

# Technology enables the `virtual company'; New electronics make the office unnecessary

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VOXmarketing is based in Dedham. And Acton. And Denver. And lots of other places around the country and world when it's convenient.

VOXmarketing is a "virtual company." It has no headquarters, no cubicles, no employee break room, no HR office where it takes job applications. What passes for office locations are the three communities in which the company's main partners live and work. It also contracts with other remote workers across the country.

These kinds of business arrangements are becoming more popular as workers seek opportunities to work from home and technology enables them to do so. Rather than being connected under one roof, workers are connected via phones, e-mail, and the Internet. While they may rarely meet each other in person, workers have more control over their hours, which can be especially helpful if they are raising children or have other family demands.

"It's a model that's really ideal for that kind of flexibility," said Amy Paxson, a managing partner with VOXmarketing who has two children.

Virtual companies are a step beyond traditional telecommuting, which tends to involve people who work for larger, office-based organizations from their homes. Amy Zuckerman, who runs a virtual company and also tracks the trend from her base in Amherst, said many virtual businesses are started by entrepreneurs who build a network of people who live where they want.

"The whole concept of virtual work has to do with how you work, not where you work," Zuckerman said.

As such, businesses can consider a much larger talent pool and don't have to worry about issues such as relocation.

"You aren't limited to the pool of resources in your city," said Sharon Sarmiento, who is based in Alabama and runs a virtual business that helps people set up their own virtual businesses.

While it may seem likely that a computer or technology-based business would lend itself to a virtual arrangement, Zuckerman's research shows that people in industries as diverse as the arts, education, and marketing are working in virtual-business environments.

"Technology is changing how people do their work," she said. "You don't have to sit in an office to do a lot of things."

While many will choose a virtual arrangement because it suits their lifestyle, cost can also be a factor. When Jon Hirschtick was first developing a new software program for three-dimensional design in the early 1990s, he and his four colleagues all worked from their homes in the Boston suburbs. Even though computer communication tools such as e-mail were still new, the arrangement suited the small start-up.

"It started in my spare bedroom because that's really all we could afford," said Hirschtick, who recalled business meetings at Dunkin' Donuts and Bertucci's. "We didn't really need an office in the early days."

Within a year, the company, known as SolidWorks, opened an office in Concord to house its growing staff and facilitate meetings. Today, the company continues to use remote workers around the world, and Hirschtick noted that he is back to doing a lot more of his work from home or on the road.

But working remotely also means giving up office culture, and while that might offer a welcome break from office politics, it also can mean fewer opportunities for casual camaraderie.

To offer the 20 or so people who work for it a chance to meet and mix, VOXmarketing holds parties during the holidays, and even chartered a yacht out of Boston over the summer.

"We work really hard to create a company culture," Paxson said.

Sarmiento, whose company is called Streamline Virtual Office Solutions, said she simulates an office environment by making time during the day to chat online or over the phone with other businesspeople. She also is careful to set specific business hours and turn off her computer when her time is up.

"It can get overwhelming," Sarmiento said. "It's hard to separate your work life from your personal life."

Observers say virtual arrangements are not for everyone, especially those who need an office environment for motivation.

"There are some people who need the peer pressure of having someone in a cubicle right next to them," said Andrew Zacharakis, a professor of entrepreneurship at Babson College in Wellesley.

Others prefer some isolation. "The people who it's right for say, 'I'm so productive when I'm at home and not distracted,'" Paxson said.

Zuckerman said she believes the virtual business trend will grow as members of the baby boom generation retire and look for new ventures. She even sees it having an

effect on home-building trends, noting that many new houses in her area have been built with home offices.

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