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Employers' plea: Stay home and work

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What could be Michigan's biggest snowstorm in ears is expected to give new meaning to the term "workforce flexibility."

In an age of high-speed Internet access and smart phones, many employers across metro Detroit were giving their employees welcome news on Tuesday: Feel free to work at home.

That's the message the Farbman Group, a commercial real estate company in Southfield, sent to its 200 employees in an e-mail on Monday. The e-mail said, "We want you to understand your safety is the most important thing to us," said Andy Gutman, the company's chief financial officer.

Farbman's office has closed only once in the past 15 years,

but "if it's really bad, we will close it," he added.

At auto supplier Visteon, which has about 1,200 employees at its Van Buren Township campus, managers were encouraged to let their staffers leave work early Tuesday -- armed with laptops in case they aren't able to make it to the office today.

"We asked employees to check local weather information services Wednesday morning," Visteon spokesman Jim Fisher said. "If weather conditions and roads are hazardous, employees are encouraged to work from home rather than risk a dangerous commute."

Thanks to technological advances that enable many workers to easily work from home, snowstorms aren't as disruptive as they used to be. After all, at last count, 34 million Americans already worked outside the office for at least one day per month, according to a study from WorldatWork, a human resources association based in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Federal government agencies are now required to provide telework programs for their employees under a law passed last fall. "Time is the new currency," said Rose Stanley, WorldatWork's worklife practice leader.

To be sure, many jobs cannot be done at home.

The Detroit automakers on Tuesday held off from shutting down plants in Michigan, preferring to take a wait-and-see approach.

Ford has emergency notification systems in place that it can use to send automated messages to employees if it decides to close a plant, said company spokeswoman Marcey Evans. "We are not going to be shutting plants down until we see what transpires overnight," she said.

For some companies, like Taylor-based Atlas Oil, shutting down operations is not an option. The supplier of gasoline, diesel and home heating oil will still have drivers on the road today, filling up tanks and generators at gasoline stations, businesses and homes.

About 100 of Atlas' 400 employees will not be able to work from home so the company is putting some of them up at nearby hotels and arranging transportation for others, said Mary Zaleski, Atlas' director of marketing.

Free Press Business Writers Greg Gardner, Brent Snavely and Chrissie Thompson contributed to this report.