

# What it Takes

You're a goal-oriented, self-disciplined self-starter. An ideal candidate for telecommuting? Not so fast.

TEXT BY CHRISTINE MACLEAN ILLUSTRATION BY PHILIPPE PETIT-ROULET OCTOBER 5, 1997

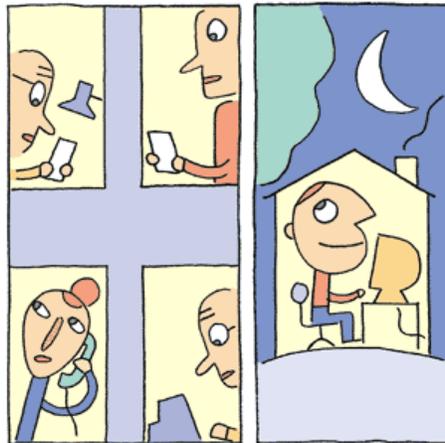
## ONE QUESTION SURVEY

What type of tightrope walk does your home/work balance most closely resemble? (Choose one)

- One with a safety net
- One with no safety net
- One I do while juggling 3 balls
- One I do while juggling 3 balls, 4 fire batons, 5 machetes and a bowling ball
- I'm no fool: I leave the tightrope walking up to my partner.

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Agree? Disagree? Stop sounding off to your computer screen! Instead, share your point of view on this subject with our readers.



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## TELL A FRIEND

You've been asking for an easy way to share these articles with friends since Day One. To which we reply, "Uncle!"

At first blush, the telecommuting life has a lot going for it. It's a life that offers more of the things you like--time, flexibility, foods you actually like, and a bathroom all to yourself. It requires fewer of the things you don't like--corporate politics, meetings, and gum-snapping office mates. The idea of working at home is so tantalizing that few people pause to consider whether or not it would be right for them or, more to the point, whether they would be right for it.

While the idea may be nice, the reality is that working at home is not for everyone. And, sorry to say, it may not be for you.

### The Research

Several years ago, a team of researchers from Herman Miller conducted a year-long primary research study on what people who work at home need. On the way to learning about what kind of office furniture telecommuters need, the team learned something else: the most successful telecommuters share certain characteristics that go beyond being goal-oriented, self-disciplined, a self-starter, and a solid performer--the characteristics generally accepted as important for telecommuting.

The researchers discovered that the stage of your career, the composition of your household, your definition of "home," your ability to merge work life and home life, and your acceptance of your family's rules can all determine whether or not you would be good at working from home. (Of course, the freedom to choose telecommuting was the most important factor; all the participants in the study had that freedom.)

No study, no quiz, no software program will ever be able to

tell you definitively whether or not you should telecommute. What the results of this study can do, however, is help you identify potential areas of difficulty and, in doing so, help you decide for yourself.

If you want to be good telecommuting material, here's what you need to do.

### **Get Settled in Your Career**

Telecommuters settled in their careers seem to have an easier time working remotely. They have confidence not only in their skills but also in their ability to *apply* those skills in a variety of settings, says Jim Long, the Herman Miller researcher who headed up the study. Because they truly believe that the company is paying for those skills and that, if need be, they can take those skills elsewhere, they are less concerned about putting in "face time" at the office.

The more successful telecommuters see themselves as "corks in the water," says Long. They believe that their careers result from training and purposefulness on their part, but they don't underestimate the role of serendipity. "They were able to describe how they floated along, got into job situations where their needs were being met, and continued to float," says Long. Still, they are satisfied with the way their careers are going and they are content to bob along. Their belief that careers to some extent "just happen" may indicate a more relaxed approach to life in general, which allows them to successfully adapt to working at home.

### **Get a Partner, Teenagers, and a House in the 'Burbs**

Suburb or city? Married or single? No children, young children, or older children? Older house or newer house or apartment? The 31 participants in the research project represented a cross-section of lifestyles and homes. After studying them for six months, the team found that home office workers from "mature families" are most successful. Researcher Long loosely defines mature families as those who have dual-incomes and older children. In addition, they live in a suburban home built in the last 25 years and have only one spouse working at home.

Although you might think that being single is perfect for working at home, "that group had plenty to complain about," says Long. "There wasn't enough social affiliation for them," since the office is where many social ties are formed. At the same time, families with small children have all the inevitable interruptions and distractions. The telecommuters in that situation are often distracted by the sound of their children laughing or crying; they feel pulled to investigate.

### **Live One Life, not Two**

Some people believe that work and home should remain separate. They see home as their refuge from work, as a safe haven in an uncertain world. For those people, bringing work into their home damages something that's very important to them--the meaning of home. "If you see your home as a place to retreat to and your employer tells you that you now have to work at home, it is going to be problematic," says Long.

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"I couldn't make artificial time separations. I just had to say 'This is my life.' It had to be fully integrated."

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Others see their home as a place to create their future, or as the hub of many types of activities, including work. When Vicki TenHaken, currently executive vice president of strategic planning at Herman Miller (and not a participant in the study), started telecommuting two days a week a few years ago, she made a conscious decision to lead one life, rather than a work life and a home life. "I knew that the only way I could stay sane and feel that I gave each its due was to integrate home and work. I couldn't separate them into blocks because then I would feel pulled in both directions. I couldn't make artificial time separations. I just had to say 'This is my life.' It had to be fully integrated."

And so, fully integrated it has become. "Your child gets sick and so you're at home. Does that mean you can't work? No. I'm home on the weekend and I have a great idea on some project. Does that mean I can't do some work on it? No. By integrating the two, I get both done in a way that's energizing rather than draining," says TenHaken, whose home office is set up on a high counter in the kitchen so that she can easily move between work and "the little things that just happen in the normal course of life."

Intertwining home and work can blur boundaries or even eliminate them. "Working any time, anywhere can easily become working all the time everywhere," adds TenHaken, who confesses to lugging her laptop on family vacations. In those situations, she says, she has learned to ask, "What are the things that I *must* do?"

TenHaken's ability to integrate work and life is typical of her gender; Long noticed that women are more comfortable working at home than men. "The women seemed to accept working at home as just another one of the many pieces of work that they already did at home, just another thing to juggle," he says. "The men viewed working at home as something very different from what they usually did at home."

Men's discomfort with working at home, Long noticed, showed up in their remarks about the "clues"--voice-mail messages left at night or on the weekends--they left for their superiors and co-workers. The men were worried about the perception of others, while the women didn't seem to be. Long thinks that women's ability to integrate their worlds contributes to their effectiveness as telecommuters.

"Having an attitude of integration helps mitigate the stress caused by bringing work into the home, and if you maintain strict separation of the two in your mind, then you aren't doing much to alleviate the stress," says Long.

Long has examples from both ends of the integration/separation spectrum. One woman in the study has an office in her kitchen. From where she sits, she has a clear view to the bathtub, which allows her to work and keep an eye on her bathing children at the same time. At the other end of the spectrum is a man so worried about waking his small daughter that he has his phone in a closet in his home

office.

People who are comfortable with their "two worlds colliding" (as Jerry Seinfeld would say) and who see home as a place to create their future were more successful at telecommuting than their separatist and home-as-sanctuary counterparts.

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"Now you have two sets of rules operating--the customs of the home and this new set of rules about the home office that have been developed and applied unilaterally."

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Even if you see home as a creative place and your spouse believes that work and home should be separate, the situation can be problematic. Long says that if either of the adults in the home are at all ambivalent about bringing work into the home, it may make you less successful than you could be.

### **Respect the Rules of the House**

Every family has norms about everything from what time to be home for dinner to which items are community property and which are individual property. What does this have to do with working in the home? In most cases, working in the home is a new experience and there are no norms. Participants in the study invented rules about when they could and couldn't be disturbed while working at home, who could use their equipment, and what the office would and wouldn't be used for. "Now you have two sets of rules operating--the customs of the home and this new set of rules about the home office that have been developed and applied unilaterally." The more successful home workers, according to the research, keep the underlying philosophy of the two sets of rules consistent; if one of the norms in the home is that everything is shared, then the more successful home office workers share their home office and equipment, too.

Long compares the norms of the home to the Bill of Rights and the home office rules to new laws: "You can't change the Constitution just because you now have an office in the home. You have to abide by the Bill of Rights." Because so many of the rules in the home are tacit, however, at times family members don't know they exist until those rules are violated. For example, family members may not realize there is norm about the way the family will spend time after dinner until the home office worker starts going to her office after dinner, disrupting the family in a way no one would have predicted.

### **All This Means...What?**

If you don't fit the profile above, think twice about telecommuting. If you do and you're self-motivated and a solid-performer, you have a good chance of succeeding at telecommuting. That may be a great situation for you--and for your company, since many experts say that telecommuting increases productivity. There's a logical reason for the increase, says Long: telecommuters work longer hours, with the number of hours being directly related to the time they save on commuting. Indeed, in a recent [Telecommute America](#) survey, 39% of the 229 respondents answered "work more hours" to the question "What do you

do with the extra time when you don't commute?"

Regardless of whether the increase in productivity is real or not, this alternative work style is here to stay. Respondents from the Telecommute America survey agree. Thirty-nine percent would return to the office only if their pay was doubled, and 36% said that there wasn't anything that would make them give up telecommuting.

"I believe that since most telecommuters are self-selected and have a strong interest in remaining a telecommuter, they will do two things. They will work harder and, if you ask them if they are working harder, they will say yes," says Long. "It will be almost impossible to find a study of telecommuting that shows productivity going down for telecommuters."

"I work harder than I ever did in the office and so do the other people I know who work in home offices," says Linda Barney, an educational consultant who works for a national company that creates curriculums for schools. Every day she starts taking calls as early as 5:00 a.m. from people across four time zones. "I work harder, but not necessarily smarter."

In spite of the calls and the feeling that work is always "looking over her shoulder," Barney likes the arrangement and so do the other telecommuters she knows. "We like to complain about work just like corporate office workers, but I have never met a home office worker who wants to go back 'in.'" That may be because those who aren't successful return to the office. Christena Nippert-Eng, author of the forthcoming "Transition to Telecommuting," told the New York Times (August 17, 1997) that an estimated one of every five telecommuters gives it up.

By knowing yourself and really thinking about whether working from home is right for *you*, you can make sure that you are not one of them.

CHRISTINE MacLEAN is a writer at Herman Miller who is settled in her career, respects the rules of her house, lives one (chaotic) life, and prefers going to the office.

#### REACT TO THIS STORY

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E-mail (required)

Title

Company

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Forcing you to leave your e-mail address makes you nervous, right? It's the editor's fault. She wants to be able to contact you if she needs clarification on your reaction.

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#### Reactions to "What it Takes"

Working from home also works across borders! I work from home in Lebanon while my boss is in London. I have a friend who works from his home in Colombia for a company in Switzerland. In these cases of international telecommuting, the added benefit for the employee is that he can get a developed-country salary living in a low-cost developing country. It's outsourcing on an individual scale.

I think there are some careers that lend themselves more to telecommuting than others. Some examples are analysis, design, and translation.

Verena  
financial analyst

.....  
This article was very informative. I'm considering proposing working from home to my boss once my first baby is born. This gave me some interesting food for thought. Thanks!

Amber Nichols  
Creative Marketing Manager, Stratacache

.....  
Thank you for "What it Takes," which presents a reality-based list of items to consider before making the big move "out". The article helps me evaluate more globally some of the reasons why my own scenario works for me.

I'm interested: does your research show a trend toward certain careers lending themselves to telecommuting? If so, which ones?

This may emerge as another influential factor.

Linda Barney  
National Consultant, Curriculum Associates

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The Editor responds:

The telecommuting research that the Herman Miller Product Research Group did with people outside of Herman Miller does not show a relationship between particular careers and telecommuting success. There were many careers represented in the sample and career did not seem to be an important determinant of success, according to Jim Long, who managed that research project.

Internal research (that we conducted with Herman Miller employees in support of our own telecommuting program) supports Long's findings. Lori Gee, a member of the team that launched Herman Miller's telecommuting program, says that certain job types did not emerge as being more appropriate for telecommuting, although the team looked for that connection. "It's more important to think about personality type and work process type," Gee says. The following lists are taken from the team's findings.

#### Recommended Skills for Telecommuters

-Self-directed--has the confidence to make independent decisions; has the self-discipline to complete tasks as scheduled and maintain boundaries between home and

work; does not need continuous outside direction

-Socially independent--can work alone effectively

-Organized--good at managing time; can work in more than one location without becoming disorganized

-Self-motivated--able to develop and follow regular routines; can set and keep self-imposed deadlines; outside pressure is unnecessary

-Adaptable--can adjust to new ways of working and new technology; can be flexible with schedules and assignments

-Knowledgeable--understands their job, how to use support tools, and how to quickly and easily access information resources--without constantly relying on co-workers for help

#### Recommended Tasks for Telecommuting:

As a rule, Herman Miller does not recommend full-time telecommuting for its employees. Jobs that would not normally appear to be suited to telecommuting should be considered if portions of the job/task can be done effectively while telecommuting. In general, look for tasks that

-Do not require a lot of explanation, direction, or face-to-face communication

-Are not driven by outside groups with short-term deadlines

-Have easily measured beginning and end points

-Require extended periods of concentration that would be hard to accomplish while in the office

-Are easily portable; resources can be moved home or accessed electronically without requiring special equipment

Christine

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