

Societal push needed for telework to take off

Speakers say catalyst could be H1N1, fuel prices

By Gina Teel, Calgary Herald October 22, 2009

Telework is far from a new concept, yet the uptake on working remotely isn't quite where its proponents would like it to be.

A catalyst such as a severe outbreak of H1N1 could force the issue, as employers could find themselves relying on telework programs to keep their business running in a time of crisis, said Bob Klay of Klay Information Management Consulting Inc.

The same holds true to maintain business continuity in many situations, be it a reduced workforce due to illness or unforeseen events like the loss of a building or loss of IT, Klay told a sold-out breakfast forum on the future of work on Wednesday.

"You need to be prepared to really protect your business. Individuals are easy to change, relatively speaking. It's the business that has a hard time to change," he said.

Keynote speaker Peter Tertzakian, chief energy economist of ARC Financial Corp. and bestselling author, said he views telework as a part of a broader societal change.

More broadly, it's about a changing society as it relates to technology and energy.

Telework could help change the current North American lifestyle, which has been defined by energy.

It's a model that sees people "driving in to a central core like a herd of cattle first thing in the morning . . . and then doing the same thing at the end of the day when you only interact with five or six people," Tertzakian said.

Societal change is brought about by many reasons. One of them is the high price of gasoline.

Tertzakian said the trigger point is around \$80 to \$85 per barrel of oil, or \$3 per gallon of gasoline.

Earlier this week, oil crossed \$80 for the first time in over a year. On Wednesday, it was \$81.37.

"There's no question that high energy prices are going to be a catalyst, particularly high oil prices, and I believe we're looking at the trigger point right in the face right now," he said.

Telework will also need to be a compelling proposition for corporations before it will be fully adopted, or perhaps even require a marshalling event to encourage more widespread adoption.

Karen Chown, director corporate and community engagement at Calgary Economic Development, talked about the WORKshift initiative underway there, which promotes telework in the Calgary business community.

Telework helps companies compete for talent, as it provides flexibility in where and how they work.

She cited the recent blast of winter-like weather in Calgary that snarled traffic for hours.

"If you consider, if we had more people who were able to work remotely, how much more productive would we all have been that day?" Chown said.

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