



01

01. Margaret Aspin at her home in Melbourne

## Can Teleworking help your business?

Teleworking is the process whereby the daily commute is substituted by phone and internet, enabling employees to enjoy a greater degree of flexibility in their working hours and location. Margaret Aspin, a small business owner in Melbourne and professional teleworker since 1996, talks to Telstra Business about Teleworking and what is driving it.

**Q1 Margaret, considering that Teleworking is still regarded as an emerging phenomenon, what got you involved over a decade ago?**

It was very much driven by supply and demand. I was a manager at a TAFE Institute where there was a real skills shortage in teaching staff. At around the same time, the concept of online learning started to take off, which helped address the skills shortage and kept students and teachers alike happy.

As demand increased, I decided to set up a virtual team specialising in education and training and haven't looked back since.

**Q2 Since then, the number of businesses that support Teleworking has increased exponentially. Why do you think this is?**

I think mainly because all the vital ingredients are there, particularly the internet and mobile infrastructure

needed to make it all work. Australians now have access to the latest and most reliable technology both at work and at home. This includes both fixed and mobile communications, especially mobile devices which can now easily allow off-site employees to quickly access company data from a central location to do their jobs better.

Having said that, I believe that businesses now recognise not only the need, but also the benefits that Teleworking [Next page →](#)



→ provides employers, employees, the self-employed and entrepreneurs alike – for example, lowering operational costs for a ‘virtual’ workforce that doesn’t require expensive office space and related overheads; retention of valuable staff who otherwise may be marginalised (such as mothers and fathers with small children, the disabled and people living in remote areas). In fact, because more Australians than ever before are seeking greater flexibility in their lives, teleworking is becoming an important tool for employers reaching out to a wider pool of skilled staff.

Lastly, with greater employee flexibility comes increased productivity and reduced absenteeism.

**Q3 According to a report commissioned by the Federal Government last year, people who work from home are up to 40 per cent more productive. Why do you think that this is the case?**

There are a number of explanations for this surge in productivity. Firstly, the reduced travel time, which in turn delivers more working hours. Secondly, many workers also find they achieve a lot more in a quiet environment without the stress and distractions that can come with the office workplace. Also, we are all unique, and the times at which we work best differ. So, by empowering staff to work when it best suits them, you are going to get the best output. Finally, phone and online meetings tend to be shorter and more focused than face-to-face equivalents.

**Q4 So what are some of the benefits for the employee?**

Foremost, this would be the luxury of avoiding the daily commute, which saves both time and money, plus has a positive knock-on effect on the environment. Overall, though, it is about greater flexibility and the wider social benefits it offers. This includes less disruption to family life by being able to work during non-business hours, greater lifestyle choice thanks to being able to live in more desirable locations. Consequently, employees achieve a much healthier work-life balance.

**Q5 Are certain industries better suited to Teleworking?**

There is a general misconception that Teleworking works best only for the call centre industry. The reality is that there are many industries where Teleworking can offer real value to companies both large and small. These include financial, engineering, multimedia, marketing and graphic design, as well as many other service industries. If your staff don’t need to be in any one place, such as a factory or retail outlet, then Teleworking could work for you.

**Q6 With 35 of your own staff Teleworking in and around Melbourne, how do you ensure that the process works as efficiently as possible?**

The bottom line is that you, as the employer, need to provide your team with a crystal clear understanding of your expectations. You also need to ensure that your staff have the necessary skills and support needed to make Teleworking an effective business tool for your company.

### Q7 What advice would you offer to small and medium businesses (SMBs) out there that are considering introducing Teleworking into their workplace?

Teleworking need not be a significant investment from the outset for SMBs. For example, websites such as [www.teleworkaustralia.com.au](http://www.teleworkaustralia.com.au) provide free business advice, and there are a number of recruitment and technology companies that specialise in hiring staff and providing the right technologies for Teleworking.

However, once a business has decided to go down the Teleworking route, then the manager should get the staff together to have an open discussion on what it means for everyone and the business. To get the program rolling, you may consider implementing a trial scheme for a pilot group of staff and supervisors to ensure that potential challenges are quickly addressed, and that Teleworking really does meet the needs of all the stakeholders involved, the business included.

Selection of the trial candidates can be done informally by approaching staff who have an obvious prerequisite that makes them viable candidates – for example, if they have a young family, live a considerable

distance from the office or are senior, long-term employees for whom working from home one day a week would be regarded as an attractive incentive. Alternatively, you can base your selection on a more formal process by distributing a questionnaire to all staff, thus allowing you to scrutinise the results and assess who are the best candidates before making your selection.

Finally, to ensure that teleworkers and supervisors are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge, conduct a training course. The course will help to familiarise them with Teleworking policies and teach them how to get the most from it.

### Q8 Finally, what are your thoughts on the future of Teleworking in Australia?

At the moment there are many factors driving interest for Teleworking in Australia. Petrol prices keep going up, finding skilled workers in a given location can be challenging and generation Y workers are demanding greater work flexibility. I think the perception of Teleworking right now is shifting from being a nice-to-have to a must-have, and thankfully technology has now come of age to support this need.

Despite this apparent necessity, small business owners should not lose track

of the benefits that Teleworking can provide. To recap, these include increased employee productivity, access to more highly skilled workers, lower operational expenditures and the ability to operate in different locations and even time zones.



**About Margaret Aspin:** Margaret Aspin owns Aspin Online Consulting which provides solutions and training to government, business and education in flexible learning and workforce options. For more information, visit [www.aspinonlineconsulting.com.au](http://www.aspinonlineconsulting.com.au)

**ASPIN**  
"meeting the need for flexible training"

## Some ways your business may benefit from implementing teleworking practices

- ✓ Increased staff productivity – up to 40%.
- ✓ Make your company's recruitment and retention efforts more competitive by providing employees with flexible working arrangements and greater work-life balance.
- ✓ Access to highly skilled workers you may otherwise not reach, due to location (eg, living in a different state) and life commitments (eg, stay-at-home parents).
- ✓ Lower operational costs, due to reduced need for office space.
- ✓ Greater coverage and mobility, enabling your business to operate without geographic boundaries.
- ✓ Positive environmental impact such as reduced traffic congestion.