



Best Practices for Remote and Home-Based Workers **By Melanie Turek, Industry Principal, Frost & Sullivan**

As more companies go virtual, supporting employees regardless of where they're based and whether they're in a remote office, a home office or a hotel, they are reaping the benefits: the ability to hire the best and brightest regardless of where they live; savings on office real estate and other facilities costs; improved retention and employee-satisfaction rates, leading to much better productivity; and cost savings and green benefits from reducing travel and commuting.

Certainly, the advantages of a virtual workplace are clear: The Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp) reports that according to results of a 2009 study, "a full 84% of companies overall believe that flexible work arrangements in their organization boost employee morale. That figure is up from 76% in a similar 2008 study conducted by i4cp. The 2009 study also showed that 78% of polled companies say flexible-work options bolster retention rates, up from 64% the previous year."¹ And Families and Work Institute (FWI), in its study *The Impact of the Recession on Employers*, states that "fully 81% of employers have maintained existing flexible work options during the recession, and 13% have actually increased those options."²

Technology enabled the virtual workplace, and now it is stepping in to make it as effective as one in which everyone works in an actual corporate office. With Voice over IP (VoIP), customers and colleagues can reach employees on one number, regardless of where they're working on any given day; with conferencing and collaboration software, they can stay connected to colleagues and collaborate on projects in real time; with IM and presence information, they can reach the right people whenever they need them; and with social networking, they can stay connected to people personally and professionally, developing and deepening relationships that lead to greater business success.

But as managers shift their focus to a virtual workplace, they also need to shift how they do their jobs. In a company in which people work in remote offices, far from the eyes of their colleagues, managers and direct reports, face time has to take a backseat to productivity, reliability and ability to satisfy clients. What matters is not how many hours an employees logs, or whether he is sitting at a desk from 9am to 5pm; what matters is whether he completes his projects on time, on budget and to the customer's complete satisfaction.

Just as importantly, remote workers need to maintain a sense of belonging—to a company, and to a team within the larger organization. Assign virtual employees to small workgroups whenever possible, and give them the tools they need to collaborate on a regular basis, easily and cost effectively. Audio, video and web conferencing can help small teams work effectively across physical and cultural boundaries. Then, mix the teams up, so that everyone gets to work with everyone else on a regular basis, and in the process develop deeper ties to the team and the company overall.

¹ <http://www.i4cp.com/news/2009/08/17/i4cp-study-flexible-work-arrangements-gaining-more-attention-in-the-workplace>

² <http://familiesandwork.org/site/research/reports/Recession2009.pdf>