The virtual workplace is here. In a few years, most global workers will travel and commute less but work just as much — and more effectively. This concept represents a seismic shift in working habits. If workers don’t have to be in the office to get work done or travel to meetings to participate, then why should they have to? Everything needed to create a virtual work environment is readily available, including Web-based remote access and collaboration technologies, best practice resources and a desire on the part of employees to have more flexible work arrangements.

There are many benefits to organizations and employees for instituting virtual-work programs. These programs can significantly increase employee satisfaction and quality of life by having more flexible options in where and when they work. Businesses can innovate and change their business model, with reduced infrastructure costs and the ability to hire the best talent regardless of location. In addition, virtual work environments contribute to environmental protection by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and fuel consumption from commuting.

Whether referred to as telecommuting, teleworking, Web commuting or even workshifting, the concept is steadily growing in popularity. Smart businesses interested in implementing a program have a wealth of resources, and the ones that go about it the right way will see enormous benefits. Here are 5 simple steps designed to help businesses get started in making the shift to virtual working for some of all of their employees.

1. **Determine the specific needs of your organization.** It is critical to factor how the business benefits that can accrue from a virtual work environment will impact your organization’s strategy, e.g. the ability to hire regardless of location; real-estate facilities impacts; business-travel expense reductions, etc. And while giving employees the opportunity to work remotely may seem to make sense, it’s important to evaluate their thoughts and opinions to ensure a win-win situation before making any changes.
   - An informal survey can reveal concerns and issues, as well as the level of interest among workers.
   - Focus groups can go in-depth to explore benefits and drawbacks.

Another consideration is which job roles are suitable for remote work and which are not. For example, knowledge workers, call center reps and sales teams are typically well-suited to working remotely, while manufacturing, R&D and retail employees are usually required to work at designated locations.
To identify possible business benefits, you should look at current and future needs for:

- Talent that may not be available locally
- Staff increases beyond the capacity of existing facilities
- Geographic expansion requirements
- Enhanced customer relationships in dispersed markets
- Facilities cost reduction

2. Go online to identify best practices for managing a virtual workplace. Many industry experts, as well as organizations that have adopted remote working, offer tips and advice on the best way to succeed. Here is a sampling of information resources:

   - Human resources
     - HRWorld article at http://www.hrworld.com/features/telecommuting-guidelines
     - WorldAtWork, a global HR organization, at http://www.workingfromanywhere.org/about.html
   - Government
     - Telework Exchange (a public-private partnership) at www.teleworkexchange.com
     - www.telework.gov
   - Nonprofit organizations
     - American Telecommuting Association at www.yourata.com
   - Consultants
     - Future of Work at www.thefutureofwork.net
     - Midwest Institute for Telecommuting Education (MITE) at www.mite.org
     - Pivotal Insight (government) at www.pivotal-insight.com
     - Telework Coalition at www.telcoa.org
3. Evaluate core technologies best suited to enabling employees to remain productive. Using the best technologies is critical to effective remote work. Relying only on email and phone can limit productivity and inhibit interaction. Currently, there are many low-cost, simple-to-use technologies that offer far greater functionality. For example, Web conferencing tools make it easy to hold online meetings at which remote participants can view and collaborate on documents, demos and other materials in real time. Other solutions ideal for virtual working include:

- Secure, remote access over the Web to the employee’s company computer
- Remote technical support to resolve employee computer issues quickly
- Webinar solutions to conduct staff training or hold large corporate meetings
- Smartphones such as BlackBerry handhelds and other devices
- High-quality and affordable audio conferencing services

4. Set policies and guidelines for managing your virtual workforce. The virtual workplace, like any other work environment, requires guidelines and oversight to prevent abuses and protect both the company and the employee. Making this shift represents a new way – a Web-enabled way – of approaching business operations, and it calls for a set of terms and conditions to be outlined between employees and their managers. Policies should cover the following topics:

- Eligibility to participate: consider job role, length of service, performance history, etc.
- Home office setup and security, including equipment, Internet access and phone service
- Work schedule, including how many days/week will be spent working remotely
- Managerial oversight and evaluation
- Reimbursement for expenses
5. Set benchmarks and measure effectiveness. A formal evaluation at the end of a given time period – six months or a year – is important to identify any issues, make adjustments and show senior management how the program is benefiting both the company and the participants. Be prepared to evaluate the impact of your virtual workplace — a meaningful comparison requires benchmarks at the beginning of the program against which improvements can be measured. Criteria may include:

- Current costs of overhead, equipment, power and travel vs. subsequent savings
- Productivity (such as number of customer sales calls per month) before and after
- Recruitment and retention statistics before and after
- Employee satisfaction and morale as measured by initial and follow-up surveys
- Growth rate in revenue, sales, markets and geographies

By following these steps to assess, implement, oversee and measure your program, you can optimize the benefits of remote work for your organization and your employees.

The ‘5 Simple Steps to a Virtual Workplace Program’ is part of larger report on workplace trends issued by Citrix Online, a division of Citrix Systems, Inc. (NASDAQ: CTXS). The report offers a unique snapshot of the evolving trend to the location independent workplace. Titled “Worldwide Workplace: The Web Commuting Imperative,” the document presents a multi-dimensional snapshot of how this evolving trend is projected to change the ways in which people live and work. It includes the results of a quantitative survey conducted by the polling company™, inc. in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia. Context and commentary are provided by members of the Worldwide Workplace Council, an elite group of visionaries and advocates brought together from a wide range of areas affected by the Web-enabled workplace. For more information and to download a copy of the complete report, visit www.workshifting.com