



# Managing Remote Employees

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**a** 2006 survey revealed more than 12 million Americans telecommute full time and another 10 million do so at least once weekly. The survey, conducted by the Dieringer Research Group for the International Telework Association & Council, showed the number of telecommuters has risen 10 percent since 2004 alone.

Telecommuters extol the benefits of the work-from-home approach – less money spent on gas, more quiet time to focus on work, fewer interruptions, and a greater sense of job satisfaction. Managers with telecommuting employees cite reduced absenteeism and increased productivity as reasons they endorse a work-from-home employee base.

But what does the increasing trend of telecommuting mean for radiology businesses? As technology continues to enable an untethered workforce, radiology business owners and managers are seeing the benefits of telecommuting for certain segments of their employees and their own bottom line.

Though the tradeoff of proximity for increased productivity and satisfaction can bring new challenges for supervisors, executives in radiology practices and billing companies say managing remote employees can be a simple, stress-free process if you begin with a few key ground rules:

- Strong, regular communication
- Defined performance expectations
- Standard quality-assurance monitoring

By carefully defining these remote-road rules, radiology organizations can benefit from technological advances that make telecommuting increasingly possible and profitable. Taking the time to lay out clear expectations, deadlines, and schedules from the start of a remote arrangement will help managers and employees alike successfully handle telecommuting.

## An Untethered Workforce

Terry Leone, CPC, CPC-P, CIC, is the president of Catamount Associates, a New York billing company with clients across

several specialties, the majority in radiology. All of Leone's nine full-time and five part-time coders work from home, with one as far away as Hawaii. Altogether, Catamount processes about a million claims annually. Having a coder in Hawaii, he said, makes his organization a nearly 24-7 operation, given the time difference between the East Coast and Hawaii, and betters the company's ability to quickly turn reports around.

Leone has used remote coders for his business since it began in 1996. At that time, Catamount relied on fax machines to send reports back and forth between the coders and the main office. Catamount still relies on faxes for a few of its clients that do not have HL7 capabilities. Leone employed remote coders initially to save on office space, but recent advances in computer-assisted coding technology have allowed his business to increase productivity and find skilled coders he couldn't uncover in his market. At this time, only Catamount's coders are allowed to telecommute.

"The technology gives me the ability to find top-notch coders I couldn't find locally and have them work for me," said Leone, who is also the president-elect of the National Advisory Board for the American Academy of Professional Coders. "As technology advances, this world gets easier. With computer-assisted coding, it's just a whole different world. It's so much easier, so much faster. It's not perfect, though, and it will never replace coders but it does help them improve. Their output is just dramatically better. It makes a good coder even more valuable."

Leone is able to manage his coders from Catamount's main office through software programs that examine coding volumes. The software tracks the time spent on every report as well as error rates. Frequent conference calls and training sessions with the team help everyone feel connected. Other organizations that allow remote coding say they rely heavily on instant messaging and e-mails, as well, to keep telecommuters connected and alerted to new clients, policies, and coding changes.

## Confidence in At-home Coders

The lack of face time and water-cooler chats can impede working relationships, so it's important for managers to help remote workers establish rapport with their office-based colleagues. Managers and supervisors can lessen communication issues with frequent discussions within the group. Leone, for example, uses Web-based conferencing to hold learning seminars so his coders can see him coding and demonstrating examples. He hosts the sessions on an as needed basis or when a new coder starts with Catamount.

"I feel as confident with that as I would if I had the training session in my office," he said.

Confidence in remote employees is key, organizations with telecommuters say. Working from home requires employees to have dedication and focus, but radiology executives have found telecommuters are fiercely committed to their jobs because they relish their arrangement. Leone, for example, is flexible on his remote coders' start and stop times for the day, reasoning that as long as they clock eight hours in a 24-hour period, the work is getting done.

Trust is a critical issue when supervising remote workers. Just as micromanagement is not likely to motivate on-site employees, remote workers should be held accountable for meeting expectations without having to constantly check in. It is important, however, to set parameters for this type of work arrangement. If employees are working off-site, managers should clarify from the beginning how quickly employees are expected to respond to e-mails and phone calls. Managers also must decide whether their remote employees can work a flexible schedule or if they need to perform their jobs during specific hours.

Another item to consider is whether telecommuters should be reimbursed for their home Internet connections, or what to do if their connection fails and interrupts their workday. Leone said he does not reimburse for home connections, but he doesn't penalize his staff if they have connectivity issues either. If an outage occurs, they are expected to make up the time at a later point.

## Exceeding Expectations

Michael Gonzales, billing operations manager for Radiological Associates of Sacramento, began letting his coders work from home late last year. He made the decision

to do so because of the need for more office space and the implementation of computer-assisted coding technology.

"We're really happy about doing it," Gonzales said. "So much so that we're looking at doing it for other positions besides coders that could work from home."

Radiological Associates of Sacramento has 71 physician partners and more than 900 employees that serve 23 facilities including free-standing diagnostic imaging centers, radiation oncology centers and hospitals in the Sutter Health System. The group codes and bills about 1.1 million reports each year. Gonzales' department has about 100 people. Of that group, four full-time coders, one part-time coder, and transcriptionists are able to telecommute. To make telecommuting possible for the coders, Gonzales' needed the coding technology to offer Web-based connectivity and the ability to measure their productivity. Both are now possible.

Before the employees began working from their homes in the Sacramento area, however, Gonzales had each of them sign a work-at-home agreement so there were no misunderstandings about productivity and expectations. Because they all live in the area, they are able to come into the office for team and department meetings, as well as "goal parties" that celebrate the office's accomplishments.

"I think having a successful work-at-home process requires proper planning, knowing what your benchmarks are, and how to measure them for success for you and your clients," Gonzales said. "You have to put those expectations in writing."

If the coders' work suffers because of telecommuting, they know they'll have to return to the office. Thus far, Gonzales said he has had no issues with his telecommuters.

"They are maintaining or exceeding those expectations," he said, noting the employees are coding anywhere from 175 to 200 reports per hour at home. He attributes the rise in productivity to the lack of distractions at home vs. those found in a hectic office setting.

"I look at working remotely as a benefit that can be offered to our valuable employees," Gonzales said. "It's opened up space in our office, but the morale of those employees is incredible. They enjoy it and are really happy to be able to do it."