

Feb 8, 2005

Home work

People love it, but few companies here have latched on to telecommuting. Those who have sing its praises, though. Sharon de Castro and Tham Yuen-C report

PTO for correction ...

The costs of telecommuting

At the moment, only a handful of employees at NCS, a leading IT solutions company, share desks but the company is looking into further reducing office rental costs by having more employees do this.

To be sure, the cost of setting up a telecommuting network is high. Which is why local companies here balk at the high start-up cost of buying the infrastructure for teleworking, said Singapore Human Resource Institute executive director Daniel Ng.

IT company Sun Microsystems here for instance, spent big money not only on tech infrastructures but education too.

It has online training courses for managers who might fear the loss of control over workers far away from the offices, and also for employees, so they know what is expected of them.

Its senior regional manager of workplace resource, Mr Danny Wee, said: "Even when people work from home, the company still needs to provide places for employees to gather and mingle with each other. We also to need to provide infrastructure and heavier phone traffic."

So savings from office space rentals alone are not huge. But overall savings from lower operating costs and IT expenses amount to as much US\$150 million (S\$246 million) globally.

Best of all, Mr Wee said, is a people gain: Employees are happier, stay longer, and work better.

RUSH hour means little to relocation manager Ms Tan Swee Hoong since she started working from home two years ago. The Hewlett-Packard employee starts her workday in T-shirt and shorts promptly at 9am by turning on her PC. From her study, she accesses her e-mail and office files through a virtual private network, then gets on the phone to contact her teammates.

The mother of three said that her day now stretches till 5pm and she also takes conference calls at night as part of her job hiring workers for HP offices in the Asia-Pacific region.

More importantly for Ms Tan, being at home means she gets to have

breakfast with her three sons, aged eight, 10 and 12, before they go to school.

'The good thing is I'm at home. If and when my children need me I'm always around,' she said.

Already the number of flexi-workers like Ms Tan are set to rise across the globe as companies tap into wireless technologies, from virtual private networks (VPN) to 3G, to improve work flows. (See box, bottom).

For companies, telecommuting raises efficiency at the workplace and eases traffic congestion during peak hours. Employees gain one important thing - more time with their families. It was precisely for these reasons that Japan launched a pilot programme earlier this year to have 20 per cent of its 63 million workforce - or 12.6 million - to sign in from home by 2010. Currently, six per cent of its workers flexi-work.

Slow growth in Singapore

In the United States, a survey last year by high-tech market research firm In-Stat/MDR showed that 44 million Americans worked from home last year. The number is expected to increase to 51 million in 2008.

But calls by the Singapore Government for a balanced work life seem to have gone largely unheeded.

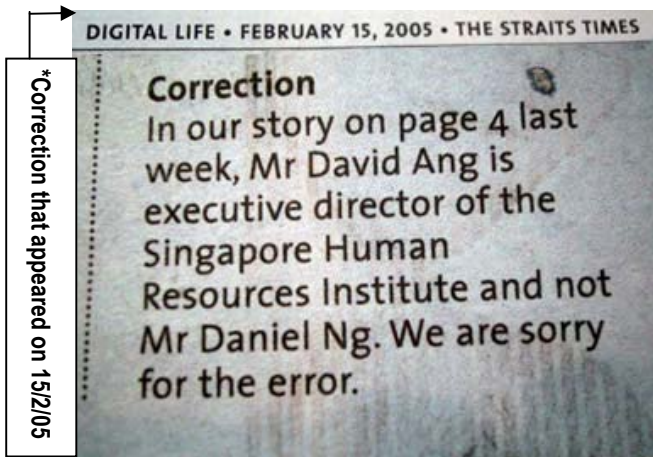
The pool of telecommuters here remains small, despite the fact that Singapore is one of the most wired countries in the world. The figures support this. About seven out of 10 households in 2003 have PCs, said the Infocomm Development Authority, while research house Gartner found that today 11.4 per cent of Singapore's population of 4.3 million have a broadband connection.

Then there are over 600 wireless hotspots around the island.

Yet, just over four per cent of private sector employees - about 39,700 people - are on a flexi-work scheme, recent Ministry of Manpower survey figures showed. Bosses still prefer to keep an eye on their employees in the office, during regular office hours.

An emerging trend

The survey also highlighted that a mere 0.2 per cent each telework or work from home, double that of last year. Negligible though the figures may be, telecommuting is slowly becoming an emerging trend.



Mr Daniel Ng, Singapore Human Resource Institute executive director said:
'Telecommuting has definitely gained popularity, but it is usually the MNCs or large companies that have implemented it.'
It is large companies like IBM, Hewlett-Packard and Sun Microsystems that have structured telecommuting programmes in place.

For people like Ms Tan, the perks of flexi-work are hard to beat. The arrangement allows employees to enjoy the best of both worlds, by allowing them to work while being there for the family.

Other benefits include not wasting time on travel. 'I don't have to spend money on clothing and don't have to waste time on getting ready for work and travelling,' Ms Tan said.

But the advantages do not stop there.

According to HP's director of human resources, Mr Stephen Chong, the company also reaps the benefits of a happier workforce, which translates to increased productivity. 'Without sounding too philosophical, if I have a happy employee, he will be highly motivated, and hence highly productive. Therefore, we want to help employees strike a work-life balance,' he said.

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Truly anywhere, anytime

PREPARE for 'death of distance'. Because fewer people will be taking that train or bus to work.

Red Herring, a business technology website, predicts that telecommuting will fly, if Internet telephony or voice over IP (VoIP), which uses the Internet to make calls - hence calls cost less than IDD charges - as well as to send data, takes off.

Naming VoIP as one of the top 10 tech trends, it said that businesses are realising that the know-how is more than just cheap phone calls over the Internet.

When integrated with business systems, it makes it that much easier to reach someone.

For example, when corporate telephone directories are integrated with Internet telephony, you will be able to call someone simply by clicking on their name in Microsoft Outlook.

Another possibility lies in integrating VoIP with regular cellular networks to create a dual-band phone that uses a wireless local area network (WLAN) at Internet hot spots and switches to a cellular network once the WLAN is out of reach.

There is no dearth of technology and gadgets to get the work-from-home momentum going in Singapore either. For instance, there are more than 650 hot spots around Singapore where you can access the Internet to check e-mail or access your company through a virtual private network (VPN).

Apart from that, general packet radio services (GPRS) and, now, 3G mobile services allow faster data transfers through cellular networks.

And there a wide variety of gizmos from smart phones to personal digital assistants (PDAs) and Blackberry devices that can receive everything from e-mail to stock market data on the go.

