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What snow day? Work goes on in the 'virtual office'

By [Nancy Kaffer](#)

Before the snow started to fall last week, Auburn Hills-based **Net-arx Inc.** sent an e-mail blast to its customers.

Titled "SnO.M.G.," the e-mail's first image showed a snowy road, congested with traffic. In a second image, titled "N.B.D.," or "no big deal," a man sits in a home office, video-conferencing with colleagues.

For many companies in metro Detroit, a day of heavy snowfall has become just that -- no big deal.



Last week's 5 to 9 inches of local snowfall didn't quite reach the epic proportions predicted by some, but the anticipation of a blizzard led many companies to offer employees the option of a "virtual workday," enabled by tools like laptops, cell phones, e-mail and Web conferencing.

And local companies say that means they were able to stay up and running with little to no loss in productivity.

At Netarx, which sells network infrastructure products and services, telecommuting on a snow day was a natural fit.

"We are a strong proponent of what we call the 'virtual office,'" said April Wong, Netarx's marketing manager. "Your workplace is more of an event and not a place. Because of the technology tools we put in place and help customers put in place, you can work from anywhere with a VPN (virtual private network), Web conferencing and video conferencing, and it doesn't affect productivity at all."

About 75 percent of the company's 125 employees based in Auburn Hills worked from home Wednesday, Wong said, compared to roughly 10 percent on a normal workday.

More and more, companies that want to attract top talent must offer options like telecommuting in inclement weather, said Mary Corrado, president and CEO of the Southfield-based **American Society of Employers**.

"You have to do this kind of stuff these days, if you want to be an employer of choice," she said. "If you expect your employees to drive in when we're supposed to get all this snow, and you have the technology? You can't be an employer of choice and expect employees to turn up in that kind of weather.

"I think employers are using it to show they are an employee-friendly organization."

And ASE is following the trend, Corrado said. Last week, the 109-year-old organization had a virtual workday for the first time in its history.

"We had a meeting on Tuesday and brainstormed about potential issues that could arise. Because we're in the customer service arena, we wanted to make sure clients had no interruption of service, so we put together an e-mail that said: 'Have your desk phone forwarded to your cell phone, bring your laptops home, make sure you have access to the database, and that's how we'll operate,' " she said. "Why risk the safety of staff driving two hours to the office?"

Anticipating a slow day, Corrado said employees were advised to take home projects to work on and stay in contact by phone and e-mail.

"We had said this is an experiment, and how did it work out? Many people said it was the most productive we have been in a long time, because they didn't have the interruptions they had in the office," she said.

It seems employers' comfort level with employees working from home has increased in recent years, Corrado said.

"I think this is the first time, en masse, companies did this," she said, adding that more sophisticated weather prediction technology likely played a role in the large number of metro Detroit companies that allowed employees to work from home.

"For us, it allows us to really not miss a beat," said Bob Berg, partner at Detroit-based **Berg Muirhead and Associates Inc.**

"Between the Internet and cell phones and all that, we've had a couple of conference calls that were supposed to take place that went ahead as usual. Five, or particularly 10 years ago, we wouldn't have been able to do that."

Berg recalls the heavy snowstorm of 1978, when he was working for former Gov. Bill Milliken. "I had a National Guard vehicle pick me up at the house so I could get to work," he said. "That night, we had an armored personnel carrier that had picked him up that day and taken him to the capital. There was a big diesel armored personnel carrier coming down my street in Lansing."

Berg said his firm offered its employees the option of working from home and taking a compensation day at a later date, or taking Wednesday as a paid holiday.

All seven employees, he said, worked Wednesday.

For Tom Nixon, co-founder of Bingham Farms-based **Identity Marketing & Public Relations**, it's a matter of common sense to let employees work from home in inclement weather: "If it took you three hours to get in and two to get home, to my mind, that's five hours of lost productivity," he said. "If you had been home and turned on the computer, you would have worked for those five hours."

Kenneth Dalto, president of the Farmington Hills-based turnaround and business consulting firm **Kenneth J. Dalto Associates Inc.**, estimates that with less than one-third of his 14-member staff working in the office Wednesday, the team was at about 75 percent of its normal productivity "because so much of our work is communication and presentation and analysis. And that's a huge increase over years ago," he said. "A snow day isn't really an off day anymore."

The Ann Arbor offices of **Brinks Hofer Gilson and Lione** and **Rader Fishman & Grauer PLLC** in Bloomfield Hills both were closed Wednesday because of the weather. But both law firms said more than half their employees were telecommuting from home or elsewhere Wednesday.

"All of our attorneys work remotely at home, while traveling and, regrettably, while on vacation," said Steve Oberholtzer, managing partner of Brinks Hofer's Ann Arbor office. But "our non-management support staff is more dependent on working at our office building -- which is related to our ... interpretation of labor laws, not due to technology limitations."

While regular telecommuting works for some companies, many say it's not likely to become the norm.

Most of Auburn Hills-based **Plex Systems Inc.**'s 167 employees worked from home Wednesday at the urging of the company's CEO, Mark Symonds, said Taya Johnston, Plex Systems' director of human resources.

Plex makes operations management software for manufacturers.

Johnston said because employees are able to use the company's network remotely, business continued as usual last week. While there are benefits from employee teams working together in the office, they are offered the option of working from home on other occasions, such as when a child is sick.

"In my personal opinion, you could do it one day here and there, but over time there is something that's lost by not having people together and collaborating," Nixon said. "I wouldn't say it's the way of the future, but for a day here and there, it makes sense."

Crain's reporter Chad Halcom contributed to this story.

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