

MDUs Are the New Office Buildings

Technology enables workers to telecommute and operate home-based businesses. Accommodating these workers is yet one more reason for owners of multiple-dwelling-unit (MDU) properties to provide robust broadband service.

By Michael Slovin / *XFINITY Communities*

The nature of work has changed dramatically in the last 10 years. More workers are telecommuting than ever before, and there is an increasingly large freelance and independent contractor workforce. Though many of these employees occupy America's coffee shops, the majority of them work at home. Increasingly, apartment buildings and high-rises are the new office parks.

As technology advances and the attitudes of employers change, the number of telecommuting workers has risen dramatically. A 2015 Gallup survey found that 37 percent of U.S. workers reported having telecommuted, up from 9 percent in 1995. The study also showed that telecommuting is more common among white-collar workers and high-wage earners and, more important, that most believe telecommuters are at least as productive as in-office workers.

In addition to the many traditional workers who perform some or all tasks at home, there is a growing labor market of freelancers and independent contractors who work wherever they choose. In 2015, the Bureau of Labor

Statistics reported that more than 53 million U.S. workers earned income outside of a traditional 9-to-5 job, and a growing number of them chose to freelance full time. One study commissioned by business software firm Intuit suggested that contingent workers could exceed 40 percent of the U.S. workforce by 2020. In all these reports, the trend line is clearly moving in the same direction.

A number of developments drive this phenomenon. Many white-collar workers conduct their entire workdays in front of computers, interfacing with co-workers mainly through email and other electronic means of communication. The world in which they work is increasingly global, and connecting virtually with internationally distributed co-workers, vendors and customers is becoming standard. Additionally, there are online platforms for professionals of all kinds to find short-term, on-demand work – an Uber for everything.

The root cause of this disruption in the labor market is, of course, technology. Employees increasingly experience work through software, either because they use business productivity tools such as email or unified communications or because software is central to the very nature of their work – as in web design, for example.

When workers are dispersed, companies are challenged to provide and manage technology services for them, and employees themselves are challenged to find adequate network infrastructure. Connecting to a virtual private network to access work databases is far more

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demanding than loading a news website or streaming music, so it is crucial that a connection is available and maintained.

HIGH-SPEED INTERNET AND MULTIFAMILY RESIDENTS

In recent years, as national average rents began to normalize, property managers focused on offering new amenities to residents. Several studies of the multifamily industry show that high-speed internet is one of the top amenities that residents favor, often ahead of such traditional amenities as dishwashers and washing machines. High-speed internet has broad appeal across demographic groups as people become dependent on technology for everything from shopping to entertainment to control of heating and lighting.

Residents increasingly demand high-speed connectivity to support their tech-focused lifestyles, creating unique challenges for property managers. Providing the network infrastructure to support all the streaming video, smart home technology and web surfing at a large property is a major challenge. But telecommuters and freelancers depend on the internet for more than just entertainment.

Telecommuters are especially sensitive to questions of productivity, something that spotty network access can damage. Since the telecommuting trend took off, there has been much discussion about whether its effect on productivity is positive or negative. Gallup found that 58 percent of Americans believed telecommuters were as productive as office workers, up from 47 percent in 1995, but roughly one in five still held the opposite view, and many more were ambivalent.

The clear overlap between the growing demand for high-speed connectivity and the increase in remote work requires property managers to think strategically about network infrastructure. Though a number of trends contribute to the need for faster internet speeds, remote work is one of the most urgent, given that it is directly

tied to resident income. A property that has multiple remote workers can't afford consistently slow connections, outages or other network issues without facing a mutiny from frustrated residents.

PREPARING FOR REMOTE WORKERS

Multifamily property owners do have options and ways to prepare for this and other trends. Network infrastructure providers nationwide have enhanced their service offerings specifically for high-speed internet. Fiber-to-the-building and fiber-to-the-unit deployments are increasingly common, and a few providers are capable of delivering true gigabit speeds, which will provide more than enough bandwidth to meet current requirements. Multifamily owners can attract new residents, including white-collar workers and millennials, who increasingly do at least some work from home, by staying ahead of the curve on network infrastructure.

As a next step, property managers need to explore the options in their region and identify which providers can deliver internet and Wi-Fi services that can scale up to the gigabit speeds they will ultimately require. Nearly every technical innovation and lifestyle trend involves the use of more bandwidth, from smart homes to working from home, and the need for more network resources will add up quickly. It is fiscally prudent to invest in network infrastructure for new properties and avoid having to retrofit under less favorable terms in the future.

Whether residents are using videoconferencing to lead meetings or simply sitting on the couch streaming movies, their demand for high-speed internet is only increasing. Property managers need to take note before they are left behind. ❖

Michael Slovin is the vice president of XFINITY Communities, Comcast's business unit focused on bringing XFINITY services to the multifamily industry. Contact him at xfinity_communities@comcast.com

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