



Home Sweet Office

By Wylie Wong

With government leaders pressing for increased teleworking, federal agencies strive to change the mindset of supervisors and employees and to equip staff with the necessary technology.

Tom Salter's morning commute typically takes about 10 seconds.

The computer specialist for the Treasury Department can march into his home office, fire up his computer and, a minute later, begin working. He no longer must endure the stress of a two-hour morning train ride to an office in Washington—and after work, he no longer has to muster the energy for another train ride home.

Salter's supervisors are supportive: They've equipped his home office with a notebook computer, high-speed Internet access and a cell phone. According to Salter, teleworking eases his stress, gives him the quiet he needs to write software programs and makes him more productive.

"I worked for years in the office, but there were so many interruptions that I wouldn't get anything done," he recalls. "So I stayed nights to get work done, and I was miserable." Salter now teleworks full-time from his Marshall, Va., home. "My house is perfectly quiet, I get a lot more done, and I see a lot more of my family," he says.

Although only 5 percent of all federal employees telework, the federal government is a big proponent of teleworking (also called telecommuting) and is a trailblazer in the movement to let more employees work from home, teleworking experts say.

Congress and every president since 1990 have encouraged federal agencies to offer

teleworking because it boosts the morale of government employees and helps them better balance their work and family obligations. It also serves as a recruiting tool for potential employees, saves the government money by reducing office use and eases traffic congestion, which lightens the load on the environment. In addition, teleworking lets agencies continue operating in the event of a natural disaster or terrorist attack that would prevent federal workers from reaching their offices.

"I would put what the federal government has done up against any private sector company any day," says Gil Gordon, president of Gil Gordon Associates in Monmouth Junction, N.J., and a board member of the International Telework Association and Council in Silver Spring, Md. "There's been a great deal of creativity in adapting telework across a diverse family of jobs, from the IRS to the departments of Justice and Agriculture and the military. It's taken the government years to develop policies, manuals and training resources, so each agency doesn't have to reinvent it and start from scratch."

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TELEWORK CENTERS OFFER AN APPEALING ALTERNATIVE

Federal workers who don't want to commute to the office and don't want to work from home have a third option: telework centers.

The General Services Administration (GSA) operates 15 telework centers in the Washington area, giving suburban employees from every agency, as well as some employees from the private sector, a workplace close to home.

The centers, originally funded by Congress and located in Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia, provide desks with a computer, high-speed Internet access and a telephone, as well as printers, fax machines, copiers and tech support.

“Some people can't work from home because they have small children, noisy neighborhoods or they don't have suitable spaces for work,” points out Stanley Kaczmarczyk, director of the Innovative Workplaces Division of the Office of Real Property in GSA's Office of Governmentwide Policy.

“Some people like to get out of the house to work, but instead of fighting traffic for 80 minutes to go to the office, they can drive six minutes to a telework center and have a professional work environment,” he says.

The centers have a 50 percent to 60 percent occupancy rate. GSA charges a user fee that varies, depending on the center. However, as in last winter, it occasionally offers free trials to first-time users to increase participation. ■

1990s and culminated in a law, PL 106-346, in October 2000 requiring federal agencies to develop teleworking policies that give qualified workers an opportunity to work from home. In the metropolitan Washington area, 15 telework centers provide workspace for employees in or near their hometown, so they don't have to trek to their offices.

In addition, two agencies in charge of promoting teleworking—the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the General Services Administration (GSA)—have developed a Web site, Telework.gov, that provides education and resources. The site includes step-by-step guides and sample agreements for managers and employees.

Among cabinet-level agencies, the Education Department is a leader, with 31 percent of its employees teleworking. The Treasury has 22 percent, and the Labor Department has 18 percent, according to a 2002 OPM survey.

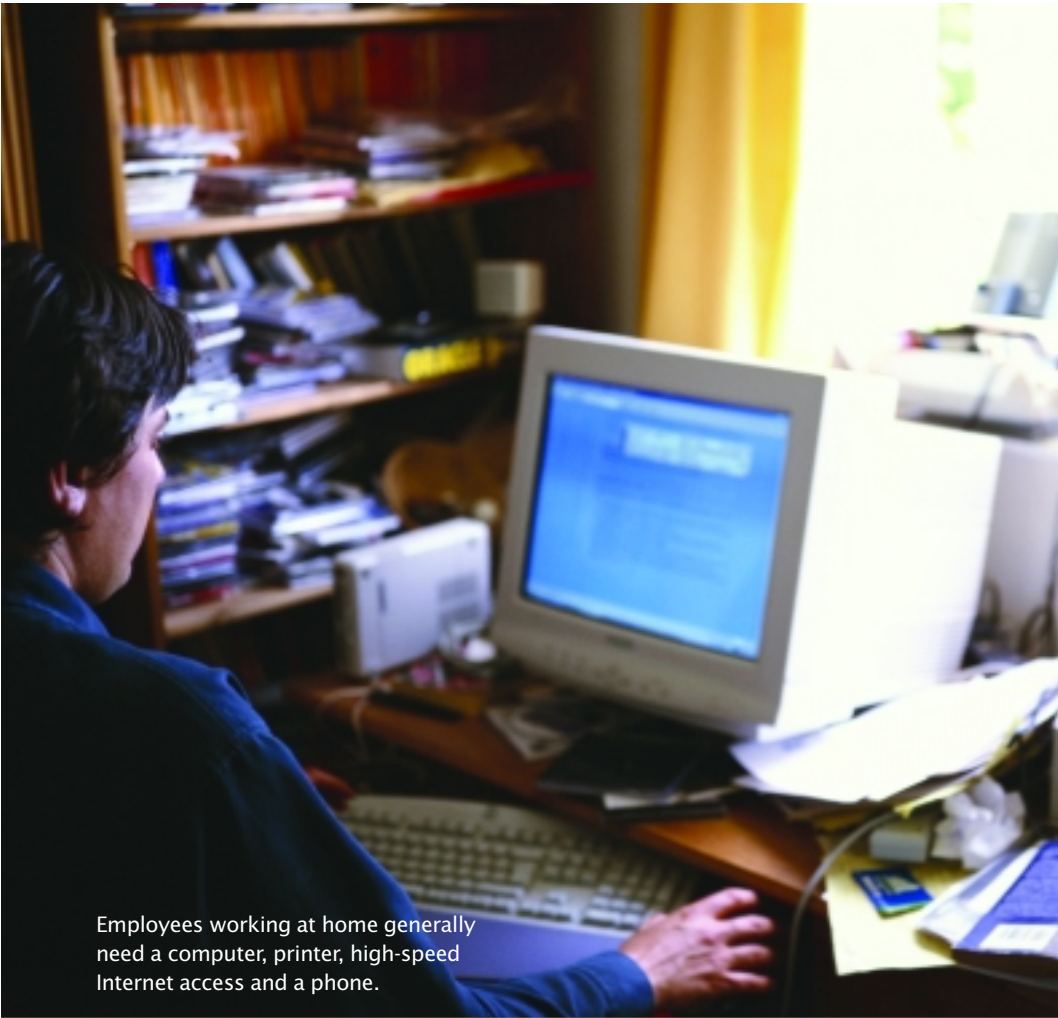
Data Security Concerns

But most agencies have been slow to make teleworking a priority. Concern about data security and IT issues are the top two reasons agencies gave OPM for going slow with teleworking. Management resistance ranks third, according to OPM's 2002 survey.

Each agency has a telework coordinator who oversees the effort. But a lack of involvement by federal CIOs and other senior IT managers is a major obstacle. The survey found that many agencies have not developed plans to meet teleworkers' technology needs and instead have left all such technology decisions up to their supervisors.

If IT staff became more involved, it would help resolve these technology issues, says Stanley Kaczmarczyk, director of the Innovative Workplaces Division of the Office of Real Property in GSA's Office of Governmentwide Policy.

“There is no single technology barrier, but for each [problem], there is a solution,” Kaczmarczyk says. “For



Employees working at home generally need a computer, printer, high-speed Internet access and a phone.

performance, not whether they are sitting at their desks.”

The effort couldn't have succeeded without the strong backing of agency leaders. “No one will do anything that their boss doesn't want done,” Hungate points out, “so unless the heads of the agency make it known, there will be resistance.”

Hungate has invested heavily to give teleworkers the technology they need for home offices, including notebook computers, printers and a cell phone or second phone line. The agency also pays for half the cost of high-speed Internet access.

To ensure network access, he standardized on the type of routers that teleworkers use at home and installed virtual private network (VPN) technology so employees could retrieve e-mail and securely connect to headquarters. He added IT staff, increased the help desk's operating hours, and installed remote management software on notebooks so IT staff could control teleworkers' computers for troubleshooting problems.

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example, for the security problem, there's hardware, software and training.” Also, he notes, “CIOs should be involved with planning, coordinating and funding the telework programs.”

Making IT Work

One Treasury agency has overcome the barriers to teleworking. At the Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration (TIGTA), 92 percent of the agency's nearly 1,000 employees telework on occasion, with 35 percent teleworking at least twice a week.

When the agency launched a test program three years ago, the employees responsible for overseeing the Internal Revenue Service were enthusiastic, but most managers balked. The agency sent the managers to training sessions that explained the virtues of teleworking and taught them how to manage employees remotely.

“Managers are used to walking down the hall and seeing employees hard at work,” says TIGTA CIO Joe Hungate. “In the training, we hit home the point that you need to be managing the results and

Trained to Succeed

The IT staff trained each teleworker to ensure they knew how to use the technology, Hungate says. The only stumbling block is that some areas don't offer high-speed Internet access. “If you don't have cable or DSL, you don't have enough bandwidth to do meaningful work,” he says.

Because a percentage of TIGTA workers telework each day, they can share desks, which reduces the need for office space. TIGTA annually avoids incurring an additional \$200,000 in rent in Washington

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and \$100,000 in Atlanta, Hungate says.

“We have a reservation system,” he explains. “You call up a concierge and reserve office space for the times you are required to be in an office.”

Other agencies have found different ways to provide technology to teleworkers. For instance, when OPM upgrades its desktop computers, teleworkers can take old computers home for work, says Abby Block, deputy associate director of OPM’s Center for Employee and Family Support Policy.

The Agency for International Development has a large workforce that works remotely from around the world. In the past, workers connected to headquarters through VPNs; now the agency has made it even easier.

The IT staff has created a Web site that international workers and domestic teleworkers can easily log onto to access their e-mail, files and office productivity software. All they need is Internet access and a Web browser.

To ensure security, each worker carries a hardware device the size of a pocket watch that displays a six-digit personal identification number (PIN) that changes every minute, says Phil Gordon, the agency’s security operations manager. To make the connection at the Web site secure, users type in their identification number and the PIN, which synchronizes with a server at the data center to verify the user and allow access.

An Opportunity to Succeed

To increase federal teleworking, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is offering notebook computers, cell phones and multifunction (print, scan and fax) machines to employees who telework at least six days every two weeks. Even with the technology investment, the agency will save money because teleworking reduces the need for office space, says Joann Riggs, assistant director of the EEOC’s human resources office.

OPM and GSA officials state that any workers who can do their jobs at home

(such as researchers), as well as those who have disabilities or are recovering from injuries, should be allowed to telework.

OPM’s Block encourages skeptical supervisors and employees to try teleworking. “When there’s uncertainty among managers and employees, we’re advocating that they try it as a test, with no commitment from either party to make it permanent,” she says. “They can try it for three months and see if it works. If it works, then we encourage them to do

it regularly.” If the experiment doesn’t work, Block adds, they can always stop.

Annual internal employee surveys show worker satisfaction has increased at TIGTA, according to Hungate, and 58 percent of employees say that teleworking is the reason.

For telework to succeed, supervisors and employees must agree on performance expectations, Hungate points out. Employers must also set parameters, such as how often people check e-mail. Only about a dozen TIGTA employees have lost their teleworking privileges because of poor work performance, he says.

Staying Productive

At the Agency for International Development, Maribeth Zankowski, teleworker and senior management analyst for workforce planning, says she guards against slacking off by acting as though she were going to work at her agency office.

“I get up at the same time and start working when I would normally leave the house,” says Zankowski, who teleworks every Friday. “It’s important to stay disciplined, with no distractions.”

Mary Lynne Schwartz, an EEOC attorney, says the flexibility lets her better balance work and family. “I start work at 7 a.m. and work until I pick up the kids from school, and if I’m behind—a rare exception—I will work that evening to finish what I didn’t complete,” she says.

For Treasury’s Salter, his 10-second commute to his home office is easy—it’s stopping work that’s hard.

“Instead of four hours of commuting, I take advantage of those hours and end up working more,” says Salter. “If things are going well, it could be 3 a.m. before I stop. But the nice thing is, I sleep in the next day.”

Salter remembers with no fondness the rigid 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. schedule of his first days as a government employee nearly 30 years ago. And he’s happy with the change in policy.

“That’s one nice thing about our office,” he says. “They’re concerned about getting the work done. How you do it doesn’t matter.” ■

