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SHIFTING CAREERS

Drawing Your Own Map to Working From Home

By MARCI ALBOHER

TORY JOHNSON, the chief executive of the New York recruiting services firm Women for Hire, is a co-author of “Will Work From Home,” a new, comprehensive guide to home-based work. Ms. Johnson did research on an array of home-based workers — from those working for \$8 an hour as virtual customer service representatives, to those who run businesses from home, to professional and executive-level free agents and employees.

Tens of millions of Americans do some kind of work from home, according to federal data. And because of increases in fuel and other energy costs, more employers and individuals will undoubtedly be exploring their work-from-home options.

Ms. Johnson and I recently discussed the variety of ways that people make a living from home, tips for persuading an employer to approve a work-from-home arrangement, and the ingredients for a successful at-home work experience. Here is a condensed and edited version of our conversation:

Q. You cover a broad swath of the workplace in this book. Does it really make sense to lump entrepreneurs and hourly wage workers together, based solely on the fact they work from home?

A. Anyone who works from home — whether for a Fortune 100 company, as a customer service representative or running your own

shop — has to possess certain qualities. You have to be disciplined enough to wake up every day and report to work, without a time clock to punch, a manager hovering over your shoulder or colleagues keeping tabs on whether you are producing anything.

It takes someone who is motivated and focused. You have to wear multiple hats and have an entrepreneurial streak, so even if you have a “job,” when your computer doesn’t work, you have to make the first attempt to troubleshoot. You are often your own mailroom, receptionist and tech support, which is a very similar spirit to starting a business.

Q. Where do you see the greatest opportunities for at-home workers and for companies wanting to hire them?

A. For the skilled knowledge worker, the free-agent market is alive and well on sites like oDesk, Elance, and even [Craigslist](#) and [Guru.com](#). In these contexts, hirers are looking for great value without the overhead and they get to connect with someone who wants to work from home. It is very efficient.

With a lot of people competing for an opportunity, the best person at the best price wins. For the individual, it’s really about marketing yourself to someone who has already made the determination and decision to find someone to work from home. And that is still easier than going to a traditional employer and trying to plead your case.

In the typical retail or customer service sector, work historically had to be done in person within pretty standard hours. Now there is an emerging world of virtual customer service agents, which has evolved for two reasons. First, technology makes it possible. Second, certain big brands are recognizing the importance of maintaining brand equity by paying particular attention to the type of people who handle calls.

Companies like J. Crew, AAA or [1-800-Flowers](#) decided that they wanted to keep their customer calls answered in the United States and wanted a higher-caliber candidate than what you typically find in a bricks-and-mortar call center where you often get a seasonal and

transient worker. In the home-based model, the level of education is higher, as is the retention, and the employer can really train someone on their brand and get someone who will deliver superior customer service.

Q. What are some misconceptions people have about wanting to start a business from home?

A. Often I will hear people, especially women, say that they'd love to start a business but haven't yet come up with a great idea. They are stuck on thinking they have to find something that's never been done before. When I ask them how many banks or clothing boutiques exist in their neighborhood, they start to see that they don't need to reinvent the wheel and they also don't need the million-dollar idea.

Oftentimes that leads to an aha! moment, that you can do something as long as you are really passionate about it and willing to hustle. Starting a business from home really doesn't have to be all that complicated.

Q. If you'd like to do your current job out of your home, how can you best lay out your proposal?

A. First, do some research. Are there any precedents within your own organization, within your industry and within your geographic area? Once you've done that, you want to figure out all the reasons the boss can say no and then come up with responses to each of those. It's always easier to say no to someone looking for a change than to say yes.

One of the most common reasons to reject a proposal is the fear that if the employer says yes to you, everyone will want to do it. But the reality is that not everyone wants to work from home. There are a lot of people who would tear their hair out if they had to work from home.

I would suggest a trial period and include benchmarks for success. It's easier for someone to say yes to a three-month trial than a permanent change.

There's always that idea that managers say, 'If I can't see you, I can't keep tabs on you.' Yet face time isn't an accurate measure of productivity. We all know people who show up every day but don't do all that much, as well as people who can get done in one hour what others would require a whole day to do.

Q. If your proposal is approved, or if you start at a new organization working virtually, what are some best practices to ensure that it will work?

A. Communication is critical, and the onus is on you to ensure that out of sight doesn't mean out of mind. That might mean having lunch dates inside the building with colleagues. It might mean asking people to copy you on e-mails, and picking up the phone to touch base perhaps more often than you ordinarily would.

Often it is the informal chitchat that keeps people in the loop. So you have to figure out how to replicate that if you are not having it in the office.

Shifting Careers, a blog by Marci Alboher, is at nytimes.com/shiftingcareers.