

Out of office

Level: Intermediate upwards

Timing: Approx. 90 minutes

Material needed: One copy of the student worksheets and Vocabulary record per student

Group size: Any

Overview

This lesson plan, which is based around an article first published in *Business Spotlight* Issue 1/2012, is suitable for both pre-experience and in-work students and learners of Business English. In this language-rich article, the author talks about different models of working and how more employees are now working away from the office, known as *teleworking*. The article covers the advantages and disadvantages of teleworking, the security risks involved for a company, how teleworking has affected management techniques and discusses which characteristics a job should have in order for it to be effectively carried out remotely.

The tasks in the student worksheets encourage the students to learn and use new business vocabulary and functional language and also to develop and practise skills that could be useful in business situations.

The teacher's notes provide suggestions for teaching and learning strategies, as well as ideas on how to present the tasks in the classroom, any necessary answer keys and extension tasks (for in class or as homework).

Warmer

The warmer tasks are intended to introduce the topic, get the students talking and to provide you with an idea of how much pre-knowledge the students have on the topic. You could write the students' answers to these on the board.

Key words and expressions

Looking at these key words and expressions prior to reading will help introduce the students to the article. Getting them to guess how the language might be used in the article will encourage them to think about the content and the words. Finding the words and expressions in context (i.e. within the article in a sentence) will help the students to understand HOW they are used. The words and expressions are numbered in the order that they appear in the article.

Key:

1. local authorities; 2. SMEs; 3. employee relations;
4. reduced commutes; 5. privilege; 6. staff retention;
7. compulsory maternity leave; 8. job-search portal;
9. presence-based systems; 10. management by objectives;
11. remote access; 12. sensitive data; 13. encrypted;
14. hot desk

Percentage questions

This task practises the students' ability to write clear, concise questions. It requires the students to look closely at the content of the article and to understand it enough to write questions which can be asked to get the given answers.

Key:

Q2: *What percentage of employees work from home at least one day per week in the UK?* A: 7.4%

Q3: *What percentage of SMEs in the UK have noticed improvements in employee relations due to teleworking?* A: 70%

Q4: *According to studies, how much more productive are people who telework?* A: 20-30%

Q5: *In the UK, what percentage of companies has noticed improvements in staff retention due to teleworking?* A: 60%

Q6: *In the UK, how many women start work again immediately after their compulsory maternity leave?* A: 47%

Q7: *What level of pay reduction would IT jobseekers be willing to accept in exchange for the privilege of full-time telework?* A: 10%

Q8: *What percentage of the job ads on Dice mention the option of teleworking?* A: 1%

Q9: *What percentage of BT's workforce in Germany spend at least 60% of their working time outside of the office?* A: 17%

Idiomatic phrases

The students should look in the article and, with the help of the paragraph numbers, find idiomatic phrases that are similar to the meanings provided.

Key:

1. to go the extra mile (para 3); 2. hesitant to embrace something (para 5); 3. in the long run (para 4); 4. cracking down the walls (para 8); 5. a hunger for something (para 9)

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Teaching and learning strategy: Idiomatic phrases

Idiomatic phrases such as those highlighted in task 4 are extremely common in English. Some of them are easy to understand the meaning of, others are less so.

As students (and teachers) often like and appreciate the playful, descriptive and depictive language of idioms, there is a danger of them not only being over-taught, but also overused – or used incorrectly by the student. Therefore, the best way of teaching or introducing idiomatic language is in context, e.g. by highlighting them when they are used in an article such as this one.

After you have pointed them out, or told the students to find them (as in task 4), you could then ask the students to use the idiomatic language in personalized sentences. Get the students to compare and share their sentences and check that they have used the idiomatic expressions correctly before continuing.

- The second set of questions asks them to think about the article and their own opinions about it.

Vocabulary record

Here, students should be encouraged to record all the new and useful vocabulary they have learned during the lesson, not only in the form presented in the article but also in related forms.

Related topics on onestopenglish

For follow-up lessons on the same or related topics, go to the following lesson plans on onestopenglish:

Business Spotlight: The case against self-employment

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/the-case-against-self-employment/>

You may also find topical and relevant *Guardian* news lessons here on onestopenglish:

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/skills/news-lessons/>

Understanding the article

The students should first complete the definitions of the three models of homeworking offered by a major corporation, then discuss which they think sounds most attractive.

Key:

1. Occasional homeworkers ... spend up to two days a week working remotely, often from hotels and airports.
2. Home-base workers ... spend about half their time working from home and often have to hot-desk when they're in the office.
3. Permanent homeworkers ... spend 60% of their time out of the office.

Discussion

These questions personalize the topic of teleworking and being a homeworker, and get the students to engage more closely with the article and its contents.

- The first question requires them to read the end of the article again and discuss its contents with reference to their own work.

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1 Warmer

Think of five jobs that can be done from a home office and five jobs that can't be done from a home office.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of working from home?

2 Key words and expressions

Match these key words and expressions from the article with their definitions. Try to predict why they appear in the article. Then scan the article to find and read them in context.

compulsory maternity leave	employee relations	encrypted	hot desk
job-search portal	local authorities	management by objectives	
presence-based systems	privilege	reduced commutes	
remote access	sensitive data	SMEs	staff retention

1. organizations in a particular area or city of the UK that are responsible for providing public services

2. small- to medium-sized enterprises _____
3. the way staff feel about each other _____
4. shorter travelling distances to work _____
5. a special benefit _____
6. the ability of an organization to keep its employees and not lose them to other companies

7. the time you have to take off work because you are pregnant or have just had a baby

8. a website that leads you to other websites where you can look for work

9. a method of working in which the employees need to be physically present in the office or organization

10. a process of defining targets so that management and employees agree and understand what they need to do in the organization _____
11. communication with a work data-system from a location outside of the company

12. information that needs to be kept secret _____
13. put into code so that no one else can read it _____
14. a workspace in an office that is shared and available for use when needed

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Out of office

by Barbara Hiller

Don't panic! Despite abandoned desks and deserted offices, work is still done because 'teleworking' is the motto. Barbara Hiller explains which requirements are necessary for this kind of work and what its advantages and disadvantages are.

1 One morning, you arrive at work and you notice something is different. There's no smell of coffee in the air, and the place seems strangely ... quiet. You wander along the hall, looking left and right. All the offices are empty. Where is everyone? A scenario like this used to send management into fits of swearing and panic. Nowadays, it's rather a reason to reduce office space; if people aren't in, it doesn't mean they aren't working. They might be doing it from home or in some other location – in other words, teleworking.

2 Today, there are more teleworkers than ever before. In the US, the number of employees who occasionally telework has increased by 74% since 2005, according to a WorldatWork survey. In the UK, the Labour Force Survey finds that 2.2 million, or roughly 7.4% of employees, work from home at least one day per week. British Telecommunications (BT) supports companies in their teleworking efforts. With the continuing trend, David Dunbar, head of BT Flexible Working Services, is a busy man. "We've recently worked with local authorities a lot, including police forces and commercial companies in the transport and finance sectors," he said. BT itself also has a strong culture of teleworking: around two thirds of staff telework at least on an occasional basis. Dunbar has been doing so since the 1980s, and he currently manages 15 teleworkers.

3 One of the advantages of letting employees telework is that savings on office space can be enormous, especially in big cities such as London. But 70% of SMEs in the UK have also noticed improvements in employee relations as a result of teleworking. Advantages for employees include greater flexibility in working hours, savings in time, money and stress due to reduced commutes, and a better work-life balance. As a result, employees tend to see teleworking as a privilege and are willing to go the extra mile in their work. "Studies say people who telework are 20 to 30% more productive, but it's hard to prove," says Boris Kaapke, PR manager at BT Germany. "At BT, we definitely see that the option to telework gives employees extra motivation."

4 Other advantages for employers are that teleworking helps people get back to work more quickly after an accident and makes working life easier for disabled employees. In the UK, 60% of companies have noticed telework-related improvement in staff retention, and BT has a particularly telling statistic on new mothers: over 95% of them start work at BT again right after their compulsory maternity leave, compared to 47% in Britain in general.

5 According to a survey by Dice, a job-search portal for technology professionals in the US, more than a third of IT jobseekers find teleworking so attractive that they would accept a 10% pay cut in exchange for the privilege of full-time telework. But many managers are still hesitant to embrace the trend: only about 500 of the job advertisements on Dice, or fewer than 1%, mention the option of teleworking.

6 The thing that seems to frighten managers most about teleworking is loss of control over the workers. "In some cases, managers think: 'How am I going to know staff are working if I can't see them?'" Shirley Borrett, director of the UK's Telework Association, told the BBC. In a workplace where an employee's jacket over the back of a chair does not mean anything anymore, managers are forced to exchange presence-based systems for management by objectives. "This can be difficult in the beginning," Dunbar says. "But in the long run, it's a better system. You end up setting strong objectives, and you manage more proactively and in a more structured way." Teamwork can be supported by regular conference calls, where all team members are updated and problems



Image: Getty

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are discussed. It's also essential to get the team together physically once in a while – and if business has been taken care of over the phone, this can be valuable time for the team to spend socializing. "This leads to much stronger teams in the end," Dunbar says.

7 Another major concern is security issues surrounding remote access to company systems and storage of sensitive data on portable computers. At BT, employees' hard drives and communication between their computers and the company server are encrypted. In addition to a username and password, login requires employees to type a security code into a small security token. The token then shows a number that is valid for one login only, just like a TAN is valid for one transaction in online banking. "So, even if someone saw you type in your password and code and then stole your computer, they wouldn't be able to get at any data from the BT network," Kaapke explains. As a further safety precaution, employees are required to lock their computers to their desks at home – and sensitive printouts must be locked away after use.

8 How telework is organized can vary from company to company. BT employees in Germany have a choice between three models. Occasional homeworkers spend up to two days a week working remotely, often from locations like hotels and airports. Home-base workers spend roughly half of their time working from where they live, and they usually don't have their own desk in the office any more. "We have shared desks, so-called 'hot desks', reserved for them so they have a place to work at the office whenever they want to," Kaapke says. The third group is made up of permanent homeworkers, who spend 60% of their working time out of the office. They make up an astonishing 17% of BT's workforce in Germany. Apart from saving on space, BT's hot-desk system also means that employees are constantly meeting others from different departments. "It's a great way of building networks, while cracking down the walls between different functions in the company," Dunbar says.

9 As teleworking spreads, you would perhaps expect some countries and cultures to be more hesitant than others. Not so, says Dunbar: "What I've found is that, across Europe, there's a hunger for flexible working that bypasses all cultural stereotypes."

Could you be a teleworker?

Check your job against these characteristics.

Jobs suitable for teleworking involve a lot of:

- thinking and writing, such as data analysis, checking cases and writing regulations, decisions or reports;
- telephone-intensive tasks, such as organizing a conference, obtaining information and contacting customers;
- computer-oriented tasks, such as programming, data entry and word processing.

Jobs not suitable for teleworking require:

- the employee's physical presence on the job at all times;
- extensive face-to-face contact with supervisors, other employees, clients or the public;
- access to material that cannot be moved from the main office;
- security issues that prevent the work from being done at an alternative worksite.

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3 Percentage questions

Write questions relating to the information in the article that you would need to ask to get the answers below.

e.g.

Q1: *By what percentage has the number of employees who occasionally telework increased in the US?* **A: 74%**

Q2: _____ **A: 7.4%**

Q3: _____ **A: 70%**

Q4: _____ **A: 20-30%**

Q5: _____ **A: 60%**

Q6: _____ **A: 47%**

Q7: _____ **A: 10%**

Q8: _____ **A: 1%**

Q9: _____ **A: 17%**

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4 Idiomatic phrases

Look back at the article to find idiomatic phrases that mean:

1. to do more than is expected or required of you (para 3) _____
2. not sure whether to take on or accept something (para 5) _____
3. in the (distant) future (para 6) _____
4. to remove barriers (para 8) _____
5. a desire, wish or need for something (para 9) _____

Use the idiomatic phrases in example sentences of your own.

5 Understanding the article

In paragraph 8, we read about the three models of homeworking that BT Germany offers its employees. Complete the descriptions and decide which (if any) you personally think sounds most attractive?

1. OCCASIONAL HOMEWORKERS ...

2. HOME-BASE WORKERS ...

3. PERMANENT HOMEWORKERS ...

6 Discussion

Discuss the following points and questions in small groups.

- Read the *Could you be a teleworker?* section at the end of the article again. Talk about your job / profession and how likely it is that you will ever be a teleworker.
- What information in the article ...
 - ... did you already know?
 - ... surprised you?
 - ... do you find hard to believe?
 - ... would you like to find out more about?

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Vocabulary record: Out of office

verb	noun	adjective (+ opposite)	adverb (+ opposite)
appreciate			
	reduction		
		productive	
			stressfully

Vocabulary record

