

Everyone In This Company Works From Home Every Day

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Rachel Lehman spends her days at her kitchen table in Corte Madera, Calif., except for a few hours in the afternoon. That's when she runs all the life errands you can imagine as a single mother of two. Lehman earns six figures as the executive president of business affairs at a major events company, but she only sits in the same room as the other executives once every few months.

As businesses across the country debate whether to let employees work from home, and how much, Lehman's company has already taken this idea to its ultimate conclusion. [FiveCurrents](http://www.fivecurrents.com/company/) is a completely and truly virtual company. The core executive team is scattered from Atlanta to L.A. to Portland, and there are few complaints.

"'Can we please have an office where I can commute with everyone else, and sit in my car and listen to NPR?' We don't hear that," says Lehman.

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Flex To The Extreme

Last month, Yahoo+ banned telecommuting, citing performance issues. Best Buy [followed suit soon after](http://jobs.aol.com/articles/2013/03/05/best-buy-ends-flexible-work-program/). But Lehman believes that an office can actually hurt productivity, by forcing workers to sit at desks for a set period. FiveCurrents, on the other hand, "lets people work in their sweet zone," says Lehman, who's designed her schedule around her predictable early afternoon slump.

"I do errands in the middle of the day when no one else does them," she explains. "I'm on fire between 9 a.m. and noon, and then 4 p.m. until 2 a.m."

This model makes sense for a company like FiveCurrents, a global production firm. The [London 2012 Olympic Ceremonies](http://www.fivecurrents.com/projects/ceremonies-celebrations/london-2012-olympic-paralympic-ceremonies/)? That was FiveCurrents. [Disneyland's 50th Anniversary](http://www.fivecurrents.com/projects/immersive-experiences/disneyland-50th-anniversary/)? That was FiveCurrents. The [150th Anniversary of Cinco de Mayo](http://www.fivecurrents.com/projects/live-broadcasts/cinco-de-mayo-150th-anniversary-broadcast-special/)? The [launch of the tallest building](http://www.fivecurrents.com/projects/corporate-stories/nakheel-tower-launch/) in the world in Dubai? The 2011 Pan American Games [Opening Ceremony in Guadalajara](http://www.fivecurrents.com/opening-ceremony-of-the-guadalajara-2011-pan-american-games-receives-emmy-award/)? FiveCurrents.

Lehman is going to Moscow and Istanbul this week, and estimates that she's been to 25 or 30 countries in the past year. She says that her boss and FiveCurrents' president Scott Givens has 10 working visas in his passport right now. Since their projects span the globe, it just didn't make sense to have a full-time staff based in one place. Instead, they can pluck the best talent from across continents, and contract them for the specific time and place they need.

For the London Olympic Games, FiveCurrents hired 880 contractors. And they're taking a similar approach to their upcoming event in Russia. "We'll be pulling people from Australia, the U.K., Italy, Greece, all over -- really the best of the best from all over," says Lehman. "Then they go back to freelance."

It's The Future, But Do We Want It?

FiveCurrents is a beacon of the future: completely virtual, completely flexible, completely global. For business, there are clear benefits to this model. You can take your pick from a worldwide talent pool, and rather than paying employees to be on-call full-time, you simply hire a person to complete a task. No costly benefits, no fussy labor laws, no paying a wage for an hour spent on Facebook.

Lehman doubts that FiveCurrents could be growing as fast it is -- doubling its profits every year for the past three years, says Lehman -- if it weren't for its reliance on freelancers.

This may be sci-fi dream-future for corporations, but for the worker, it has a hint of something more dystopian. Flexibility sounds good for all involved, but the flexibility that is spreading through the working world right now is flexibility of a very particular kind.

Significant majorities of employers give their workers flexibility when it comes to when and where they work, and daily time off if something comes up, [according to a 2012 study from the Families and Work Institute](http://familiesandwork.org/site/research/reports/NSE_2012.pdf), and that number is rising fast. But at the same time, fewer employers are offering more extended flexibilities, like career breaks for family responsibilities (52 percent in 2012, compared to 73 percent in 2005) and moving from part-time to full-time and back again (41 percent in 2012, compared to 54 percent in 2005).

In other words, employers are offering more and more flexibility when it helps their workers be more productive, and offering less and less flexibility when it helps their workers take time away from the job.

Flexing Into Trouble

For FiveCurrents, the freelancer model seems to work perfectly. Their contractors, for the most part high-skilled technical producers, likely have little trouble finding other work to fill up the time between FiveCurrents projects. And it gives them a chance to try out the company before possibly moving to full time.

But if all companies were to go that route, the situation for workers [may not be so sunny](http://jobs.aol.com/articles/2012/04/27/how-employers-can-legally-strip-your-job-of-benefits/). Freelancers don't get the labor protections that workers have enjoyed since the New Deal. No health and unemployment insurance or pensions, and certainly no paid vacations or paid maternity leave. Already, [The Freelancers Union](https://www.freelancersunion.org/about/), a New York-based advocacy group for independent contractors, places the number of freelancers at 42 million.

From Lehman's Northern California kitchen, flexibility looks like a glorious thing. But as our companies all inch closer to becoming FiveCurrents, and flexibility continues to be one of the most talked-about topics in the American workplace, it's worth taking a moment to examine exactly what kind of flexibility we're talking about.