

Home sweet home

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Screaming children and barking dogs don't exactly make for a good working environment, and a kitchen table covered in bread crumbs or an unmade bed make poor substitutes for office desks.

Yet many people still prefer to work at home rather than fight the downtown rush hour to join the rat race in the corporate tower.

In fact, despite a slightly declining number of teleworkers (employees who work at home), a Statistics Canada general social survey indicates there were still 1.3 million Canadians working out of their homes in 2005.

Because the survey focuses on employees, the number of Canadians working from home is actually higher when home-based businesses are added. That number may actually be increasing.

Lynda Kavanagh, owner of WOW Communications & Training in Lethbridge and Calgary, says most of the people for whom she provides entrepreneurial training plan to work out of their homes.

"I teach a lot of entrepreneurial courses in Lethbridge and Calgary, and I find that about 75 per cent of the participants are planning on being home-based," Kavanagh says.

For many people, it's a lifestyle choice, Kavanagh says. People are looking for more peace in their day, or they're tired of commuting. Others want to spend more time with their families and less time in a traditional office environment. Often the venue for work is determined by the type of business.

"People providing services are more likely to have a home base than those who provide a product, which is the retail, and home-based businesses don't work well in a retail setting."

Then there are the "seniorpreneurs," people who are 55 plus and who have paid down their debt, gotten rid of the children, and probably have a pension coming their way, yet they don't want to stop working. But neither do they want the nine-to-five commitment.

"They are starting businesses where they can take as much or as little work as they want."

Women are also getting into entrepreneurial-service-type industries such as consulting and knowledge-based businesses, where they don't need a storefront.

A 2004 CIBC survey found a growth rate of 50 per cent over the past 15 years of women wanting to start their own businesses, many of which will be home-based businesses, Kavanagh says.

While there are many advantages to working from home — low overhead, convenient hours, no bosses (if it's your own business) — there are also disadvantages, and not everyone is suited to a home-based job. "Some people find it hard to be motivated," Kavanagh says. "When I started, I told myself I had to act like it was a job. In all my previous jobs I had been to my desk at 7:30 a.m., so when I started I was there at 7:30, dressed, hair done, lips on."

Several years later Kavanagh finally began to relax on days where she didn't have to meet with clients. On those days she dressed casually, but she still counsels people not to spend all day in their pajamas in case a customer phones for a meeting.

"It would be very easy to say 'no' if you are still in your comfortable PJs."

Another disadvantage to working at home is that other people don't understand that when entrepreneurs don't work, they don't get paid.

"I remember getting a call from a friend of mine who said she had accumulated some overtime and wanted to go golfing. I told her I was working and she said, 'well, you are your boss, take the day off.' I had to explain to her that while she was golfing, she was technically getting paid; I would not be."

Some people also find working from home lonely and isolating, and others find it hard to turn off work, especially when it's so easy to go to an office that is just down the hall. Then there are those who would have difficulty managing their time.

"It is easy to procrastinate, a word that should not be in any entrepreneur's vocabulary."

Even though company work may be done from a home, Kavanagh says it's still important to separate the office from the rest of the house.

"It's a home and it should stay a home. People need to have respect for their family and the neighbourhood. Working from the kitchen table that may have some leftover spills from last night's supper is not a way to project a professional image."

And image is very important in home-based businesses.

"In the larger centres, people who have a home-based business are looked at almost enviously, where in smaller centres it may still not be considered a real business. That is why it is extremely important to project a professional image, and that means no food on a project you are sending to a client. It's also difficult to do the job properly while working on a table or couch."

An effective home-based business also includes an area that's designated as the office.

"You don't live in there and you don't do your work in other parts of the house."

Before considering working from home, it's a good idea to gauge your level of commitment and ask yourself at least one important question, Kavanagh says.

"Mainly people need to ask themselves why they want to work from home. If they want to badly enough, they'll find a way to make it work."

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Lynda Kavanagh, of WOW Communications and Training, provides training and courses on how to work out of your house. Herald photo by Ian Martens