

Everyone's Guide to Teleworking

*Strategies for Success
and Building Value at Work*

Thomas Spiglanin, Ph.D.



Ansera Solutions, L.L.C.
La Quinta, California

Illustrations by Fedorenko Anastasiia.

Figures by Thomas Spiglanin.

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Definitions of teleworking and telecommuting used with the permission of Jack (John) Nilles.

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Contents

Contents	vii
Acknowledgements	xv
Preface	xvii
1. Introduction	1
What is Telework?	3
<i>Knowledge Work</i>	3
<i>Defining Telework</i>	5
Who Should Use This Book?	7
What's in This Book?	9

Section 1. The Digital Workplace

2. Introducing the Digital Workplace	13
What is the Digital Workplace?	14
Features of the Digital Workplace	15
<i>Business Services</i>	16
<i>Document Storage and Retrieval</i>	17
<i>Communication</i>	17
<i>Mobile</i>	18
<i>Collaboration</i>	18
Teleworking in the Digital Workplace	18
3. Exploring the Digital Workplace	21
Accessing the Digital Workplace	22
The Workplace Divide	24
<i>Advantages of the Physical Workplace</i>	26
<i>Disadvantages of the Physical Workplace.</i>	27
Computer Networks in the Office	29
4. The Intranet in the Digital Workplace	31
Revisiting the Digital Workplace	32
Accessing the Intranet for Telework	35
<i>Virtual desktop</i>	35
<i>Virtual Private Network</i>	37
<i>What is the difference?</i>	38
Section 1 Knowledge Check	40

Section 2. Preparing for Telework

5. Preparing for Telework	45
6. The Teleworking Space	49
A Minimum Viable Workspace	49
<i>Other Considerations</i>	52
Alternative Workspaces.	54
7. Teleworking Technology	57
The Basics	58
<i>The Computer</i>	59
<i>Internet Connection</i>	60
<i>Telephone</i>	62
<i>Printer and Scanner</i>	63
More Technology	64
<i>Smart Mobile Devices</i>	64
<i>Wi-Fi</i>	65
<i>Sound Devices (Headsets and Microphones)</i>	65
<i>Video Devices (Webcam)</i>	67
<i>External Monitor and Laptop Accessories</i>	69
8. The Telework Mindset.	71
<i>Time Management</i>	72
<i>Showing Up</i>	74
<i>Life-Work Balance</i>	76
<i>Work-Life Balance</i>	78
Section 2 Knowledge Check	82

Section 3. Communication

9. The Importance of Communication	87
<i>Communication at Work</i>	88
<i>Telework Communication</i>	89
10. Communication Fundamentals	91
<i>Communication Is Hard</i>	92
<i>Body Language and Tone of Voice.</i>	93
Barriers to Communication	96
<i>Predisposed Barriers</i>	97
<i>Created Barriers</i>	98
<i>Environmental Barriers</i>	98
Barriers to Teleworking Communication	99
<i>Synchronous and Asynchronous Communication</i>	100
<i>Categorizing Teleworking Tools</i>	101
11. Audio and Video Meetings	105
<i>Meeting Features</i>	106
Video Meetings	107
<i>Video Meeting Considerations.</i>	107
<i>Our Work Persona, On Camera</i>	108
<i>Video Camera Placement</i>	110
Audio Meetings	111
<i>Sound Quality</i>	112
<i>Audio Meeting Considerations</i>	114
<i>Calling in to Live Meetings</i>	115
Etiquette for Interrupting	116

12. Written Communication	119
Written Communication Tools	120
<i>General Writing for Communication</i>	121
<i>Instant Messaging</i>	122
<i>Text Messaging</i>	124
<i>Group Messaging</i>	126
Email	128
<i>What's Good About Email</i>	129
<i>The Trouble with Email</i>	131
<i>Writing and Sending Email</i>	132
<i>Reply All</i>	135
<i>Closing Thoughts About Email</i>	136
 Section 3 Knowledge Check	 138

Section 4. Building Value

13. Building Value	143
Being Recognized.	147
<i>Out of Sight</i>	149
 14. Organizational Perspective.	 151
<i>Being Recognized</i>	152
What to Share and When to Share It	154
<i>Involving Managers in Our Decision-making</i>	155
<i>Understanding our Manager's Role</i>	157

15. Working Well with Others159
<i>Cultural Aspects of Work</i>	<i>160</i>
<i>Collaboration</i>	<i>161</i>
<i>General Collaboration Skills</i>	<i>163</i>
<i>Communication in Collaborative Settings.</i>	<i>164</i>
16. Influence and Leadership167
Influence	168
<i>Growing Influence</i>	<i>169</i>
Exercising Leadership	170
<i>Informal Leadership</i>	<i>171</i>
17. Developing Informal Networks175
<i>Workplace Networks</i>	<i>176</i>
<i>Informal Networks are Personal.</i>	<i>177</i>
<i>Workplace Networking for Teleworkers</i>	<i>179</i>
<i>Influence and Informal Networks</i>	<i>180</i>
<i>External Networks</i>	<i>181</i>
Section 4 Knowledge Check183

Section 5. Charting the Future

18. The Future of Telework 189

 Will Employers Support Telework? 190

The Growth of Teleworking 191

Telework Takes Off. 192

The Future of Telework 194

 Will Telework Affect Where We Live and Work? . . . 195

Housing Markets. 196

Job Markets 198

19. Our Teleworking Future 201

 Does Telework Fit Our Future? 202

 Part-Time Telework. 203

Benefits 204

The Employer Perspective 206

 Full-time Telework 207

Policies and Our Planning. 207

Challenges for Employers 209

 Transition to Teleworking. 210

Transitioning from the Workplace 211

Starting a New Job as a Teleworker. 212

 Other Consequences 214

20. Conclusions 217

Bibliography 221

Everyone's Guide to Teleworking



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Preface

From an early age, I was fascinated by everything from the path of the planets across the night sky to how ants instinctively follow an invisible trail to food. Wherever I lived, I needed to understand my place—geolocation as I later learned. Human technology was equally fascinating. I wondered how telephones worked, even without electricity, and how we could watch television using signals broadcast from over fifty miles away. When I saw the Winter Olympic games in France on the television in my living room in California, I had to learn how that was even possible.

My Dad, trained as an electrical engineer in the forties, clearly influenced me. I repaired dozens of vacuum tube television sets and radios. My first audio system used an early transistorized amplifier, handed down from my Dad (which I repaired). It's a

wonder I didn't electrocute myself before I was ten, experiencing dozens of shocks as my fingers grazed electrical supply circuits.

Although I was interested in the order of things, many of them human, I had to choose a way to make a living. At seventeen, I was yet unaware of academic fields of study that fascinate me today: anthropology and human culture; sociology and human society; psychology and the human mind. I could visualize the work of a chemist, so that started my educational path.

After earning my Ph.D. and a short postdoctoral stint with Sandia National Laboratories, I landed a job in the aerospace industry. First doing laboratory science, then program management, and then business development, I eventually found myself in human resources but specifically in the field of learning and development. My primary audience was the professional staff and management of the company. It was here I became intrigued by human systems.

I came to realize that work itself was often an experiment with unknown outcomes. From a scientific perspective, the work experiment wasn't always well thought out, and results would often leave more questions than they answered.

There was no recipe for workplace leaders to follow in charting a course for the company, yet they seemed adept at doing so. Most worked on instinct, often consulting with experts, but they were also guided by those who came before as well as by their own extensive experience.

I also came to understand the nature of workers, most of them intelligent, some highly educated, and several who later became leaders of the company. I learned both first and second hand

about the work challenges faced by many, which were almost always interpersonal at their core.

I became responsible for creating training programs that helped people communicate more effectively with management and customers. I focused on practical things they could implement on the job. My favorite comments from executives were their descriptions of noticeable performance improvement from employees who'd attended my classes.

In hindsight, I understand how fortunate I was to enter the workforce at such a remarkable time in history, given my fascination with technology. I saw the commercial introduction of the fax machine, which changed the pace of work by eliminating delivery time. I wrote papers and reports using the earliest commercial word processors. I created applications on a variety of mainframes, microcomputers, and then the personal computer when it entered the workplace. I was “the first on my block” to use the World Wide Web and to build websites. I used email long before anyone heard of spam or viruses. I also became the first on my block to telecommute.

Through it all, I saw technology change the very nature of the workplace. I saw some struggle, and others thrive. I found that failures were often rooted in interpersonal relationships that had changed because of technology. Unlike so-called thought leaders, I wasn't on the sidelines studying it. I was living it, and I was helping others thrive amidst it. Better yet, I'd developed a diverse worldwide network of colleagues who contributed the additional breadth, depth, and insight from businesses of all types and sizes necessary to understand changes in a more global context.

Preface

All of this prepared me to write this book, which seeks to show how to survive and thrive while teleworking, where traditional expectations meet ever-evolving technologies. My hope is for employees and managers alike to better understand the inherently social nature of work, how to address its most critical aspects as work continues to decentralize, and how we can continue to provide optimum value to our employers. In short, my goal is for us all to remain out of the office, but not out of mind.



Chapter 1

Introduction

One morning, around the year 2000, I remember driving to my workplace, mentally calculating how much time I wasted by commuting to work. I figured that I spent over thirty percent of my awake life at work and close to five percent more just driving there and back. This was the price I paid to establish my life so I could enjoy leisure, build a home, raise a family, and prepare for a future when I didn't—or couldn't—work. Work was work. Everything else, the remaining sixty-five percent of my awake time, was left for me to do as I please.

At that time, I was focused on work-life balance. I reasoned that if I could gain back the five percent of my life that I spent in

the car, I'd be happy to split the difference with work. They'd get just a little bit more of my time, but so would I.

As a knowledge worker, much of my work could be done anywhere I had a computer, and I owned both a PC and a Macintosh. I had a laser printer. I even had them interconnected with a home network, making for a pretty sweet home office setup. And sitting next to me, during my drive that morning, was my brand-new Nokia 3310 mobile phone. As I lifted it to phone a co-worker, I felt I could literally work from anywhere.



Telecommuting, as doing work without the commute was known, made sense to me. At least once a week. Maybe, if I then brought the fruits of my labor to work the next day to prove that I hadn't been out enjoying the beach instead of working.

Looking back, I know I was right about telecommuting but too focused on the technology. I wasn't thinking about the context of

my work and what was really needed to succeed while working away from the office on a regular basis. My management wasn't ready for me to telecommute. My customers weren't ready for me to telecommute. Even the company wasn't ready for most of its employees to telecommute as a standard practice. That would take another decade or two.

What is Telework?

In the most general terms, work is essentially putting forth effort, physical or mental, to accomplish something. For most us, what it really means is our job. We do work for pay and other compensation, most commonly from a company or organization. In many cases, that work can now be done at any time and from anywhere, or could be, with the right enabling technologies. That's where telework comes in.

Telework, like telecommuting and remote work, implies work done at a distance. For this reason, a number of jobs just cannot be done today through telework, notably any work that must be done in a physical location. Restaurant jobs, home repair, residential and commercial construction, and jobs in the transportation industry come to mind. Technology may eventually replace some of these functions, but this is many years off.

Knowledge Work

Much of the work done in offices *can* be done through telework, if certain requirements are met. Offices bring together people,

who largely operate computers, to do the work of the employer. Although working from a distance may present some challenges, notably with communication and collaboration, many of the reasons for people to be physically located near one another are historical. Offices predated the computer, the Internet, and all of the mobile technology we enjoy today. Using technology, this work might now be done through telework.

It's tempting to use the term *white-collar* to describe work that qualifies for telework. In general use, it was once synonymous with office work. However, the term originated from the historical dress of office workers, specifically male, going back more than a century. In current practice, business casual dress replaced formal attire for all genders in many offices.

In addition, the label might also apply to many jobs that are not likely to be done through telework. Managers who oversee workers in a physical location, like a restaurant, hotel, or a construction site come to mind. In addition, jobs once considered as *not* white-collar are being done at a distance through telework, and the range of such jobs continues to grow with automation technology.

Many people use the term *knowledge worker* to describe jobs that can be done through telework, as will we. Although most jobs require knowledge, the primary work of the knowledge worker is to deliver products based on what they know. These jobs are among those most likely to qualify for telework, but we must acknowledge they are not the only ones. Nonetheless, it gives us a strong starting point for our discussion.

Defining Telework

Some people use the terms telework, telecommuting and remote work interchangeably. Others use them inconsistently, possibly dependent upon the context of a particular conversation or discussion. There are also conflicting uses of these terms, one using telework to mean precisely what another means by remote work or telecommuting.

The conflicting uses might result from changes in the workplace, mostly technological, since the terms were coined by Jack Nilles in 1973, long before the development of the Internet (Nilles, *Transportation-Telecommunications Tradeoff*). Nilles, however, had foreseen the explosion in computer and networking technology. His definitions match what we adopt below, which are self-consistent, representative of a preponderance of uses, and fit what I call the telework era. They also happen to match my own experience as a commuter, as someone who worked from home on occasion, as a telecommuter (with formal telecommuting agreements), and ultimately as a teleworker.

Telecommuting refers to doing the work of paid employment (for a job and on the clock, so to speak) without commuting into the traditional workplace where they are assigned and normally commute to do their jobs. This is consistent with Nilles' definition that telecommuting is, "Periodic work out of the principal office, one or more days per week either at home, a client's site, or in a telework center" (Nilles, *What's Telework?*). The employer has allocated physical space (or time-shared workstations) and resources to the employees. Telecommuters, often through formal agreements with their employers, periodically work at locations

away from this place. Telecommuting is usually undertaken with prior approval from management, whether for a finite period of time or on a scheduled basis. For example, I once worked with a team of computer scientists that collectively had telecommuting agreements with their manager. Each avoided their commute one day every week but coordinated schedules to maintain coverage in the workplace.

Telework involves doing the work of paid employment at a location of the workers' choosing with all the electronic tools they need to do their job. This is consistent with Nilles' definition, where teleworking is, "ANY form of substitution of information technologies (such as telecommunications and computers) for work-related travel; moving the work to the workers instead of moving the workers to work" (Nilles, 2014). Unlike telecommuting, however, there is no implicit requirement for the employer to allocate physical space to the employees if they are full-time teleworkers. They may or may not be assigned or attached to a physical location where their work is managed. Coworkers and managers may also be teleworkers, located within traditional workplaces, or a combination of the two.

Remote work is a more general term than either telecommuting or telework. It implies some physical place where work is done and the remote workers do work away from this workplace, whether or not the employer allocates physical space and resources to them. Remote work for an employee assigned to a physical workspace differs from telecommuting in that it may or may not avoid a commute. The employee may have commuted to the office but, for any number of reasons, is situationally working

at a local coffee shop, a guest office, a customer location, or even at home. Teleworkers might also be described as doing remote work since they are working remotely from the physical workplace.

Work from home is another oft-used term in the same genre. It has little use in the context of this book other than to reference a specific location since telecommuting, remote work, and telework are commonly done from a worker's home.

Who Should Use This Book?

This book is meant to help anyone who wants to be (or thinks they want to be) a teleworker or a regular telecommuter. If you're among the millions of people who think this is a part of your future, please read on.

If you're in a new teleworking situation and have never set foot in a physical workplace for your employer, this book will help to quickly fit into your new position and start off in the right direction. We'll discuss the challenges of telework and how to overcome them, so you hit the ground primed for success.

For those who are already telecommuting or teleworking, you may feel disconnected or even disadvantaged at times. We'll discuss approaches for overcoming the many barriers presented by the teleworking situation. Technologies may empower work at a distance, but they cannot replicate the experience of being surrounded by coworkers. A large part of this book will address this

gap by focusing on how to build value while teleworking, whether you want to become a manager or grow in your job.

If you don't telework but work with others who do, you'll gain insight into the challenges faced by your colleagues. We'll address the benefits of being physically present in the workplace that your teleworking coworkers need to overcome, allowing you to better understand and support them.

If you're a manager, you'll gain insight from our discussions, which are framed from an employee perspective. Many of the approaches that experts recommend for managing telework don't consider the impact on employees, or simply don't work well in one situation or another. We'll focus on the working professionals who *want* to excel at work, provide value, deliver consistent performance, and help you do your job. You may even want to



share this book with your direct reports and use it to frame conversations that can produce results.

What's in This Book?

This book is designed as a guide so we can refer to individual topics when needed. We'll organize our discussions about teleworking into five topic areas, or sections:

- ◆ The Digital Workplace
- ◆ Preparing for Telework
- ◆ Telework Communications
- ◆ Building Value
- ◆ Charting the Future

The Digital Workplace is where all people teleworking for an employer report for work on a daily basis. We'll discuss what it is, what it means, and how to access it as a teleworker.

Preparing for Telework refers to three aspects of preparing that are essential for all employees: being physically prepared with an appropriate telework space; being technologically prepared with the appropriate equipment; and being mentally prepared with the appropriate mindset.

Telework Communications are critical because work is an inherently social activity. Understanding and addressing the

challenges of communication while teleworking is required to succeed.

Building Value will distinguish us among our coworkers and define how our employers view and rely on us. As teleworkers, we need to be deliberate in several key areas to be valued by our employers, especially since we are less visible than our office-resident coworkers.

We'll close with ***Charting the Future*** by looking at the both the future of telework itself as well as our future with it. Informed by history with a bit of speculation mixed in, we'll project how telework may impact our employers, our communities, and then us as we approach decisions related to telework amid several common situations.

Throughout our discussions, we'll do our best to remain out of the office, but not out of mind.