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Career girls who don't go out to work

Emma Morley talks to five women who have joined the growing numbers working from home

When Donna Lee started working from home 14 years ago she was one of a minority. But now Donna, along with four other travel counsellors in north Cumbria, is among 3.1 million people who currently work from home.

National Work from Home Day takes place tomorrow as part of Work Wise Week, to promote smarter working practices such as flexible, remote and mobile working, and working from home.

The five women share many years' experience in the travel industry and work as part of the Travel Counsellors organisation, working independently from home arranging flights, hotels, honeymoons and cruises.

Donna, from Carlisle, spotted an advert in a travel newspaper for people to work from home and thought it would fit in with her lifestyle.

She said: "It sounded perfect. I had three young children and needed to be available for the family.

"I could take the children to school and if one of them was poorly I didn't have to ask for time off work.

"I loved being part of their lives and had the best of both worlds."

Donna, 49, has worked in the travel industry for more than 30 years. When she started working for Travel Counsellors the company only had 30 travel counsellors. Now, with advances in technology, there are travel counsellors throughout the world.

She said: "It was daunting to start with because I was setting up a business as well as starting a new working routine and I was concerned

about where the business was going to come from.

"I sat by the phone for a couple of years and worked seven days a week but then reduced this to five days.

"At the start I had a laptop and the head office would tap into my computer system in the evening to get the work I had done during the day. This is now instant."

Donna now works from 8am to 6pm and attends a business networking meeting on a Tuesday or Friday at 6.45am at the Crown and Mitre in Carlisle.

She said: "I usually get up at 6am and do any housework that needs doing.

"I am not wasting time travelling to work.

"I make sure that 6pm is my cut off point though.

"The long hours are a disadvantage but I want my business to be successful and this is the best motivation."

Webcams and on-line message boards have been set up by Travel Counsellors and every Wednesday the head office in Bolton broadcasts an update for the travel counsellors to watch on their computers, bringing them up to date on new offers and travel industry news.

"This helps you feel part of the company and in touch with people," said Donna. "If a travel company goes bust then they keep us informed.

"When XL went under we got wind of it the day before and got up early to contact customers who were affected. We had rebooked them on other holidays by 9am.

"If I was working in an office I would just be starting work at 9am."

Donna does go out to see some clients although much of her work is done on the

phone and email.

For travel counsellor Sue Fleet, from Keswick, working as a from home allows her to continue her career while looking after her 23-month old son George.

"If clients can't speak during the day because they are at work then I can work evenings or weekends.

"I can take George to nursery and pick him up which I wouldn't be able to do if I had to go out to work in an office - I would have to rely on other people.

"I work when George is in nursery."

Sue had been working as a manager of an independent travel agency in Carlisle but decided to set up her business from home in April 2008.

The travel counsellors can work as many hours as they want at any time and Jean Nixon, from Carlisle, prefers to work in the evenings.

She said: "It can be easier to get hold of clients then although my computer is switched on from when I wake up to when I go to bed.

"Working from home is not for everybody, you do have to be focussed. I cleared out my dining room and have made it into my office."

Gillian Steele, from Wigton, joined Travel Counsellors in June last year.

"The main advantage is that you can be fully flexible with your working week," said Gillian, who has been working in the travel industry since 1983. "My husband sometimes works at weekends so I can tailor my hours so I work at the same time.

"Isolation is the only disadvantage. I do get out and about but you have to

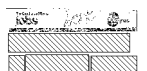
make the effort to see people.

"My life used to revolve around my work but now my work revolves around my life."

While former Workington Going Places manager Linda Wilkinson usually works from 9am to 6pm, working from home allows her to be flexible and work at any time if there is an urgent matter that she needs to deal with.

"I work more hours than I should," she said. "I do take a break to pick up my grandchildren from school though.

"It's nice to work in peace and quiet and I get a lot of job satisfaction."



Savings on travel, food and clothes

- More than half of employees are working from home more often since the financial crisis began, according to new research from BT Business and Remote Employment.
- The research showed that remote working is helping staff stay out of the red, with 60 per cent claiming they are better off because of the flexibility.
- About half of respondents believe they save £10 to £20 per day on travel by working from home, with additional savings on lunch and refreshments.
- Most said that home working eliminates the costs of having to look the part for the office – with 31 per cent reckon they save around £250 per year by not buying work clothes.



Flexitimers: Travel Counsellors, back, from left, Jean Nixon from Carlisle, Linda Wilkinson from Workington and Donna Lee from Carlisle. Front, Sue Fleet from Keswick and, right, Gillian Steele from Wigton