

S.F. Traffic Snarl a Win for Telecommuting

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The gasoline tanker that crashed and burst into flames near the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge April 29 did more than melt and collapse a stretch of the highway overpass; it enlivened the debate about whether all in-house workers should be offered telecommuting alternatives.

In what is already being called the worst disruption for drivers since the 1989 earthquake that damaged the Bay Bridge itself, the city has found itself scrambling to add trains to the BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) rail system, as well as free ferries, buses and trains for the daily commute.

Above all else, city authorities are urging residents to telecommute if they have the means. However, this "telecommute only in case of disaster" message has caused no shortage of hands being thrown in the air by those who have long-advocated the benefits of telecommuting.

The American Telecommuting Association has been spreading the gospel of remote work for more than five years, urging more employers to adopt telecommuting policies for their employees. In return, they assure, managers will be rewarded with more loyal employees who are often more satisfied with their jobs, more productive and easier to train.

But advocates argue that telecommuting's bounty includes far more than happy workers. Telework's societal benefits range from reduced traffic to minimized air pollution and strain on transportation structures and fewer demands on nonrenewable resources such as fossil fuels.

Yet, telecommuting still appears to have miles to go before it gains mainstream workplace acceptance. In a survey released in January by Korn/Ferry International, a Los Angeles-based recruitment firm, more than half (61 percent) of the executives surveyed said that they see career stagnancy among teleworking employees, furthering the notion among workers that telecommuting is unhealthy for one's career.

A separate study released in August 2006 by OfficeTeam, a division of Robert Half International, echoed this sentiment. Forty-three percent of respondents said telecommuting is best-suited for staff-level employees, not executives (chosen by 14 percent) or managers (chosen by 18 percent). The majority of respondents in this survey also noted that senior executives at their companies rarely (55 percent) or never (12 percent) telecommute.

Still, the current traffic situation in San Francisco only serves to amplify the need for telecommuting alternatives, whether widely used or not, for in-house workers. And given the findings from the U.S. Census Bureau in March 2005 that Americans spend on average more than 100 hours each year commuting to work - more hours than they'd miss on a two-week vacation - it's hard to imagine why anybody would complain.

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