

# Telework, a growing trend

*As many as 1.5 million Canadians are teleworkers*

by **Jim Bentein**  
For Mature Living

**C**algary geologist Ian Hunter, 51, has been able to stay at home with his 90-year-old mother — who suffers from Alzheimer's — while continuing to work as a consultant to the oil industry from his home.

Jean Sutherland is a 54-year-old Canadian who lives in Mexico and earns about \$40,000 Cdn a year from a Web site she uses to sell electronic books and other products.

And Calgarians Clair Logan, 51, and her husband, Robin, 60, were able to make what they call a lifestyle choice. They work from their Hillhurst-area home several days a week thanks to the "flex-work" approach of the financial institution that employs them.

They are examples of the growing trend towards telework in Canada.

Thanks to home computers that can process data that only sophisticated mainframes could process a few years ago, employees are using the Internet, voice and video conferencing to work from home either full or part-time.

As many as 1.5 million Canadians are teleworkers, say Bob Fortier, an at-home employee himself and president of the Ottawa-based Canadian Telework Association. Most are in their 50s and up, he says.

"We know that usually older workers are more successful as teleworkers because it requires someone who is a self starter and who is very proficient at what they do," he says.

Fortier, 55, took early retirement five years ago from the Treasury Board of Canada.

But like many workers who have taken early voluntary or involuntary retirement (his was by choice), he found he was too young to spend his days watching TV or golfing.

Recent stock market losses have also caused some former retirees to return to part-time or full-time work — much of it done from home, he says.

There are also many who choose such work for lifestyle reasons, including the need to stay home to care for a loved one.

Many of today's professional or semi-professional jobs allow

people to work from home, says Fortier.

But even truck drivers, mechanics or other tradespeople can do some of their job from home, he says, citing work he did in the past as a consultant to a dock workers union.

"People who are injured could do paperwork from home, managers could work from home sometimes, and some specific tasks which require privacy would be ideal," says Fortier, a workplace consultant.

But despite the fact many jobs can be done from home, corporations and smaller businesses in Canada haven't embraced the concept as fully as had once been believed, he says.

"Employers aren't getting the message that the solution for the future is to offer more workforce flexibility," says Fortier.

Largely because it has a rapidly aging population, Canada faces future labour shortages in many professional and skilled areas, he says.

But while this challenging future is one reason companies should offer flexible working environments, another is that they can realize savings today, he says.

Research by Fortier's association suggests companies can economize on office space costs, experience less worker absenteeism and save in other areas by offering a telework option, he says. "The study showed that with 100 teleworkers, a company could save \$5 million over five years."

This doesn't include the savings companies realize on benefits if they hire many off-site consultants.

Firms that have embraced telework, such as IBM Canada Ltd. and some banks, report lower levels of absenteeism because home workers often continue to function even if they're ill.

They also are more refreshed for work because they don't have to face long commutes.

Other studies have shown home workers are 10 to 20 per cent more productive than those who commute to offices, says Fortier.

One new reason for embracing telework is the threat of terrorism, he says. Firms with flexible workforce approaches can respond to such threats better than those with all their staff and resources in one central office.

The Bank of Montreal is one

large Canadian corporation that encourages flexible workforce approaches, including telework and reduced hours for people who want to phase into retirement or family responsibilities.

Clair Logan and her husband, Robin, who have worked for the Bank of Montreal for 33 and 25 years respectively, have embraced the opportunity to work from their home.

"My husband just retired in January," she says. "He was able to do telework for two years prior to that and it worked very well for him, allowing him to phase into retirement."

As executive assistant to the bank's senior vice-president for the Prairies, Clair often works from her home, which is just a walk away from her downtown office.

Two years ago, Logan arranged with the bank to take every second Friday off in return for working some extended hours on other days.

"The bank provides people with the tools they need to work from home, such as remote dial access to get into the bank's secure Web site," she says. "I enjoy my work, but having this flexibility has given me the motivation to stay in my job longer."

Several of her colleagues work either part-time or full time from home. But although the bank encourages it, Logan says only workers with discipline can make it work.

Ian Hunter, whose 90-year-old mother moved in with him seven years ago, has increasingly relied on his ability to work from home

since she started suffering from Alzheimer's about two years ago.

"I've worked for about 15 oil and gas companies over the last 10 years and I have a good niche," he says. "They pay me good money to look at rocks and tell them where to drill."

Most of his 30-hour work week is from his home office in the Willow Park area, where he also cares for his mother.

He also works at the Core Research Centre, a geological lab located near the University of Calgary research park, as well as at research labs in London, Ont. and Fort St. John, B.C. On such occasions, he hires home care workers to look after his mother.

Hunter has a network of five computers at his home that includes three printers, several desks and an extensive library. He also employs an assistant who prepares reports.

He plans to continue working

from home as long as possible. "I love what I do and I get as much work as I want," he says.

Jean Sutherland is another Canadian who makes a living from a distance. She lives with her 60-year-old partner, Gary, in the Lake Chapala area of south-central Mexico, where there is a large enclave of retired or semi-retired Canadians.

The couple both have Web sites that they use to sell computer software, electronic books and other products. "We have both worked online since 1996 and we earn a good living," says Sutherland.

Such work gives them a mobility they would not have otherwise, says the former stockbroker. The couple moved to Mexico two years ago from the Toronto area and they are planning to return to Canada in the next year, likely to Vancouver Island.

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