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### **A Day in the Life of a Remote Coder**

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**Leslie:** The trend toward home-based coding continues and more and more coders are seriously considering whether or not they would prefer working at home.

**Patty:** It's a big decision for a coder and one that I am sure they must evaluate carefully. Telecommuting isn't for everyone. Unless you have actually worked at home for an extended period of time, it is hard to imagine what it's really like.

**Leslie:** Then let's ask a telecommuter that we know. Dee Mandley is a telecommuting coding compliance consultant for Care Communications Inc. Let's give her a call.

**Leslie:** Hi Dee, we would like you to join our dialogue about telecommuting this month. How long have you been telecommuting?

**Dee:** I would be happy to share my experience as a telecommuter. I have been working from home for about six months, and it has really changed my life.

**Patty:** How is your life different?

**Dee:** I am more present in the lives of my children, while at the same time I am still pursuing my professional goals.

**Leslie:** Is that why you chose to work at home, to be more available to your children?

**Dee:** Yes. My children had been in day care 12 hours a day since they were born. Now that they are going to school all day, I wanted to be able to send them off to school in the morning and be at home for them when they returned at the end of the day. By working at home and eliminating my travel time, I can get all of my work done and still have time to be a homemaker. I can throw a load of laundry in and start dinner preparations during my lunch break, so everything for the house doesn't have to be done at the end of the day. I am less exhausted when it is time to help with homework and get the kids ready for bed. I used to feel very stressed when I got home at 6:30 in the evening, just fighting the traffic to get home; rushing to get dinner, do laundry, straighten up and also trying to spend quality time with the kids was wearing me out.

**Patty:** Dee, you are a very social person and I know you enjoy interacting with people. Do you find it lonely working alone for eight hours every day?

**Dee:** Honestly Patty, I don't feel alone at all. I stay connected to my co-workers and clients via the telephone and e-mail. And, I get a great sense of satisfaction from feeling so productive. I have far fewer distractions

working at home than when I was working at the hospital. For social interaction, which I love, I simply get it elsewhere. I have hobbies and other non-work related activities that involve being with people. I am also very involved in regional, state and national level health information management (HIM) associations. In fact, I think I really have more balance in my life than before.

**Leslie:** It can't all be perfect, Dee. Don't you have any problems working at home?

**Dee:** Not problems, but challenges. For example, communication is a little more challenging. I don't have the benefit of body language, the non-verbal cues that we all use to communicate effectively. But I think we learn to compensate by developing more acute listening skills.

Perhaps even more challenging is making sure that out of sight isn't out of mind. Sometimes I think people forget I am here. This is that sense of isolation that is the number one challenge of working from home.

**Patty:** How do you overcome that?

**Dee:** It is important to speak up and reach out to co-workers. I also create routines so people start to expect to hear from me. For example, I send my colleagues the daily stats via e-mail. I gently remind home office staff and clients of the meetings I should be attending via telephone. After a while, people get used to hearing a voice contribute via the telephone and the interaction becomes quite natural. I also meet weekly with my supervisor via the telephone. Sometimes I meet a friend for lunch, and I have set up a daily exercise program. You also have to keep an open mind and be flexible, especially when working with people in four different time zones!

**Leslie:** How do you manage your time?

**Dee:** Again, I think establishing a routine is very important. I have regular working hours. I set my alarm for 6:00 a.m., instead of 5:00 a.m. like I did when I had to drive to work (one hour, one-way). I get ready for work and I sit down at my desk promptly at the start of the workday. The morning is most important for me. I feel more productive in the first four hours at home than I did in an eight-hour day at the office. I am not aggravated from fighting traffic. I am more comfortable, and I am able to concentrate better.

**Patty:** Sometimes coders have to be more flexible about the hours they work because the work may not always be available to them first thing in the morning.

**Dee:** That's true for people who are strictly doing coding. But even then, we have administrative tasks that can be handled in the early part of the day. We also need time for reading professional journals and keeping up with new learning. Coders at home still have some other responsibilities and they can use these to manage their time during workload fluctuations.

**Leslie:** Can you think of any other challenges you would like to share with our readers?

**Dee:** The other thing I found very challenging was becoming more responsible for my computer. I no longer had someone down the hall to come troubleshoot when things weren't working correctly. You have to learn to take care of your own equipment and to be able to converse intelligently with helpdesks. I also had to learn about the Internet, browsers, security technologies and regulations, remote access technology, VPNs and other state-of-the-art telecommunications to be as self-sufficient as possible. And I always keep the helpdesk phone numbers handy. But it is important for anyone contemplating telecommuting to realize that they can't be afraid to learn about trouble-shooting their own technology and to be able to communicate clearly about problems when they need the help of experts.

**Patty:** Any other words of wisdom for your colleagues who are contemplating working at home.

**Dee:** I would only caution people that you cannot work when your children are at home unless you have a child care helper.

They can't be running in and out of your home office. You won't be able to concentrate, which is one of the great benefits of working at home. So this summer when my children are out of school, I will enroll them in a day camp through our city's park and recreation department. They need to understand that Mom still goes to work, even if it's in her home office.

**Leslie:** Based on your comments Dee, it seems important to set boundaries between work and personal life when telecommuting. Having a space dedicated for work, establishing work routines and mastering technology tools seem to be the keys to being a productive telecommuter.

Thanks Dee for sharing "a day in the life of a remote coder" with our readers and us.

*Leslie Ann Fox is president and chief executive officer, Patty Thierry is vice president and chief information officer, and Dee Mandley is a coding compliance consultant of Care Communications Inc., a Chicago-based HIM services company whose newest service is online coding with CAREcoding .com. They invite readers to send their thoughts and opinions on this column to lfox@care-communications.com or to pthierry@care-communications.com.*