

Suggestions for Implementing a Successful Telecommuting Program

What is Telecommuting? How is it different from Telework?

Telecommuting is a flexible work arrangement that allows an employee to work from an alternate workplace, such as from home or another satellite location (which is linked, usually electronically, to a primary workplace) during all or some portion of the workweek. Telecommuting is a reasonable accommodation for employees and employers that is a mixture of working at home and the office with varying amounts of time spent at either location. Telework describes a more permanent situation where an employee is working from home and has no routinely scheduled time in the office. Teleworking is a particularly attractive option when the employee and office are located great distances from each other. This guide does not promote one option over the other but focuses on telecommuting because it has the greatest potential use in most office work situations.

Establishing a Telecommuting Program

Overall in establishing a telecommuting program, the agency should:

- A. Establish an agency-wide telecommuting policy and identify a Telecommuting Coordinator.
- B. Identify specific categories of positions that are appropriate for telecommuting.
- C. Require both the supervisor and employee to complete the Telecommuter Application to assist in determining eligibility (see Sample Telecommuter Application).
- D. Require a telecommuting agreement between the agency and eligible employee before the employee may work at an alternate location. A Telecommuting Agreement will provide the rules and guidelines necessary for the agency and employee to participate in a telecommuting program. The Sample Telecommuter Agreement provides a general framework for agencies utilizing telecommuting. The agreement must be signed by both parties prior to the start of telecommuting (stipulating that both parties will abide by the terms and conditions of telecommuting). The agreement must be reviewed and renewed at least annually to ensure that the guidelines for participating in the program indicate continued eligibility and are well understood.

Agencies may want to include the conditions listed below in work agreements:

- The duration of the agreement;
- The work schedule and how it can be altered
- How leave is to be requested and approved by supervisors;
- How routine communication between the employee, supervisor, co-workers, and customers will be handled;
- Employee's performance plan/expectations;
- The equipment and supplies that will be used and who is responsible for providing and maintaining them; and
- Safety requirements (see Safety Checklist and Guidelines).

- E. Provide training for employees and supervisors who wish to participate in telecommuting.
 - The federal Office of Personnel Management has developed a website, www.telework.gov, which includes training materials that can be used to develop training ideas.

What role does a Telecommuting Coordinator have in the arrangement?

The agency director or his designee should identify an employee to be a Telecommuting Coordinator. This individual is responsible for the day to day coordination and management of the agency's telecommuting program. The Telecommuting Coordinator will oversee the agency's program, assist supervisors in determining which jobs are best suited for telecommuting, organize the training of telecommuters and their supervisors, and will ensure compliance with laws, policies, procedures, and guidelines.

Who are the Best Candidates for Telecommuting?

In making decisions about which employees are designated or approved for telecommuting, agencies and employees should review their quality of work, in addition to ensuring that their positions are appropriate for telecommuting. Generally, employees who are successful in telecommuting include, but are not limited to, employees who:

- Are able to work productively on their own.
- Are self-motivated and independent.
- Have a low need for social interaction.
- Have good communication skills.

Moreover, tasks and functions generally suited for telecommuting include, but are not limited to:

- Data processing
- Research and policy development
- Telephone-intensive tasks
- Computer-oriented tasks (programming, data entry, word processing, etc.)
- Intensive thinking and writing tasks (policies, programs, papers, etc.)
- Project-based work
- Reviewing cases
- Computer-based training

Agency/Organizational Advantages

Provides a Great Retention and Recruitment Tool

Telecommuting is an attractive benefit to many employees. In the private sector, companies who offer it can recruit skilled professionals across the state or country. Telecommuting often increases an employer's ability to retain experienced employees and, thus, reduces the company's recruiting costs. According to one estimate, telecommuting programs can reduce employee turnover by as much as 18%. Telecommuting also increases an employer's flexibility in recruiting new individuals, improving the odds of hiring excellent employees. It may

enable an employer to recruit or retain an employee who is otherwise unavailable because of geographical restraints or time limitations. It attracts new talent and helps retain high-performance employees. Moreover, it increases the labor pool, making employers attractive to semi-retired workers, homemakers, and to people with disabilities.

Disaster Preparedness

Telecommuters are a key factor in keeping organizations going when disaster strikes. Within hours of the 1994 Los Angeles earthquake, telecommuters were conducting business, even though their office buildings had been destroyed. Telecommuting can help mitigate business disruption during strikes, bad weather (snow, ice, etc.), epidemics, and other emergencies. Many organizations and jurisdictions are incorporating telecommuting in their emergency preparedness strategies.

Increases Productivity

Telecommuters typically work more efficiently without office-related distractions and interruptions. Most companies find employees who telecommute are 10 - 30% more productive. In an AT&T sponsored survey of Fortune 100 telemanagers, 58% reported increased worker productivity. The state of California's telecommuting pilot program measured productivity increases of 10 – 30%, and American Express tallied a 20% productivity gain for off-site call center employees. Telecommuting can also help create a culture that emphasizes flexibility and cooperation to achieve goals. In doing so, a results-oriented and more productive culture is created.

Decreases Absenteeism

Employees who telecommute take two to four fewer sick days each year than other employees. According to the 1996 Unscheduled Absence Survey by CCH Inc., absenteeism costs U.S. companies \$603 per employee per year. The National Safety Council says that on an average workday, 1 million employees are absent from work because of stress-related problems. By contrast, telecommuters can work from home when a minor illness or sick child keeps them from the office. Unisys found that its telecommuters take 33% less sick leave per year than their in-office colleagues.

Boosts Employee Morale

People who telecommute see it as an employee reward; it's a vote of confidence from their employer. Telecommuters are often happier employees. First of all, telecommuting shows that the employer trusts that employees will spend time in the alternate workplace wisely, and employees appreciate being treated as responsible adults. Working at an alternate workplace also eliminates the hassle of commuting, increases time available for work, cuts commuting costs in saving gas, and potentially lowers stress. All these benefits can improve job satisfaction and motivate employees to work harder.

Employee Advantages

- *Increased Flexibility*

Telecommuters have more control over their time than their in-office counterparts. This lets them work at their peak energy times and adds flexibility to their overall day and schedules.

- *Financial Savings on Commuting and Other Costs*

A study conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management found that offering telecommuting options is among the top five approaches being used by companies to help employees deal with rising gas prices.

- *Increased Job Satisfaction: (Trust + Flexibility = Satisfaction)*

Telecommuting lets employees better balance work and family issues, particularly if they have some flexibility in choosing the hours in which they work. Also, allowing employees to work remotely shows that the company trusts them to get the job done without direct supervision. Both trust and the increased flexibility can increase employee's job satisfaction, reducing turnover, and increasing the company's ability to attract excellent employees.

Challenges to Telecommuting

- *Loss of Contact Among Employees*

The informal interaction that comes from having a group of employees together in one place can mean a great deal to an organization. Employees need to be aware that they'll be on their own and that they can take steps to ensure that they interact effectively with co-workers. That is why it is imperative that agencies choose telecommuting employees carefully.

- *Management Issues*

It can be tough to adequately manage employees who are out of sight, so managers often are resistant to telecommuting – both for themselves and for their team members. In response, telecommuting advocates recommend:

1. Being very careful in deciding which employees may telecommute.
2. Training managers on how to handle long distance employees.
3. Ensuring that telecommuters are treated the same as other employees in performance appraisals and opportunities for advancement.

- *Confidentiality and Privacy*

Employers need to ensure that confidential agency information remains secure when employees are working from home or otherwise outside company premises. Agencies should also respect workers' privacy when working from home.