

IBM Office Works Well at Home

By [Yelena Gorelova](#)

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A nascent plan at IBM Russia that allows employees to work at home one day a week has improved performance, the results suggest, as well as improved self-motivation and devotion to the job in off-hours.

The IBM branch, which operates out of a skyscraper in business center Moskva-City, switched to the new schedule in November. All workers — from programmers to executives — got the right to work at home one day per week. IBM's head office in the United States has used a flexible schedule for 10 years. But the same wasn't true for the Russian branch until a mass transit breakdown surrounding Moskva-City forced the branch to seek out the experience. Many employees were spending three to four hours every day to get to the office.

The four-day workweek was permitted only for those who had been on staff for longer than half a year. The rules of the game were explained outright: Those who chose to work at home had to stay in constant contact, said Valentin Timakov, deputy general director of human resources.

IBM's own instant-messaging and communications program, Lotus Sametime, lets management supervise subordinates working remotely.

Productivity in the information-technology sector depends 70 percent on self-motivation, Timakov said. When employees got to take a break from sitting in traffic, their readiness to meet the company's interests increased noticeably.

In one example, they became more eager to work during off-hours, he said. Often employees need to call or message colleagues who are in different time zones. Many used to be unhappy about a business call at 7 a.m. or 10 p.m., but now they do it more willingly.

It appears that the hope of IBM's management, for workers to keep up their level of responsibility, was realized. Six months after introducing the flex schedule, the company surveyed employees at its Russian office and foreign colleagues who were working with them. It turned out that for them all three performance indicators improved: quality of work, efficiency and motivation, IBM said.

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