

The Virtual Office – Telecommuting Basics

In December 2009, *NEDRA News* sat down, virtually, with Helen Brown and Elizabeth Huntley Roma of the Helen Brown Group (HBG) to discuss their perspectives regarding telecommuting.

Helen Brown established HBG in 2002 and works out of its central office in Watertown, MA. HBG employs six full-time researchers in addition to Helen, who is the principal. Elizabeth Huntley Roma joined HBG in 2008 as a Senior Researcher; she works from her home in South Carolina.

NEDRA News: How many years have you owned your own company and what prompted your move to use telecommuters?

Helen Brown: The Helen Brown Group grew slowly from a home office in 2002 when I started to hire freelancers. Originally, we didn't have an office space, which was a cost savings and helped with the bottom line, when we were starting out. It was an easy step to hire telecommuters because in general they had worked with me before and I already knew about the quality of their work. They shared my values and abided by the same ethics – it was a natural progression.

NN: What are the benefits of telecommuting – to the employer and to the employee?

Elizabeth Huntley Roma: This is my first full-time telecommuting experience and overall I really like it. I do not miss commuting, and I like the flexibility and the comfort of it. I can wear what I want, set my work environment the way I like. There are days when I think I would like to be in an office with people. However, the lack of interruptions makes it a lot easier to hunker down and focus on writing profiles. It definitely increases productivity.

HB: We meet as a group to discuss the direction of the company and workload. We are not distracted by the many other meetings that typically occur in an office environment. In addition, allowing people to have the opportunity to have flexibility in their life and work schedule means that I tend to have employees who are more satisfied with their home/work/life balance.

NN: What characteristics do you look for in employees to gauge whether or not they are a good fit for telecommuting?

HB: I look for all the stuff you would look for in excellent prospect researchers: curiosity, intelligence, solid writing abilities. I also look for those who have worked in a managerial capacity where they have been responsible for overseeing other people through a significant process. It shows they can manage time, and if they've managed people, they understand expectation. I also look for people who are great with customer service, those people where you can hear their smiles on the phone.

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NN: How do you address the need for being in the midst of things, and how do you foster those opportunities for collegial conversation, brainstorming and face time?

EHR: You have to be comfortable working independently. I have always preferred to work this way. You need to be able to do that, but still feel part of a team, which is the challenge. Face time and the collegial interaction that goes with it are important. Staff meetings are all-day affairs where we discuss what each of us is working on and strategize. The weekly conference calls also give us a chance to hear each other's voices and share ideas and resources.

I also think IM (*instant messaging, providing online, real-time communication*) is really helpful - particularly when I am stuck on something or can't find what I am looking for. With IM, you also can see everyone who is on-line; it is almost like a physical presence.

HB: Face time is not so important with prospect researchers in regards to doing our job well. That said, we try to meet on a quarterly basis in addition to weekly phone meetings. It's interesting, when someone is not on-line, you can feel their absence from the virtual office. You look to see them in the IM box and it gives a sense that they are physically present. It is not much different than working on different floors where you pick up the phone to touch base.

NN: Do you feel that face time may be a generational thing?

HB: I don't know that it is a generational thing, as we span a couple of generations within our group. It is certainly a more common practice now than it was twenty years ago when resources were physically located in the prospect researcher's office. With what is now available on-line, researchers can do 98% of their work on-line which gives us the ability to work virtually.

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NN: How do you manage your telecommuters so that you feel confident about what is taking place in the virtual work environment?

HB: The most important thing for me is that the work gets done to our quality standards and on deadline. A strong work ethic is really important when you are talking about any telecommuting issue. If you are trying to convince someone that you can do it, the best way to show them is through your metrics.

NN: Can you say something about routine and whether or not it is important?

EHR: My routine varies from day to day which for me is a positive thing. We pretty much work business hours, but if I get up early I can start work earlier which can ease up the evening. It is a very individual thing. For some people, routine is really important, and if you know that about yourself, it is important to work that into your telecommuting schedule.

HB: The only caveat to that is that we have clients who we work with on a half-time basis. The client always comes first.

NN: What advice would you give to people who are considering either working as a telecommuter or hiring telecommuters?

EHR: As a word of caution I would just say that it is important to be aware of the isolation that comes along with telecommuting. Sometimes you have to force yourself to get out of the house, go for a walk, and get some fresh air.

HB: I encourage my employees to volunteer for the Association of Professional Researchers for Advancement and NEDRA so that they can get out and network and contribute to the prospect research community.

NEDRA Calendar—February 2010

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