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## Telecommuting good for workers and environment



*"Instead of falling under the spell of a sales pitch, or rejecting new technologies as instruments of illusion, we need to look closely at new technologies and ask how they can help build stronger, more humane communities and ask how they might be obstacles to that goal."*

— Howard Rheingold  
in "Virtual Communities"

Mass transit, electric cars and alternative fuels have dominated efforts to develop more environmentally sound transportation in the United States. Now, however, sophisticated telecommunications infrastructure allows us to explore a new paradigm: circumventing transportation by "traveling" electronically.

As Jack Miles wrote in "The Information Technology Revolution" almost 10 years ago, "The microcom-

puter is the analog of the automobile: the telephone line and the communications satellite serve as the highways. The major difference is that information is transported rather than workers, who then have the potential to become telecommuters.

The environmental and human health costs of automobiles have focused attention on telecommuting as an alternative to travel. "The real key to reducing the environmental, social and personal costs of cars is to use them less, and especially to commute less," Steven Anzovin wrote in "The Green PC." "That's where the computer, another defining generation of our time, can come to the rescue.

"The personal computer allows new kinds of work to be done at remote locations and sent instantly to a central place of business. Nearly all

work done on a PC, and that includes an increasing amount of all the work done in the world today, can be done anywhere. Using networks, E-mail, fax modems and online services, computer commuters can work at home in comfort, leaving their cars in the garage and their suits in the closet."

In 1992, an estimated 6.6 million people used personal computers to telecommute to work for at least part of the work week.

Videoconferencing saves an enormous amount of travel and is catching on. This means of telecommuting allows people at distant locations around the world to meet and interact as if they were in the same room.

Central Methodist College in Fayette uses a type of videoconferencing to teach night classes to students in East Central College in Union some 130 miles to the north. The technology allows Central Methodist professors to save time and money and to avoid the risky drive to Union and back several nights each week.

Large corporations also find videoconferencing to be cost-effective. The health-care firm HBO and Co. in-

stalled a videoconferencing system and reports "a savings of \$290,927 in travel dollars saved — not including the savings and productivity achieved by avoiding over 3,888 employee travel hours."

Alan Durning warned in "How Much is Enough" that "we in the consumer society will have to live a technologically sophisticated version of the lifestyle currently practiced lower on the economic ladder."

Telecommuting is a safe alternative to transportation that allows us to drastically reduce the environmental impact of our lifestyle while accomplishing our daily work. To learn more about it, consult "The Green PC" by Steven Anzovin, "The Telecommuter's Handbook" by Brad Schepp and "Telecommuting: How to Make It Work For You and Your Company" by Gil Gordon and Marcia Kelly.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.