

by Donna Obstfeld

I've been busy interviewing this week and although some of the candidates were local, some of them have and would continue to have significant daily commutes.

This got me thinking, why are employees willing to travel so far to work?

Are people commuting further because there are less jobs available, or are people choosing to live further out of London? If they are choosing to live further out, is it because property is cheaper, or is it a lifestyle decision? Is the cost of commuting off-set against cheaper housing outside of London and higher salaries within London?

Whatever the reasons, the reality is that most people no longer live within walking distance of work and this has implications for both the employers and the employees.

What do commuting employees do during their journey? I guess that depends on how they are commuting. If it is by car, the time could be used for thinking, planning and organising. Hands-free technology also means that phone calls can be made and taken. Conference calls with a number of colleagues or with International colleagues who are in a different time zone. The time can be used, but it is important that drivers are safe doing so. Some companies are increasingly worried about employees using phones in the car, even if hands-free. The risk of corporate manslaughter charges being brought against Company Directors if an employee is on a business call and has an accident is increasingly real. More and more of our clients are asking for policies which ban the use of phones while driving both personal and company cars.

So what about the train? Proving a seat is available, employees could make extensive use of a two hour journey in each direction. A great time for catching up on reading - uninterrupted time for journals, legal documents, presentations and other work related documentation. The train journey may also provide peace and quiet for the drafting of documents, checking of emails and planning the day. Care must be taken and due respect given to privacy when working in a public space. Not only have commuters been known to leave laptops, top secret papers and important memos on the train, but they may not know who is sat next to them, who they work for and what value your papers have to them! Phone calls on a train or in a public place may also expose your business to risk. Very often, if the commuting employee is having a conversation down the phone, half the carriage can hear it and while lovers tiffs and stories of last night may be amusing, you don't know who may benefit from the knowledge that company A is closing down and that the MD has been charged with fraud and that 50 employees are going to be laid off. How does the commuter know that one of the 50 employees is not on the train? While working on the train may be an advantage, care should be taken to plan what work will be undertaken and whether it is safe to do so.

For an employer, recruiting someone who lives two hours away may also have implications. It could be an advantage if they are able to work on their journey, but travelling four hours a day may result in exhaustion and lack of social life as early mornings and late evenings take their toll. Living so far away may also result in employees being less flexible about working late. If there are two trains per hour, they may not want to stay back and finish something, missing their train and delaying them even longer. There are children who only see their father at the weekends. He is gone by the time they wake up and they are asleep by the time he comes home. Increasingly, this is not what families want, but many are prepared to accept it while securing jobs closer to home is increasingly difficult to do.

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