinars, Skype, and recordable conference calls). Teleworking is proving to be a morale booster—management trusts you to do your job.

The part-time teleworking option keeps team members connected face to face, reduces social isolation, minimizes the “island evolution” so that workflows and

best practices don’t drift from the desired standards, and allows more consistent employee–supervisor connections. It also allows two people to occupy the same workstation and thus saves the costs of real estate, energy, equipment, and furniture.

## The down side

Communication is perhaps the most challenging aspect of full-time telework. We all have to work harder to stay connected. Teleworkers are not privy to word-of-mouth conversations, whether a verbal “heads up” of an emergency system reboot or banter about the staff meeting or an impromptu team discussion about the latest initiative development. Team building is difficult with teleworkers. They can forget what the activity level is like in the office, and they are unaware of which resources are immediately available (or not!). Not seeing or hearing the office can be frustrating. Despite the availability of improved tools, remote training can be difficult. Most telecommuters are seasoned veterans, leaving fewer qualified “trainers” in house as resources for newer staff. Social isolation (such as missing the chili cook-off contest) can be disappointing. Variable connection speeds and less-than-optimal Internet services can be annoying and reduce productivity.

At DJS, teleworking is an employee privilege, not a right, and is based on a sound business need. Our employees are critical resources for our company’s success, so when there’s an opportunity for them to benefit, with a favorable effect on the company as a whole, everyone wins—our employees, our company, and our customers.

**Nancy Devaux**

Production Services Manager  
Dartmouth Journal Services

## From a Managing Editor

Simply put, technology has made it possible to have a virtual editorial office. The office of *Neurology*, the official publication of the American Academy of Neurology, can be viewed as a model for the virtual office. A main office in Minnesota houses four of our staff members, and an office

with four staff members is in a different state. In addition, our editor-in-chief and seven associate editors are remotely situated, as are our reviewers and authors. Our production teams at Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins and HighWire Press are on the opposite coasts of the country.

In the main office, several employees work 1 day a week at home, and I have the same option when it is necessary. Most communication among the offices, the editors, the production teams, and telecommuters is electronic. We regularly take advantage of a Web-based tracking system that can be accessed by all as needed, Web conferencing, videoconferencing, telephone calls, e-mail, and intranet chat to exchange information. The predominant use of those electronic tools minimizes the effect of any one employee’s working at home.

When telecommuting works, it is for two reasons. One is that the nature of the jobs makes physical proximity unnecessary. The main reason, however, is the nature of the employee. Our staff members are self-disciplined, focused, highly skilled, committed professionals, who clearly understand their duties and have earned the trust of their supervisors. They take ownership in the tasks assigned to them, pride themselves on getting their jobs done (and are more productive in a day’s uninterrupted time), and are accustomed to working in an atmosphere of trust. Indeed, the culture of our organization is to hire people who have a professional attitude and can work independently.

One of the things that makes telecommuting work for our employees is that they don’t work 100% at home but are anchored in the office setting with several other staff members. It is critical for them to have regular contact with the office and their supervisors so that they are not isolated. They enjoy the team brainstorming, social interaction, and camaraderie that are parts of the culture of mutual respect for which we strive among our staff.

**Patty Baskin**

Managing Editor  
*Neurology*