

Do it yourself

By Steve Quinn | The Dallas Morning News

Telecommuting can ease working life and save companies money

Heidi Hess has spent \$578 to build her desktop computer, \$50 a month for high-speed Internet service, about \$20 for a headset and \$30 for a business phone line with unlimited long-distance.

That investment is half what it would have been several years ago when technology costs were higher, Hess said from her home office in Plano, Texas, where she performs contract call-center duties.

And it's the kind of commitment analysts say is making telecommuting increasingly accessible to hourly wage earners — not just executives looking to trim their commutes.

“People with lower-end job titles and lower-end wages had a hard time breaking into that — until now,” said Tim Houlne, chief executive of Plano-based Working Solutions Inc., which employs 22,000 home-based contractors including Hess.

“As telecommuting gained momentum, now you have this lower-wage employee that is able to work in the home.”

Costs vary depending on the sophistication of the computer equipment and telecommunication services, but millions of people in hourly wage categories are setting up shop as independent contractors or home-office employees.

The growth of broadband Internet service in the home has helped drive the number of contract telecommuters to 16.5 million in 2004 from 9.2 million in 2001, said the Dieringer Research Group Inc. of Milwaukee.

“First it was laptop computers, then along came broadband, which means it's just as easy to work down the road as it is down the hall because you can move a lot of infor-

mation quickly,” Dieringer analyst Tom Miller said.

The number of people with broadband at home rose from 2.8 million in 2001 to 8.1 million in 2004, he said.

Call-center work leads this paradigm shift with about 100,000 at-home operators, but other workers — transcribers, medical coders, proofreaders, administrative assistants and data entry specialists among them — are increasingly operating in home settings.

This won't keep jobs from being transferred offshore, analysts and telework executives say, but it could expand the work force as computers and high-speed Internet connections become household fixtures.

Most workers earn \$10 to \$14 an hour, though there are exceptions that can push the wages to as high as \$20 per hour.

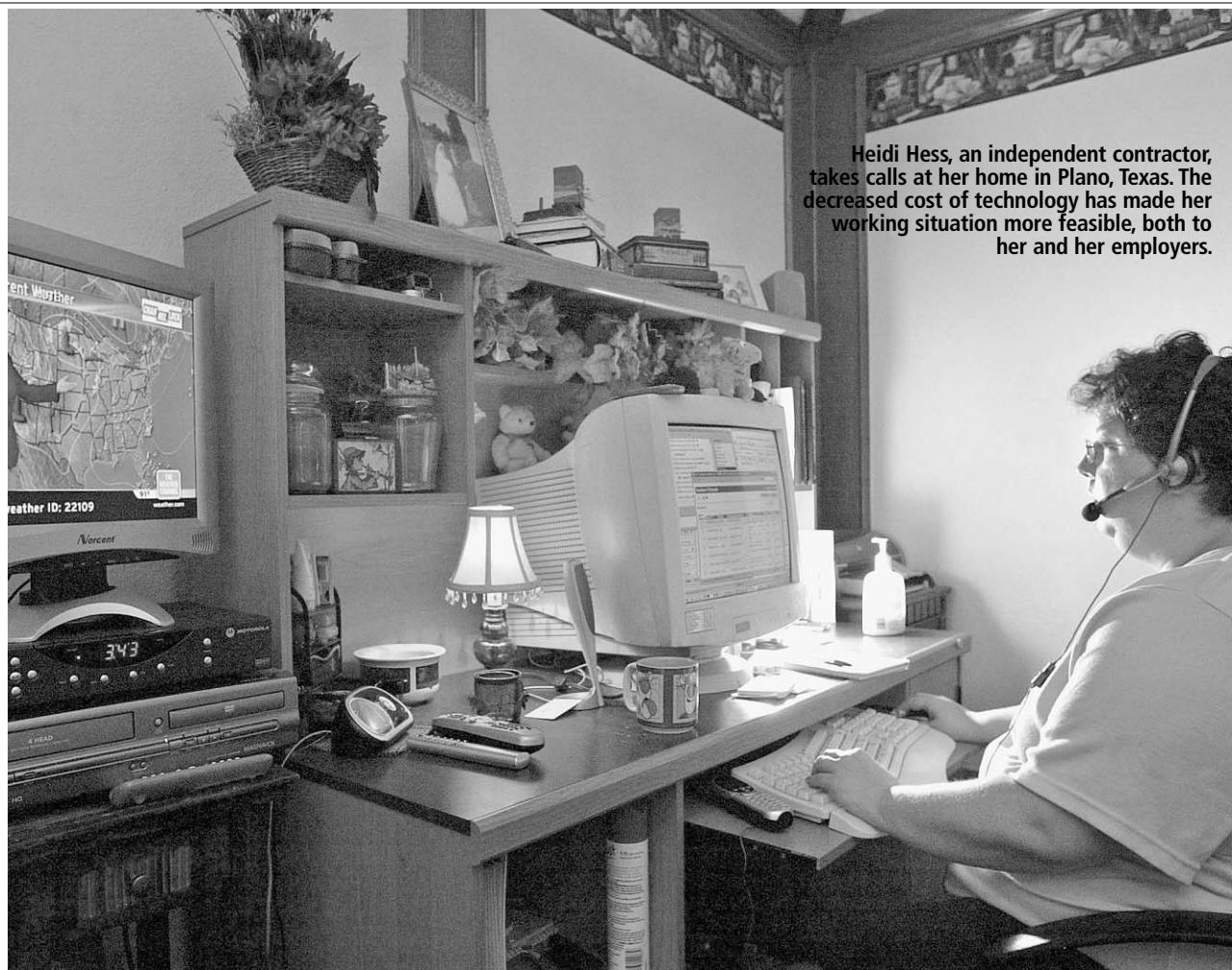
Meanwhile, businesses are cutting office-space expenses and labor costs by farming out this work to contractors or letting their employees work at home.

The market for telework contractors is becoming “very competitive — almost more than the on-site job,” said Pamela La Gioia, president of Kentucky-based Telework Recruiting Inc. “There is nothing you can't do from home.”

This groundswell of work-at-home activity has broadened the definition of the telecommuter, Miller said.

“People are leveraging the technology not so much to overcome commuting but to be sole proprietors, consultants or contractors,” he said. “It's becoming more and more about empowerment of the individual worker than it is about displacing driving time.”

Hess, 39, says that empowerment works two ways. Not only does she



Heidi Hess, an independent contractor, takes calls at her home in Plano, Texas. The decreased cost of technology has made her working situation more feasible, both to her and her employers.

have a flexible work schedule, she also has consumer choices when setting up shop.

“If I start having problems with my (Internet service provider), there are so many more options to get high-speed connections that I can just switch,” she said. “Years ago, you used to have to sign long-term contracts for service, and now I don't even have to pay for instant messaging anymore.”

Hess spends most of her work-week taking calls on behalf of two Working Solutions clients, Florida-based retailer Office Depot Inc. and San Francisco-based delivery services company Ensenda Inc.

Office Depot this year closed 10 of 12 call centers and switched to home-based employees.

That will save the company \$15 million a year, said Julian Carter, Office Depot's senior director of operations.

In addition to the savings, the company is getting a consistently higher-quality work force, he said.

“These people are more motivated, generally more mature, more educated and generally have a background in leadership,” Carter said. “Many people view what they do as a more entrepreneurial venture because so many work in a contract capacity.”

Other Dallas area employers, including Harris Methodist Fort Worth Hospital, offer medical transcriptionists and other employees the chance to work at home.

The hospital provides a \$1,500 computer and lets the employee establish a home office, enabling the hospital to free up space for patient care.

“What we see is their productivity increases, because they don't have the distractions found at the office setting,” said Diann Brown, the hospital's director of health information services. “If we have an ice day during the winter, our work carries on.”

For hospital transcriber Brenda Sholtis, the \$50 investment in a

high-speed line is offset by money not spent on gas or car maintenance.

“If you're healthier and happier, your whole life is better,” she said. “I can handle being alone and working because I'm still being productive.”

As technology becomes ubiquitous, the lines of telecommuting will continue to blur between highly paid executives and the hourly wage earners, experts say.

And employers will continually review what work can be completed at home either by a full-time employee or a contractor.

“You'll find companies taking a look at other areas that make sense: real-time transcription, accounting, billing, collections, human resources,” Working Solutions' Houlne said.

“As this new work force grows, there is more empowerment being given these people because companies want to manage results, not people.” ♦