

# Executive **EDGE**

## HOME ALONE

“Telecommuters”—employees who work at home by means of computers—are increasing rapidly in the 1990s. In 1994, 4.5 million telecommuters spent at least three days a month working at home, according to BIS Strategic Services, a Norwell, MA, research company.

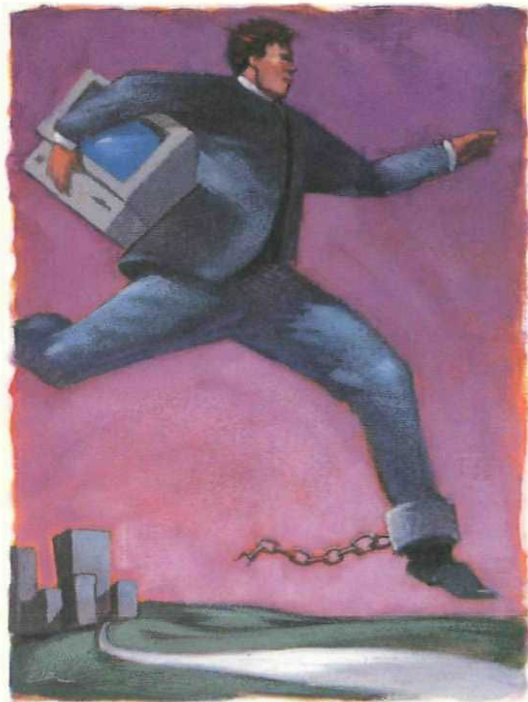
Telecommuting is on the rise for a variety of reasons. It enables employers to split work shifts to meet demand-driven timetables. In some cities, telecommuting has become a way to reduce commuting by car and thus also air pollution. And the practice allows employers to save on the

costs of real estate and physical-plant maintenance. Martin Pospeshil, who manages alternative officing strategies for AT&T's Global Real Estate division in Basking, NJ, says telecommuting has saved his firm \$21 million in real estate costs since the program was launched in 1991.

Most firms that allow telecommuting are relatively small, and most telecommuters are middle and upper managers. Even in these firms, the majority of employees continue to perform their work at the office. There are two reasons for this: First, the computer technology such employees need—in,

say, data entry, customer service, or transaction processing—is often too complicated for home use. And, second, some employers do not trust their workers to be productive at home.

Thus the telecommuting movement will have to include many more workers before it has a decisive impact on the U.S. economy. Emerging technologies may help this come about, however. New York's Con Edison is currently equipping some of its customer service representatives with an at-home version of imaging software that will allow them to telecommute. As for distrusting employees who are not at the office, AT&T's Pospeshil says: “That’s



Chris McAllister

a culture we've been working with for a long time. Now management has to change its paradigm.”

From Tracy Mayor, “Getting the Home Fires Burning,” CIO, February 1, 1995, pp. 53-58.

## NIRVANA: NOT ALWAYS A BY-PRODUCT OF TEAM SPIRIT

Although teamwork is associated with efficiency, it does not always have the positive effect the business world has come to expect. As an increasing number of corporations hasten to create teams, nearly 70 percent of those which have introduced them say the teams did not accomplish their goals, according to A. T. Kearney, a consulting firm that continues to favor teams.

Political issues plague teams. The undermining of a company's existing distribution of power threatens managers' authority and, in some cases, their livelihood. In addition, peer pressure often replaces top-down managerial control in empowered teams. “People try to meet the team's expectations and under peer pressure they end up pushing themselves too hard,” says a worker at New United Motor Manufacturing in Fremont, CA, a plant where teams of workers elect leaders and come up with ways to improve quality and efficiency.

Teams' troubles do not end with the political. For example,

in many cases managers fail to clearly establish teams' objectives. But the success of teams is in real peril when companies do not change their appraisal and reward channels, expecting employees to work collaboratively while they compete for individual rewards.

Instituting teams is also costly. Employees in self-managing teams need to be educated. Courses on issues such as conflict management and stress resolution not only use financial resources but take up employees' time. And cross-training can be onerous, in some cases taking years for employees to learn all the jobs they might be called on to do.

Finally, not all employees want to be empowered; many shun the burden of decision making. Furthermore, many who are up to assuming more responsibility still find it difficult to discipline their peers.

From “The Trouble with Teams: Togetherness Has Its Perils,” *The Economist*, January 14, 1995, p. 61.