



ONCE THEY
DISMISSED IT
AS A SKIVER'S
CHARTER, BUT
NOW MORE AND
MORE FIRMS ARE
ADOPTING
TELEWORKING -
ADAM WAKELIN
FINDS OUT WHY

Midway through the July fortnight and we're living the lyrics of a Morrissey song. With half of the county on holiday, "every day is like Sunday" in laidback Leicestershire at the moment - and isn't it brilliant?

No early evening mad crush at the supermarket check-out, no clawing your way on to an overcrowded train and, best of all, no snarls of traffic to battle through between work and home.

If only things could be like this all the time, eh? Well, think on, because weeks like these could soon be here to stay.

That's because the concept of working from home is finally moving from long-hyped pipe-dream to daily fact of life.

Thousands of us are already doing it, tens of thousands more are about to do it - and that means at lot, lot less of us in the rush-hour rat race.

"Home-working really is catching on", says Martin Traynor, managing director of Leicestershire Chamber of Commerce.

"A lot of firms are already doing it and we're going to see a lot more of it in the future."

BENEFITS

The benefits of working from home - or teleworking as it's sometimes called - are fairly obvious for us wage slaves.

You can be there when the kids come back from school, nip out to the shops when you want, and, let's face it, who doesn't like the idea of going to work in their pyjamas?

The sudden new-found attraction for employers is less obvious.

Bosses have always tended to hang a large pair of inverted commas on the "working" bit of working from home.

Many saw it as a skiver's charter. So why the abrupt change of heart?

The chance to boost their environmental credentials has an obvious appeal for some.

Telecoms giant BT is leading the way in Leicestershire, with 210 of its employees here now working from home.

Among them is regional director Andrew Bacon.

But Andrew admits that simply taking staff out of the office does not automatically reduce a firm's carbon footprint.

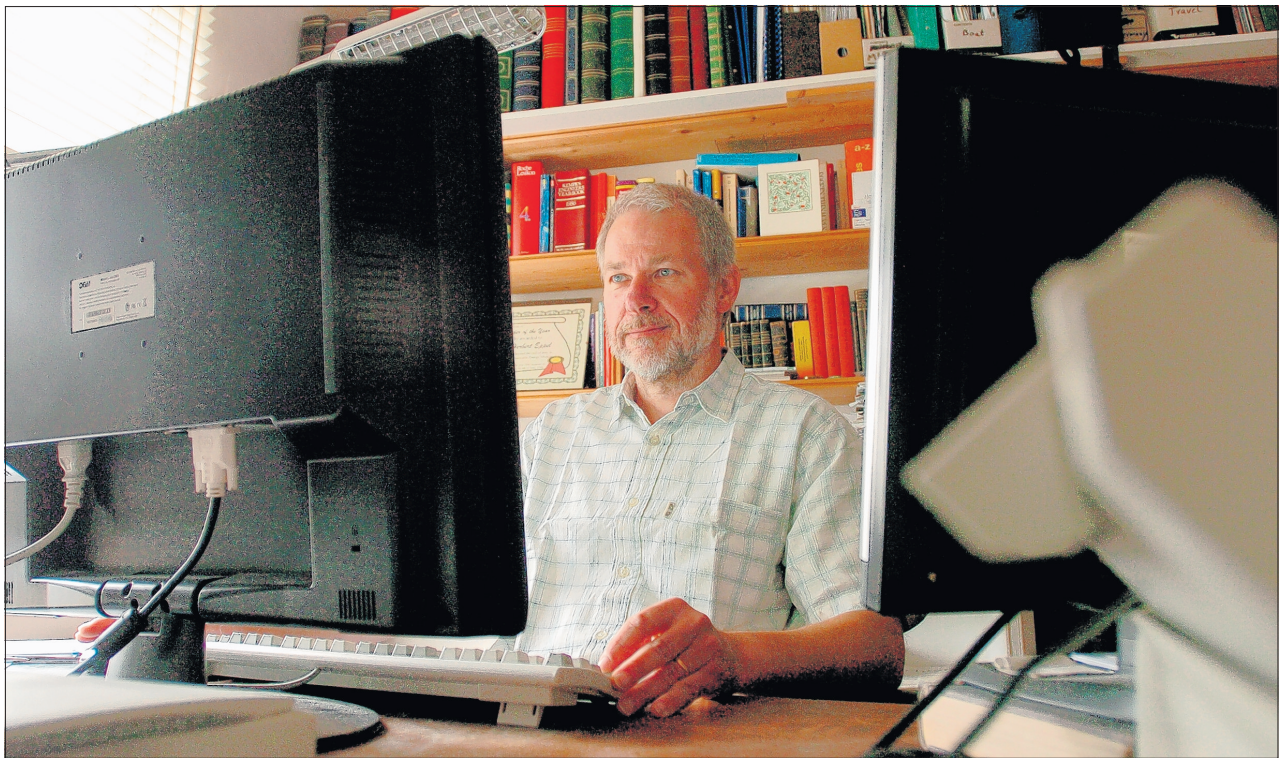
Opinion is divided.

Some experts say that corralling people in a single workplace - all using the same heat and lights - is more eco-effective than having lots of us plugged into the National Grid individually at home.

"Some scientists suggest there are carbon benefits from doing that, others question them", says Andrew.

There's no magic, one-size-fits-all formula for working out which is greener: home or office. It depends on the home and the office and particular working patters, Andrew suggests.

"There are too many ineffi-



PICTURE: MIKE SEWELL / 200568-0

NOVELTY FACTOR: Herbert Eppel, from HE German Translations, working from his Aylestone Road, Leicester, home - the former university lecturer runs a business.

Home work - we love it!

cient buildings", he says. "We need a way of working that doesn't rely on an unsustainable jungle of concrete buildings."

The greatest green dividend from working from home - one that probably single-handedly makes it more eco-friendly than not - is the cars it gets off the roads.

If more businesses followed BT's lead of having more teleconferencing and less face-to-face meetings, that environmental saving could be made even greater.

"It doesn't take much of a reduction in traffic to significantly reduce congestion and CO2 emissions", says Andrew. So, there are green benefits. Is there anything else in it for the boss?

Yes there is. Think about it: if you're working from home whose gas, electricity, etc are you burning? Not the firm's.

The recession has given the idea of teleworking huge impetus, says chamber of commerce chief, Martin Traynor.

"It has definitely accelerated things", he says. "A lot of businesses are conscious of the cost of running offices and they are looking at alternative ways of working."

"Ten years ago, employers were probably sceptical (of home-working). Now they can see the benefits of it."

Most firms will not abandon premises completely, believes Andrew. There will still be an HQ for conferences and meetings, but employees will "hot desk" in flexible office spaces. Some days one person will be using it while another works from home and vice versa.

Less office space means less rent, less rates and vastly reduced overheads for companies. Most of us are familiar with the concept of "off-shoring" - exporting things like call-centre jobs to cheaper destinations like India and elsewhere.

Now, some firms are "home-shoring" - bringing those jobs back, but asking people to do them under their own roof.

"You can achieve a low-cost service without having to go overseas", says Andrew.

That might be good news for the beleaguered UK economy, but the idea of lumping overheads onto workers is a development less of us will feel happy about.

But the results of a home-working trial at a council in Yorkshire suggest many of us would still be financially better off be-

ing out of the office. Yes, we might have to have the central heating on all day in the winter, but these rising fuels bills should be offset by the typical £450 saved on petrol, car parking and other travel costs.

Home and flexible working certainly seems to be a success at BT - for bosses and staff.

According to its internal research, absenteeism has dropped to 3.1% (against a national average of 8.1%) and productivity is up by nearly a third. The company also claims to be saving £69 million a year in heating and accommodation costs.

Herbert Eppel, a former university lecturer, has been working from his Leicester home since setting up his language translation business, HE Translations, 15 years ago.

The novelty has yet to wear off. If Herbert ever wakes up and wishes he had an office to go to (and he says he doesn't), he just needs to look out of his window.

"I see cars piling up on the Aylestone Road into Leicester every morning and it is such a waste of time and resources", says the member of the Leicester branch of Friends of the Earth.

"Millions and millions of per-

son hours must be lost every year in those traffic jams. It's not just an environmental waste, it's incredibly wasteful economically."

HE Translations now employs sub-contractors all over the world - and they all operate under their own roofs.

You do need discipline to work from home, says Herbert, but there's no loneliness of the long-distance translator.

E-mail and social-networking sites provide plenty of virtual water-coolers; places to go to swap ideas, let off steam, or just have an old-fashioned chin-wag.

"I'm absolutely delighted and over the moon with working from home", says Herbert. "I know it perhaps wouldn't suit everyone, but it suits me."

BT boss Andrew is another who can't imagine being stuck in the same office all day.

"I would never do it", he says. "If I had to work in a fixed location in an office nine-to-five, then I would have to seriously question whether I wanted to work for that organisation."



PICTURE: 200428-01

LEADING THE WAY: Andrew Bacon, works for BT as a regional director, based at his home.