Telecommuting's a turn off in Texas

BYLINE: Diana Williams  AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN
DATE: September 20, 1992
PUBLICATION: Austin American-Statesman
EDITION: FINAL
SECTION: BUSINESS
PAGE: H1

CORRECTION: CORRECTION; 9/29/92; PAGE D1

Graphs on Page H1 and H2 of the Sept. 20 Business section omitted the source of the polling data. The source was the Center for Transportation Research at the Department of Civil Engineering at the University of Texas at Austin.

Texas businesses are lagging far behind their counterparts elsewhere in backing the telecommuting trend, experts say.

Telecommuters - workers who typically use their homes during regular business hours as a company office - represent only a small percentage of Texas workers, said Joanne Pratt, a Dallas-based telecommuting consultant.

Instead of instituting companywide telecommuting policies, Texas businesses have viewed the work option on a case-by-case basis. "You seem to have to have some sort of unusual circumstance to be a telecommuter in Texas," Pratt said.

While some Texas operations, such as Frito Lay and Xerox, offered out-of-the-office work to employees as early as the 1980's, most Texas companies did not follow suit, she said.

"We're beginning to see some interest in Texas, but it's not yet resulted in a lot of action," she said. Pratt believes that, as air quality concerns begin to effect larger cities like Dallas and Houston, telecommuting popularity will rise in Texas.

Already, the Dallas County Community Supervision and Corrections Department is looking to shift its employees from office work to telecommuting. The department, with 500 workers, plans to begin moving its probation officers to telecommuting by November, a spokesman said.

In Austin, public and private employers generally do not have standard policies that let employees work from away from the office.
Michele Moore, a spokeswoman for Dell Computer Corp., said that company does not have a telecommuting policy. However, many Dell employees can gain access to the office through home computer hookups.

IBM Corp., which employed about 7,500 people in Austin at the end of last year, grants telecommuting to workers only on special approval. The policy lets approved employees work 30 hours a week from their homes for up to three years.

Dwayne Cox, a company spokesman, said IBM has granted telecommuting approval to fewer than 100 employees in Austin.

Advanced Micro Devices, which has 2,300 employees in Austin, also does not have a telecommuting policy, said spokesman David Frink.

Seton Medical Center, which employs about 3,000 workers, does not have many home-based employees, said Gayle Granberry, a hospital spokeswoman. However, the company lets some employees, such as medical transcription workers, do their work away from the office.

Most of Seton's workers, including doctors and nurses, are needed at the hospital.

Hani Mahmassani, a civil engineering professor at the University of Texas, said telecommuting is not catching on in Austin because drive times are typically short and easy.

Also, many Austin employees do not see a pressing need for change, said Mahmassani, who is studying telecommuting attitudes across Texas. Additionally, managers often are reluctant to abandon traditional office practices.

"While there may be some sympathy among individual managers, they do not see telecommuting as a policy that they will encourage anytime soon," he said. "They see more obstacles with it."

Pratt believes telecommuting has been stunted across the state because many companies are locating on the edge of cities. This trend further decreases commuting stress and complications for workers, reducing pressure for home-based work, Pratt said.

In addition, ingrained attitudes about the workplace stop many Texas companies from considering the option.

"We have a corporate culture here that says 'we know our employees are working because we can see the back of their heads,' " Pratt said. "It requires a big mental shift to really trust your employees."

(from graphic)

Working from home

360 Austinites who work in potential telecommuter fields were polled for this study. They replied to the individual questions on a scale of 1 to 5.

How important is flexibility of your work schedule for accomplishing your household duties?

1: not important 5: important

Percentage responding
1 14.7
2 13.6
3 25.6
4 25.8
5 20.3

If you could work from home, do you think you could get ore work done? 1: not at all 5: definitely

Percentage responding
1 23.3
2 17.4
3 24.9
4 15.7
Illustration: GRAPH