Q. *Last month you had a question from a supervisor about telecommuting that described some of the trouble spots with this type of arrangement. What are positive things we could consider?*

A. There are dozens of benefits to creating a flexible workplace and supporting telework programs. The push for flexible work environments continues to gain momentum as employers look for ways to attract and retain a wider pool of qualified employees, reduce stress and increase employee morale—and lower real estate and overhead costs. The STIR model provides a systematic way to incorporate best practices to overcoming these concerns and guide organizations through the process of building successful, sustainable and customized telework programs that meet the demands of a changing workplace. The fundamental tenet of the STIR model is that telework is more than a transition to employees working off-site; it is a transformation to a better way of doing business.

Step One: Strategize
Demonstrating a compelling reason to establish a strong telework program will help to accelerate its acceptance and sustain the program. Each organization should consider carefully how telework can be a key element of its strategy. For some, the drivers for a robust telework program are a lack of office space or a need to reduce operating costs.

For others, telework is a powerful recruitment and retention tool, particularly for those with high recruitment targets or long apprenticeship periods, or as a means to strengthen energy efficiency and environmental sustainability strategies. Ensuring that everyone in the organization understands the "big picture" for adopting telework will facilitate greater acceptance and sustainability.

Step Two: Transform
Successful telework programs require all employees to communicate differently to ensure that interpersonal relationships and partnerships remain strong and sustainable. Innovative ways for holding productive brainstorming sessions and other meetings, duplicating hallway and water cooler chat, and fostering teambuilding and collaboration need to be developed to maintain highly productive work teams. Supervisors who rely on personal observations as a way to evaluate employee performance will need to use other measures of performance.

Once businesses recognize that telework requires a significant transformation, they can put in place change management strategies that include:

• Assessing the readiness of employees and the organization critically for this new way of doing business (e.g., suitability of infrastructure, business processes/policies, and the impact of the change on organizational culture).

• Identifying concerns of affected groups and addressing these in meaningful ways.

• Using clear and regular communications that explain strategy, acknowledge challenges openly and celebrate telework successes.

Step Three: Implement

Technology is certainly an essential component of a telework program. Without the technological advances of the past 20 years, telework on any scale would not even be possible, let alone desirable. Laptop computers, e-mail, SharePoint sites, communities of practice, LiveMeeting capability, and other technology tools allow teleworkers to communicate and share information with colleagues across the country and around the globe. However without supporting activities, technology is unlikely to yield the desired benefits. These activities include:

• Establish a senior telework coordinator as a strategic leadership position. Designating a senior member of the leadership team as a strategic telework coordinator and partnering this person with designated liaisons throughout the organization will help ensure a smooth program rollout. The organization's telework coordinator position should be full time and include the responsibility and authority to support program design, develop supporting policies and procedures, provide technical assistance and conduct evaluations.

• Establish telework policies and procedures. A clear telework policy that provides an overarching framework with parameters, standards, definitions, rules and clear expectations for employees and supervisors lays the groundwork for operational consistency throughout the business. Many successful programs establish policies and procedures that are specific to each department or business unit to further customize the telework initiative for each work group.

• Assess eligibility for telework at a task level. In determining telework eligibility, look at the tasks that employees accomplish as part of their job rather than the position as a whole. For example, while it might seem counterintuitive to think that someone serving in a customer service or administrative assistant function could telework, these employees might be able to perform select tasks more effectively and efficiently, such as required paperwork, while teleworking.

Step Four: Recalibrate

Even the most successful telework program must be examined and adjusted periodically to reflect changes in organizational goals, the workforce, technology and the external environment, and to ensure that it is sustainable. Performance metrics—such as customer satisfaction indices, recruitment/retention metrics and real estate costs per employee—can be used to measure the real impacts of telework, cultivate greater senior leadership support, reinforce views that telework results in a positive return on investment and target areas where further investments could contribute to even greater returns. *Source ICF International whitepaper*