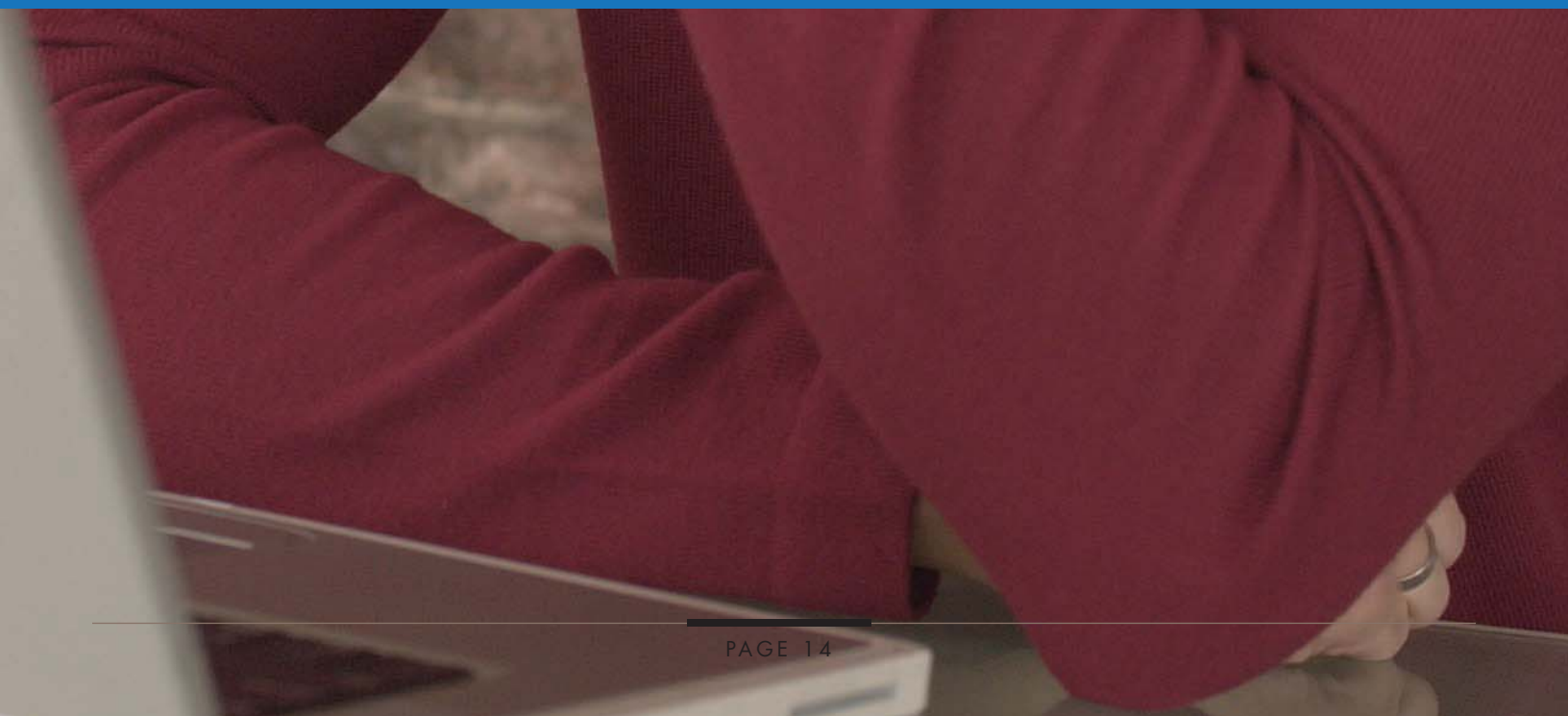# GSA Takes on the Telework Challenge

By Gail Lovelace and Stan Kaczmarczyk

Telework in the federal workforce seems like a win-win proposition. It can reduce energy use; cut down on greenhouse gases; ease traffic; reduce our dependence on foreign oil; increase worker productivity; save taxpayer dollars; help persuade talented individuals to build long careers in public service; and make the country better prepared for times of emergency.

So why hasn't telework fever swept the federal landscape? The U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) and Office of Personnel Management (OPM) have been working on the Governmentwide Telework Program for more than 15 years, and participation is still moving at a slow pace.

First, a definition. OPM describes telework as "an arrangement in which an employee regularly works at an alternate work site such as the employee's home, a telecenter, or other location that allows him or her to accomplish work in an effective and efficient manner." For more information, see: *http://www.opm.gov/perform/articles/2001/fal01-2.asp.*

Second, a bottom line. Telework is still evolving, and there are some growing pains that need to be worked through. Successful implementation in the federal government hinges on culture change and pro-active senior leadership, along with useful policies, implementation guidance, program support, best practices, and effective tools.

Success One Step at a Time

September arrived last year with a "Telework Challenge" from GSA leadership. The goal was to have 20 percent of all eligible GSA employees teleworking one or more days per week by the end of the year. Be careful not to skip too fast over the word "eligible." Telework is not appropriate for all positions. Site-specific employees like security guards and those who provide face-to-face customer service obviously can't do their jobs from an alternate work site.

The target at GSA jumps to 40 percent of eligible employees by the end of 2009, then to 50 percent in 2010. We easily hit the first mark and are now up around 27 percent. At this pace, GSA will likely reach 30 percent by the end of the calendar year, and is looking good to achieve 40 percent in 2009. Our hope beyond increasing participation at GSA, which has over 12,000 employees spread over 11 regions throughout the nation, is that other agencies without broad-based participation will explore the benefits of telework and follow suit.

As stated above, this is hardly a new endeavor for GSA, an agency better known as the federal government's acquisition arm and property manager. In 2006, GSA published a Federal Management Regulation Bulletin that established guidelines for agencies implementing and operating alternative workplace arrangements in the federal sector. The first-of-its-kind guidance helps agencies resolve commonly encountered implementation issues. GSA and OPM have worked continuously to identify and provide the needed guidance and tools.

Telework Elevates National Readiness

Even if we put the other potential positives aside, telework should be strongly considered because it helps enormously with continuity of operations planning. That includes "mini-emergencies" such as power outages and snowstorms. Government can't shut down in times of disaster and we know that in the midst of a crisis is no time to begin rehearsals.

Telework lets us iron out the kinks before the crisis. It enables us to be proactive instead of reactive, and hopefully continue in a smooth and uninterrupted fashion during the next emergency.

A case in point occurred last winter when forecasters warned of nasty weather ahead in the New England area. GSA

Regional Administrator Dennis R. Smith encouraged employees to leave the office prior to the storm and work at home until clear skies returned. The strategy worked beautifully. Nearly 60 percent of those eligible to telework continued to serve our customers with minimal disruption. Plus our employees didn't have to deal with icy roads.

The GSA New England Region used the same tactic last June when hundreds of thousands of fans flooded Boston to celebrate the Celtics' win in the NBA finals. Sixty-two percent of our regional employees teleworked, thereby avoiding long travel delays caused by the large crowds.

Such experiences demonstrate that having a large pool of trained, equipped employees who can work from home or a remote location increases flexibility and adaptability. Federal agencies that have a robust telework program in place are better prepared to have employees shift to an emergency work arrangement should it become necessary.

This is particularly important at GSA, which serves agencies that directly serve taxpayers, both in normal times and in times of crisis. For example, should a hurricane strike, GSA employees provide the supplies and services needed to help get communities back on their feet. A well-designed telework system enhances our ability to serve agencies such as FEMA, and to help re-open the federal government offices that assist citizens once the storm moves on.

Security Concerns

While a successful telework program requires careful study of personnel, policy and culture issues, information technology is also important. Some critics argue that telework can actually create a cyber or technology security issue. GSA takes this concern quite seriously.

Last year, the agency published Federal Management Regulation Bulletin 2007-B1,

"Information Technology and Telecommunications Guidelines for Federal Telework and Other Alternative Workplace Arrangement Programs." This policy document, which integrated guidance from the National Institute of Standards and Technology, the Office of Management and Budget, the Government Accountability Office and GSA, was designated to help agencies identify the technology fundamentals for successful and secure telework programs. It provides telework technology and security information in a consolidated, easy to read format that covers topics such as basic equipment, telecommunications, security, privacy, training and support.

While there is no doubt the government will have to make additional IT investments, GSA Chief Information Officer Casey Coleman has noted, "The IT community has seen this trend to a mobile workforce coming for awhile and has provided us with plenty of product choices to resolve the security, access and management issues."

Adequate technology exists and is available to enable controlled information security in a telework environment. Remote workers need a computer, a high speed data line and a phone. It is likely that all three will be rolled into one device in the near future, as voice over Internet, high speed WiFi and data encryption already exist.

At GSA, employees must complete a technology implementation plan before they can be authorized to telework. This includes a review of IT security requirements.

The next big step is clear: each agency must identify issues, do the analysis and put solutions in place to address them. The goal, obviously, is to find the best and most cost-effective way to ensure that each teleworker has the right equipment, training and data protection to do his or her job.

Another important piece of the security puzzle that managers are grappling with involves ensuring the privacy of personal information. Government managers have access to a considerable amount of private information that must be protected. Say a manager has a job opening and wants to review applications on his or her telework day. Such applications typically include home addresses, personal e-mail addresses, home phone numbers, and Social Security Numbers. Government managers are required to ensure that such information remains private, which means that strict, detailed policies and procedures must be in place for all employees, including those who telework.

Telework as a Public Service Magnet

We all know the federal workforce is changing. According to the Partnership for Public Service, over the next four years, 530,000 federal employees – most of them Baby Boomers – are expected to turn out the lights one last time and implement their grand retirement plan. GSA is among the top ten agencies with the highest percentages of employees projected to retire by 2012. Many hold leadership and critical skills positions. Learn more at: *http://www.ourpublicservice.org/OPS/publications/viewcontentdetails.php?id=126*.

How does the government continue to attract and retain talented workers? Although telework is just one tool in the human resources toolkit, it is an important one that federal managers cannot afford to overlook.

Statistics show that most Baby Boomers worked for fewer than three companies throughout their entire careers. That stands in stark contrast to the current trend, which predicts today's workers will switch organizations seven times or more.

Telework is a powerful incentive for workers to stay in the federal government. Most employees appreciate flexibility in the workplace, including the ability, when appropriate, to work at an alternate location. We see this time and again at GSA. In one case, a stellar employee decided to leave for another agency because she wanted to be geographically closer to her family. She was offered the opportunity to telework and she changed her mind, allowing us to keep one of our best and brightest. Besides retaining institutional knowledge, the ability to offer telework saved the hassle and expense of losing the employee, announcing the opening, interviewing, selecting someone, and then training the new hire.

For those who want to telework, but not at home, GSA has established 14 Telework Centers in Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia. These alternate work sites save nearly 2.8 million travel miles a year, which in turn saves 115 thousand gallons of fuel. Learn more at: *http://www.gsa.gov/telework*.

Over the years, GSA has run several free trial promotions to attract new users to the centers, including a recent promotion for federal managers. GSA's goal is to prompt culture change by easily giving managers actual telework experience. Those who have tried it are learning that employees don't need to be under the watchful eye of their supervisors to be productive.

Indeed, telework has been characterized as "pro-productivity, pro-environment and pro-sanity." According to the Research and Innovative Technology Administration, an office in the U.S. Department of Transportation, various studies report productivity increases with telework because employees spend more time working and less time commuting. As well, fewer interruptions or distractions can translate to more work done per hour.

Studies have also shown other positive byproducts of a robust telework program. They include less time missed from work, less incidental absence and less use of sick

leave. According to a 1999 Telework America National Survey, absenteeism caused by illness and personal reasons cost employers an average of $3,313 per year per non-teleworking employee. For teleworkers, the figure dropped to $1,227, saving employers an average of 63 percent per worker.

Promising but Still Evolving

The GSA Telework Challenge has increased participation and taught us plenty, including the fact that more challenges lie ahead. For instance, is there a risk that telework might undermine teamwork? How do we maintain "all for one and one for all" if everyone is working remotely in separate locations? Video teleconferences may help. We also need to focus hard on education, both for employees and managers, on all aspects of telework, including security and privacy matters.

Just as telework is not right for all positions, it is also true that not all people are right for telework. Telework is neither an employee entitlement nor a management requirement. It is a mutually beneficial arrangement governed by a bilateral written agreement. If anything goes amiss, the agreement can be terminated by either side. There is almost no risk in trying the arrangement for a few weeks.

Performance goals and measures are always key to establishing and maintaining a superior workforce. Telework is no exception. It is especially important to clearly articulate goals and measures for remote workers. If the employee fails to produce the expected amount of work or even if the quality drops, a manager can reduce the number of days in the telework agreement or suspend the agreement.

The point to keep in mind, however, is that the taxpayer is best served when federal managers focus on results rather than geography. Put another way, work is what someone does and not a place where someone goes.

Support from the top, trust in each other, a focus on results and mastering the technology to stay connected are the four crucial elements to establishing a solid telework program. Grooming informed, flexible managers and senior staff is essential. Employees and managers must know telework is supported at all levels. Also, trust and improved communication must exist between managers and employees.

Managers must also learn new skills to understand and provide proper management to remote workers. Managing a virtual or remote workforce requires a leap of faith for some managers and often a change in management style. Employees need proper instruction to help them be as productive and accessible as possible when working remotely. GSA offers training to ensure that managers are prepared to supervise in this new environment. The agency is also teaching employees the IT skills needed to handle the technology components of remote access.

Despite its many benefits, telework remains an idea that will certainly take some getting used to. That's understandable, given the fact that it requires major adjustment on the part of managers long accustomed to seeing their employees face to face. However, in an era marked by tight budgets, skyrocketing fuel costs, readiness woes and increasing concern about the environment, the simple truth is that telework is an evolving program that shows incredible promise. Telework really can work! ◼

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