

Best Practices for Managing Teleworkers: Changing Attitudes, Changing Ways



Compared to non-teleworkers, employees who telework:

- Are more clear about work expectations
- Have a greater sense of control
- Have higher job satisfaction
- Are more likely to recommend their organization as a good place to work
- Are less likely to express intention to leave their current organizations

Many local, state and federal government agencies are facing mandates to increase the number of home-based workers within their organizations. These so-called telecommuters, or teleworkers, offer significant benefits to the organization, and they reap many advantages themselves. An organization that supports teleworkers can typically reduce facility costs while improving business continuity and employee productivity; workers get a more flexible work schedule and the elimination of their daily commute, which saves them time and money.

In a recent report to Congress, the Office of Personnel Management delivered the results of a 2009 survey of teleworking in the federal government. According to the report, a total of 33 agencies reported cost savings/benefits as a result of telework. The greatest benefits were in the areas of productivity (39 percent), human capital, such as recruitment and retention (37 percent), and realized savings in leave (34 percent).

Those advantages were also reflected in job performance and employee satisfaction. According to the report, when compared with respondents not able to telework, more teleworkers are clear about work expectations (83 percent versus 79 percent), are held accountable for results (87 percent versus 83 percent), and have a clearer sense of control over work processes (53 percent versus 44 percent). They also report greater levels of job satisfaction (76 percent versus 68 percent), would recommend their organization as a good place to work (75 percent versus 66 percent), and are less likely to express intention to leave their current organizations (74 percent versus 68 percent).

But despite those benefits, there are still barriers to telework: Respondents reported office coverage (64 percent), organizational culture (49 percent), and management resistance (47 percent) as the main reasons they weren't likely to telework. As government agencies wrestle with new mandates to increase the number of employees who work from home, they are struggling to find ways to keep them as productive as possible. For the vast benefits to be realized, organizations must ensure their teleworkers have the tools and structure in place to succeed. Technology can go a long way toward helping that effort, but it won't make a difference if leaders don't also change the way they manage employees and their expectations of them, as well as compensation plans and other motivator and reward programs.

There are certain key changes organizations must make before and after they deploy teleworkers. And these changes should apply across the organization—that is, to office-based and home-based workers—so that everyone is judged on the same metrics and criteria.

First, recognize that teleworking isn't for everyone. Although many government agencies are compelled to have a certain number of their employees working from home part or full time, they should be careful in choosing who will be best served by such a situation—and who will best serve the organization. Although most agencies will see significant benefits from allowing employees to work from home as needed or desired, some employees simply aren't cut out for the independence and discipline such a set-up

requires. Many people already know this about themselves—given the choice, they will opt to go into an office every day for the companionship, sense of purpose, or because they don't trust themselves to be productive at home. Listen to them. Others may want to telework but are clearly not ready to do so. It's a manager's job to recognize when an employee shouldn't work from anywhere but the office, and support any employees who fit that group. It's also her job to help identify top performers who may want to work from home and who, in doing so, will help the organization be as productive and effective as possible.

Identify job roles that are location-neutral. One of the most common challenges to teleworking is that it clearly doesn't work for all positions within an organization. Many government jobs require that the employee be in a certain physical location to interact with the public, or one another, in person. For example, county clerks, court personnel, DMV agents, and emergency responders must be "in the office" (or court room or firehouse) during their shift. But just because some employees can't work from home doesn't mean none of them should. Office administrators, accountants and auditors, planners and many other back-office personnel can just as easily work from home as from an office, especially if they have tools like conferencing and IM to interact with their colleagues as needed. And while working at home may be a benefit, it shouldn't be rejected simply because not all employees can take equal advantage of it. After all, each government job is different: Police officers must work from patrol cars and the streets, but that doesn't mean the HR rep for the police force needs to, too. If he is working in an office today, he can work from home tomorrow.

Institute and leverage transition periods as needed. Letting people work from home one or two days a week is a good way to trial the new way of working and make sure that it's a good fit for everyone—not just the teleworker, but also his or her manager and colleagues. However, for the transition period to succeed, teleworkers must be given the technology and business-model support they would get if they were working from home on a permanent basis.

Shift your reward system to focus on results, not time spent on any given project or any given workday. One of the benefits of telework is having a flexible schedule, and you can expect your home-based employees to get used to the freedom to work anytime and from anywhere; as long as they're getting the job done, they shouldn't be judged on where or when they're doing it. (That said, if part of their job is meeting with constituents or participating in conference calls, they should be available at the necessary times to do so.)

Implement a career track that takes account of home-based workers and back it up by promoting teleworkers to management and leadership positions. Just because someone's working at home doesn't mean she can't take on more responsibility within the organization. Employees will be more willing to work remotely—and the program will be better respected and more successful—if it's not viewed as a career ender.

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“Technology plays an important role in teleworking. Consider new technology based on key criteria: ease of use, security, reliability and cost-effectiveness.”

Assign teleworkers to small collaborative groups whenever a project supports such work and mix up the players often, so everyone gets a chance to get to know one another better and exchange skills and ideas. Working with one or two colleagues on a specific task ensures remote employees feel like a part of the broader team—and if its members have a solid relationship, the team will be more collaborative and engaged even when they’re not working together on anything specific. Audio, video and Web conferencing can help small teams work effectively across physical and cultural boundaries.

Leverage social networking tools like Facebook and Twitter to keep people connected from afar. Social media can help them establish and nurture bonds inside and outside the virtual workplace. By helping far-flung employees get to know each other better, and stay in touch even when they’re not actively working on a project, social media tools make it more likely that remote and office-based employees will support and collaborate with one another as needed.

Give teleworkers the technology they need to work from somewhere other than a corporate office. These will likely include a notebook PC, mobile phone, access to IM and conferencing tools, and a headset. Consider technology based on key criteria: ease of use, security, reliability and cost-effectiveness.

Many government agencies are facing requirements to enable and support more home-based employees. To do so effectively, they must change not only the physical status of their teleworkers, but also their internal management practices, policies, and incentive and reward systems. In the process, they will benefit not just their teleworkers, but all their employees.

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