

## ***JCSA Networking Parents***

Conference Call • March 15, 2005

**Topic:** The Advantages and Disadvantages of Tele-Commuting: A Discussion with an Employer and Employee with Jonathan Woocher and Amy Z. Amiel

**★Bio for Jonathan Woocher, Executive Director of JESNA:**

Prior to assuming his position at JESNA in 1986, Dr. Woocher was Associate Professor in the Benjamin S. Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service at Brandeis University. Dr. Woocher has a Ph.D. from Temple University in Religious Studies and a B.A. from Yale, summa cum laude, in Political Science. He is the author of the book *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews*, and has written extensively on a wide range of Jewish communal and educational issues. Dr. Woocher has made presentations and conducted workshops at numerous national and international conferences and in communities throughout the continent.

**★Bio for Amy Z. Amiel, Director of Project Development for JESNA:**

Amy Z. Amiel manages special projects for the Office of the Executive involving the intersection of innovation in Jewish education and philanthropy. Some of Amy's accomplishments include serving as the founding director of Bikkurim: An Incubator for New Jewish Ideas and The Grinspoon Steinhart Awards for Excellence in Jewish Education. Amy completed her MA in Organizational Psychology at Columbia University where she was the recipient of a Wexner Graduate Fellowship, and her BA at Barnard College.

**★Presentation, Questions & Answers:**

**Question to Jonathan Woocher (JW): What is JESNA? How did you come to embrace telecommuting as an option for some of your employees? What other family-friendly policies does JESNA have?**

**JW:** JESNA is a national organization that strives to deliver a system of excellent Jewish education through people (recruiting the best Jewish educators), best practices (models of success in Jewish education), and innovative solutions (new models of Jewish education). JESNA has 30 employees, more than half are part-time. The main office is in NY, with a smaller office in Berkeley, CA and individual offices/homes in Maryland, Cleveland and New Jersey.

JESNA engages staff in a variety of conditions. We came to embrace telecommuting because we realized it was the best way to ensure that we could get and keep the best people for our office and take advantage of their talent. Regarding other family-friendly policies, we have recently upgraded our parental leave to 1 month paid leave (previously just 3 months unpaid leave). We try to be accommodating with emergencies and crises and flexible work hours. Why? Because it is important to have the most talented people and create the framework that will allow you to keep them. Also, I assume that professionals are self-governing. I was, in my previous academic setting, and I didn't see why it wouldn't work in an agency setting.

**Question to Amy Z. Amiel (AA): What made you start to telecommute? How did you bring it up to your supervisor? How exactly do you do it, and how is it working for you? Is it what you expected it to be?**

**AA:** It was my supervisor's idea. My husband relocated for his job 3 months after I started working for JESNA. I went in to tell Jon that I was going to have to leave and he suggested that I move and then find office space to work from, but then I couldn't find any so I stayed and worked from home. For 3 ½ years I worked out of a corner of my bedroom in our apartment – not the best arrangement – but now we have a house and designed an office in the basement.

I don't have the most traditional day. Most days I work from 7:45am to 3pm, some days longer, and I work many evenings and weekends. It gives me the flexibility to do what's important to me, for example, pick up my kindergarten kid from school. I am able to be there for my kids, but I should add that I have full-time childcare. I go to NY 2x per month, some months less often, and some months more often. I don't enjoy the thought of going, but once I am there, I enjoy being with my colleagues.

**Question to both JW and AA: What is the impact of telecommuting on office dynamics?**

**JW:** It makes it harder for both to feel the day-to-day connection that comes from being in the same physical space. There is also a high percentage of self-starting staff and they can become self-contained. We try to structure it so that the telecommuting staff can participate through regular visits to the office and telephone calls.

The second major issue is that sometimes there are questions about equity and fairness. It can build up resentment about why some and not others. We have tried to develop specific policies, for example, what is JESNA responsible for regarding home costs, office equipment, internet connections, etc. We have evolved over time to have more consistent policies.

**AA:** Knowing the culture of the agency, for example, not knowing new staff members. When I was in the NY office I set up specific times to meet with new staff members. I need to work hard to overcome a sense of "who are you?" and "what do you really do?"

**Question to both JW and AA: Why do you think that other Jewish agencies have not initiated family-friendly work policies? What can we do about it?**

**JW:** It is easier for JESNA because we do not require staff be on the front lines as day-to-day service providers as with, for example, day school teachers. Also, people don't think about it. Most organizations are very conservative in their cultures. Things will not change by themselves. There is also some resistance in some quarters because it might complicate matters, so they are not prepared to do this. But it will inevitably make its way to the Jewish world because the price of not having the best people is too high.

**AA:** I agree with Jon's first point regarding direct service agencies. My husband is a Hillel director and feels that his staff need to be there for the students. But there are many benefits, including the ability to accomplish tasks that are difficult to do in the office and that this creates loyal employees who stay long-term. JESNA has many long-term employees. We need to speak up and suggest telecommuting even when it is not advertised and we need to try to encourage positions to be filled with flexibility.

**Question to AA: How have you set limits working from home?**

**AA:** It took a year for me to understand what kind of physical set-up and technology I would need to really function well. Also, I am not interested in domestic stuff (laundry, painting kids bedrooms), so I am not tempted to do these things. My work is very dynamic/involved with other people. I am in contact with others via phone and email and this helps. I use my Palm and calendaring skills to keep focused. It doesn't always work, but then I make up the time in the evenings or on weekends. You need discipline to work at home, but this can be learned.

Beth then opened up the call for other participants to ask questions.

**Question: Have you run into issues with database security and getting access to files?**

**AA:** I have a firewall on my computer. JESNA will soon update their server for remote access. Until then, I have documents emailed to me. It is not ideal.

**Question: How do others respond to you, for example, donors/lay leaders?**

**AA:** The response overall has been very positive. I don't always tell people and there have been funny moments, such as when I am sitting in my PJs on an important phone call. Some people seem skeptical but I hope that my work style and work product show them the benefits.

**JW:** I don't worry about what others think, because the nature of our work is such that it doesn't matter a great deal where we work. People care more about whether they are getting a professional response and professional service.

**Question: Do you have a separate phone line? If not, what happens?**

**AA:** It took a long time in the beginning to figure this all out. Yes, I do have my own business number and high speed internet because the nature of my work is so much on the phone and email. It was more complicated when the office was in the bedroom and when the phone would ring late at night because someone thought they were just leaving a message on voicemail.

**Question: Are you a consultant?**

**AA:** No, I am not a consultant. I am an employee of the agency.

**Question: Do you have a written policy or is everything on an individual basis?**

**David (staff person at JESNA):** We are currently updating our policies for our employee manual. Yes, we will share it when it becomes available.

**Question: Do some staff have different arrangements because they need them?**

**JW:** This is a classic tzedakah issue – do you give people differently because of their needs or do you give everyone the same? We are trying to swing the pendulum towards greater comparability, not based on individual relations or special favors, but based on policies based on the needs of the agency. Of course, we take individual needs into account. This is true for lots of issues for all staff.

**David:** Balance is needed for equity, or at least perceived equity.

**Question:** How do you suggest someone frame it in making a request to an employer?

**JW:** You need to make a business case. Employers are not responsive just for a staff person's need. You need to be prepared to respond to concerns that may be raised. Engage the supervisor in a discussion of options, not just this is how I want it to be.

**Audra:** *Working Mother* October 2004 has a worksheet on how to do this and other resources.

**JW:** *Harvard Business Review* highlights different models about this issue. It should not be difficult to pull together materials to make a business case.

**Question:** Do you think enough people need to push aggressively even if they get turned down or will this happen on its own?

**AA:** I think there needs to be a culture shift. Rather than each of us individually, especially in the Jewish community, we need to write well placed articles, talk to key leaders in the community, and use models to encourage other employers.

**Audra:** Advancing Women Professionals is holding a "convening" on May 11<sup>th</sup> to address this issue in a panel discussion. It is open to the public.