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WORKING LIFE

The Easiest Commute Of All

The ranks of remote workers are swelling as companies see the sense in freeing them

On the edge of Albuquerque lies a mammoth expanse of hills and horizon called Mesa del Sol. This celluloid-worthy, clay-colored plateau sprawls for over 25 square miles. It's the last parcel of its size in North America that is so close to both a central business district and an international airport. When ground broke in October, the unspoiled scrub began giving way to what will eventually become one of the largest planned -- and technologically tricked out -- communities in the nation, a place that will offer 310 sunny days a year in a climate balmer than Colorado's, cooler than Arizona's, and cheaper than either. A place where you can hit the slopes in the morning, tee off after lunch, and then jam in some collaboration with co-workers in India before David Letterman. In other words, a desert idyll for those who want to go off the grid but remain connected, and keep their New Economy-size paychecks while living a New Mexico-priced lifestyle.

Or so the pitch for this broadband nirvana will go. Mesa del Sol, designed by New Urbanism guru Peter Calthorpe, will be the first place of its kind built from scratch and targeted at the creative class. A big marketing push will be made to coastal knowledge workers looking to cash out of their million-dollar split levels, move inland, and work remotely for their companies. Mansionettes will carry price tags of up to \$400,000, about the same as the average Manhattan studio. They'll feature home offices sequestered from family foot traffic and fully wired for transnational connections. Business centers strewn throughout the community -- all within a short walk or electric-cart ride -- will offer rent-by-the-hour support staff plus state-of-the-art meeting rooms and seamless videoconference hookups to China and India. With the Albuquerque airport only six minutes and one stoplight away, a former regular of the big-city airport crush can leave for meetings in other cities after breakfast and still be home for dinner.

Mesa del Sol's developer is Forest City Enterprises Inc. (), the same company behind the "sustainable" Stapleton development outside of Denver -- where houses are so hot there's a lottery to get on the waiting list -- and the MetroTech Center in Brooklyn. The company's professorial co-chairman, Albert B. Ratner, has personally handed out hundreds of copies of Richard Florida's book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, to pretty much anyone who will take one. Like Florida, Ratner believes that the future of work belongs to those who will log their hours when they want, how they want, and, most important, where they want. Companies will hire brains, not bodies. Thus Ratner's bid to lure Mensa types to the Mesa.

The builder is clearly on to something. More and more, the creative class is becoming post-geographic. Location-independent. Office-agnostic. Demographers and futurists call this trend the rise of "the distributed workforce." Distributed workers are those who have no permanent office at their companies, preferring to work in home offices, cafes, airport lounges, high school stadium bleachers, client conference rooms, or some combination of what Florida calls the "no-collar workplace." They are people who do team projects over the Web and report to bosses who may be thousands of miles away. Currently, about 12% of the U.S. workforce qualifies as distributed, estimates Charles Grantham and James Ware, executive producers of Work Design Collaborative LLC in Prescott, Ariz. But in urban areas, they figure the number is closer to 15%. "Anytime 15% of any population is doing new behavior, you know it's going to take off," says Grantham, who predicts that 40% of the workforce will be distributed by 2012. "We're at a tipping point."

Many technology companies are already there. At IBM (), 40% of the workforce has no office at the company; at AT&T, a third of managers are now post-geographic. The growth of globalization, independent contractors, extreme commutes, expensive gas, and the broadband-connected micropolis are all continuing to build the ranks of the location-neutral, especially at troubled tech outfits for whom the cost savings can be a godsend.

FAR-FLUNG EFFICIENCY

At Sun Microsystems Inc. (), nearly 50% of employees can work from home, cafes, drop-in centers, a company office, or some combination thereof -- saving the company \$300 million in real estate costs, says Bill MacGowan, Sun's senior vice-president

for human resources. Agilent Technologies customer service engineer Walt Swanson hasn't seen his boss in nearly three years. More and more at Agilent, that's becoming the norm. In 2003 the company closed 48 U.S. sales offices and swiftly instructed all the employees to work from home. Today, 70% of Agilent's workforce is connected remotely either some or all of the time. The company estimates that these virtual workers cost 60% less. "I get to sit here and look out my window while I talk to customers -- and watch the leaves changing, squirrels running around, and kids going off to school," says Swanson, who works in a spare bedroom in his Knoxville (Tenn.) home.

Indeed, at many companies across America, the most innovative new product may be the structure of the workplace itself. Today, every knowledge worker has the tools to work from pretty much anywhere: a laptop, a mobile phone, and global, high-speed Internet access that is becoming as ubiquitous as pay phones used to be. Teams are increasingly transnational, warming undersea cables with Net meetings, conference calls, and collaborative projects involving large, far-flung groups. Increasingly, no one is sure of where anyone else is anymore; what's amazing is how little it appears to matter.

The office is stretching right along with the workday. With demands increasing to show up for meetings before the sun comes up and after it goes down, the ability to work from anywhere is becoming a necessity. "If staff meetings are at 5 a.m. or 10 p.m., I can guarantee you I'll be attending them at home in my jammies and robe," says Laura Dionne, Intel Corp.'s () director of supply-chain transformation. The trade-off for Dionne is that she has also been able to reclaim the dinner hour with her husband and three kids. "That's prime time, and I protect it," says Dionne, who manages a remote team of 200. She credits Intel's aggressive virtual-work program with enabling her to hang on to key talent she might otherwise have lost, especially working moms. "Technology allows working remotely to be completely invisible," says Dionne.

It's ironic that even as employees are farther away, companies are capable of keeping even closer tabs on them. Executives at Agilent can monitor engineer Swanson's output anytime they want. Swanson says daily reports keep a rundown on what he does: when he answered a call, how long it took him to resolve a technical issue, and how much time passed before he put the phone back into "ready" status. "They know more than in the old days when I had an office next to my boss," says Swanson, a high performer who the company treated to a trip to Cancun this year.

For those on the lower end of the knowledge worker spectrum, whose output can be easily monitored, it can mean more Big Brother oversight. For those on the high end, it can mean more hours but more flexibility. In a sense, time and flexibility are becoming a new kind of career currency in on-demand careers that never stop. "I'm on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year," says AT&T's manager of worldwide safety programs, Allen Hilbert. Hilbert works out of his Cape Coral (Fla.) home -- often with his legs up on a chaise lounge in his lush backyard. Fully 85% of the safety staff works virtually. "If I get a call at 1, 2, or 3 a.m., I can get across the house to my office and service the customer right there."

HIGH-SPEED HAPPY PEOPLE

Why should managers like Hilbert commute two hours a day, as he used to do, only to park themselves at a computer to send e-mails or yak on the phone to clients and employees in different time zones, countries, and continents?

Of course, nothing can supplant the intellectual electricity of knowledge workers brainstorming in person. But companies are finding that allowing workers the flexibility to work remotely contributes to increased productivity. Sun says its virtual workers are 15% more productive than their office-tethered brethren. "Our people working these remote schedules are the happiest employees we have, and they have the lowest attrition rates," says Sun's MacGowan. The need to seduce and keep star talent also plays a role. "Would I rather settle on someone mediocre in the Bay Area, or get the best person in the country who is willing to work remotely?"

Sun employees don't even need to lug their laptops around anymore. Workers can stick a Java Card into any Sun machine -- from Texas to Tokyo -- and their desktops and data will appear. "We don't even need PCs or laptops anymore," says Sun's senior director of the iWork Solutions Group, Ann Barnesberger.

Not only is flexibility an employee accommodation, it is also increasingly seen as a crucial management strategy that can improve worker performance and company financials, according to a recent study released by Corporate Voices for Working Families. It's a key to retaining younger workers as well. At Boeing, the average employee is 46 years old, says Jeffrey Hobbs, Boeing Co.'s () director of the workplace of the future. So to draw younger workers, the company has no choice but to offer the flexibility they prize. Yet its virtual work program is a smash with all ages. "Of the 8,000 employees participating, I've only heard of a few who have said they want to come back to a regular office," Hobbs says.

Still, many gray-flannel managers are leery. How do you supervise someone sitting miles instead of inches away? "People used to managing visually are a little bit reluctant at first," says Hobbs. Acclimating managers to judge people on output, not face time, takes time, training, and sometimes the example of senior executives working virtually, in part to prove to underlings that doing so won't set them back. In the end, says AT&T's director of telework, Joseph Roitz, people are "not going to make it in the global knowledge economy unless they can work with and influence people beyond their line of sight."