TAKE THE LEAD

HOME IS WHERE THE WORK IS

Project teams can make telecommuting work—as long as there's flexibility when the business requires it.

BY NEAL WHITTEN, PMP, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Not everyone on a project team necessarily needs to be in the office every day. Just because someone's working at home doesn't mean that person can't sit in on a videoconference or be accessible to project stakeholders.

Not only are many workers happier at home, but telecommuting can save organizations money by cutting overhead and real estate costs. Productivity among at-home workers also can increase, as unnecessary interruptions are reduced, not to mention the time saved by avoiding commuting.

Here are some factors to consider:

- **Cost.** Does the price the employer must pay to set up a productive home office outweigh the benefits to the company?
- **Security.** What measures must be taken to safeguard data? Is there information too sensitive to be allowed outside of the office?
- **Availability.** Will the project member be easily accessible when needed?
- **Team bonding.** Will there be enough communication for it to feel like a real team?
- **Productivity.** Does the person have the skills to work well with little to no supervision? A slacker in a company office will likely be even more of a slacker in a home office.
- **Trust.** Are you convinced the project member will dedicate the necessary time for work duties?
- **Precedents.** Do other team members work virtually? Is it fair for one employee to work from home when others cannot?

Project professionals who want to work virtually may have to make their case to their employers. Here are some tips for securing permission from your boss:

- **Develop a business case** that outlines the benefits to your project, your boss, the company and you. List the downsides, too—and how you would mitigate them.
- **Propose interim steps,** such as working from home one or two days per week. Once the trial period is over, show how you'll measure the effectiveness of working at home.
- **Identify how you will remain connected to the office**. Develop a communications plan outlining how frequently you'll file progress reports, call in, attend in-office meetings and solicit feedback from team members.
- **Be prepared to shoulder some of the costs.** Are you going to need a faster computer or specialized software? Don't assume your company will cover all extra expenses.

Home Sweet Office

The decision for a team member to telecommute also should include the review and support of the project manager. Even one person telecommuting affects the entire project team, so be sure to discuss the logistics:

- **Set expectations** for all team members—both telecommuters and those in the office.
- **Define work rules,** such as the typical workday start and end times, and the protocol when out of contact.
- **Employ technology** such as video conferencing and instant messaging to lessen the impacts of limited face-to-face contact.
- **Consider an intranet or online collaboration tool** so all project members can easily ask questions or post status and information.
- **Start slowly** and adjust as needed. For example, you may keep weekly tracking meetings face-to-face at first.
- **Monitor productivity** through the telecommuter's status updates and responsiveness to emails and phone calls.
- **Increase the frequency of communications** so telecommuters stay connected and bond with team members in the office.

Project success must never be compromised. After all, that is why the team is employed. But if the project can meet its objectives with some team members working from home, then more organizations should be prepared to address the issue. PM

Neal Whitten, PMP, president of The Neal Whitten Group, is a speaker, trainer, consultant and mentor. His newest books is The Gift of Wisdom: Lessons for a Lifetime.