
The Amazing Adventures of Us— Future Workplace

The Road Not Traveled— Mainstreaming Telework

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Those who advocate workplace improvement are now into their second (or third—depending on your historical perspective) decade of trying to move telework out of its pigeonhole and into the mainstream. It is a difficult struggle, characterized by continuing management resistance and other barriers. There are new signs, however, that this effort to mainstream is beginning to take hold.

This has occurred despite the lack of consensus on the exact definition of telework, and the somewhat confusing use of alternate titles such as telecommuting, flexi place, or alternate workplace arrangements. Recent studies, such as those conducted by the International Telework Association, show a continued growth of telework. Current estimates are that between 20 and 30 million American workers participate to some extent in alternative work scheduling or work sites. There are indications, too, of telework's inclusion in mainstream commerce, politics, and popular culture. Indirect measures of its success include the increasing number of advertisements for telework products such as home office furniture and design tools; the use of telework terms in the popular vernacular (especially jokes); and, the inclusion of telecommuting in political platforms as a solution for local traffic woes, such as in the recent election campaigns in Maryland and Virginia.

Telecommuting is a method to accomplish work. In order to gauge the true progress of telework mainstreaming, it is necessary to examine its impact on organizations and workplaces. This article briefly reviews indicators of telework inclusion in the fabric of workplace management, exemplified by Federal workplace activity. Indeed, you can invoke the notion that telework progress in the Federal workplace—with its perceived bureaucratic leanings—bodes well for the rest of the workforce.

Congressional Mandate

In October 2000 Congress passed legislation to mandate goals and timetables for increased Federal utilization of telework (Public Law 106-346, Section 359).

To address the concerns of Congress government's telework program lags behind that of the rest of the workforce, that the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has

been surveying agencies for legislative compliance. Additionally, OPM has initiated activities to provide telework information and support to Federal agencies. Telework officials at OPM and the General Services Administration (GSA) report significant increases in efforts by agencies to improve their alternative work numbers and programs. Compliance reports tracked by OPM indicate significant recent increases in the level of federal telework.

Policy Development

An indication that federal agencies are taking telework more seriously is the government-wide policy review established to identify and remedy policy issues that hinder the successful development, implementation, or operation of telework programs. This review, conducted by an inter-agency workgroup led by GSA and OPM, was established in response to the mushrooming of policy inquiries from agencies as they initiated and expanded telework programs. Preliminary comments from the workgroup identify a range of concerns in areas such as pay, travel, duty station, workplace safety, health, legal, technology, and continuation of operations. Publication of the workgroup's final report, including recommendations, is expected during the spring of 2002 and will have ramifications beyond the government since many of these telework issues are found at the state and local level as well as in the private sector.

Technology Barriers Study

Congress requested that GSA conduct a study of barriers to federal home-based telework because it was concerned that technology issues might be hampering federal telework efforts. The goals of the study include identifying barriers and their prevalence in the workforce as well as recommending solutions. This study, carried out by the private-sector contractor Booz Allen Hamilton, will provide insights into the state of federal workplace technology. The final report is to be completed, submitted to Congress, and published during the spring of 2002.

Telecenters

While there are numerous styles of telework, the two basic "flavors" are work-at-home arrangements and telework centers. Telework centers (telecenters) are satellite office settings that are utilized by teleworkers who live near the center. Unlike satellite offices, however, Telecenters typically serve workers from many different organizations as opposed to being a satellite site for a single organization. The federal government has a small array of between 15–20 telecenters, sponsored in conjunction with local jurisdiction partners (most of which are in the Washington

DC area) and a large number of combination telework and distance learning centers nationwide run by the National Guard Bureau.

Both public and private sector organizations have set up telecenters but none have fared well in terms of becoming self-supporting or profit-making entities. The reasons are that the established telecenters are underutilized—likely due to management resistance to any kind of telecommuting and the cost ineffective prospect of paying additional overhead for each teleworker using a telecenter (that is, the telecenter workstation lease *in addition* to the overhead costs for the teleworker's existing workstation at the main worksite). A solution is to reduce management resistance and reconfigure teleworker workstations to "hotelling" arrangements.

"Hotelling"—creating an office center in the suburbs for employees to use to reduce their travel costs—is still a concept of the future. A second solution is to find more economical ways of "hotelling" than is provided by government. In the meantime, despite congressional legislation and fall-out from the terrorist attacks of September 11, many private sector telecenters have closed down. But as the benefits of telework-reduced facility management become better appreciated, the result will be the mainstreaming of telecenters to serve those workers who prefer or must use center-based, as opposed to home-based, arrangements. As an added incentive to increase utilization now, federal telecenters will begin offering free 60-day trials for potential federal teleworkers.

Facility Management

Private sector organizations have accrued an impressive body of experience using telework as a facility management tool to reduce their costs and improve utilization and design. Typically, teleworkers give up their traditional office workstations to the organization, which surrenders or reassigns such workstations. They are replaced with a smaller number of "hotelling" workstations, which are used by workers on an as-needed "reservation" basis. In some cases these workstations, especially in field office set-ups, are completely surrendered and removed from the organization's facility portfolio and costs. Federal agencies have gotten into this act just recently. The Internal Revenue Service, for example, has completed an elaborate pilot and analysis (including cost benefits) with respect to "hotelling" and is considering further utilization of it. The Navy Department recently completed the Pentagon's first "hotelling" pilot. Other agencies, such as the Federal Railroad Administration, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, and the Department of Education, have successfully established ongoing applications of telework-reduced facility management.

Recruiting and Retention: The STEP Program

Over the years, there has been growing evidence that telework programs have helped organizations boost their ability to recruit and retain workers. One such assertion was made collectively by a group of the nation's major accounting firms. The Federal government is taking a big 'step' forward in this regard by using telework to assist families of Federal employees affected by change of station moves. According to a study by the Department of Defense, one of the primary reasons for the attrition of military personnel is the adverse impact on their families caused by change of station moves. For families that want to stay together, the jobs and careers of spouses are typically disrupted by such moves. In response, the Federal government has established the Spouse Telework Employment Partnership (STEP), a public/private partnership effort designed to use telework to provide employment and career opportunities for those spouses of Federal employees, both civilian and military, who are affected by change of station. The Secretary of State has endorsed this concept and active partnerships between participating organizations will be formalized in the near future.

Emergency Response/Prevention

For some time now, public and private sector organizations have been looking into the use of telework as an emergency response and prevention activity. Federal Continuation of Operations policy, for example, contains guidance for such use by Federal agencies and, for some time now, telework experts have advocated such use. Needless to say, the events of September 11 boosted the interest of employers in adding telework to their emergency response policies and measures. The Department of Trans-

portation and GSA have been working collaboratively with private-sector partners to provide telework relief to New York City organizations affected by the World Trade Center attacks.

Other Indications

There are other indications, some controversial, of the mainstreaming of telework. Congressional efforts are underway to provide tax incentives as well as liberalized home office write-offs for teleworkers. Some states, notably Virginia and Maryland, already offer incentives to organizations for establishing telework programs. Moreover, Congress has sponsored a pilot program—Ecommute—to provide environmental credits to organizations that establish telework programs. These credits can be traded or otherwise cashed in. Telework program management software is in the development stages and, in some organizations, is already in use. Finally, some organizations are attempting to develop, apply, and sell telework or teleworker certification programs and standards.

Convenient Information: Telework.gov

As public and private sector organizations have increased their telework program development, they have called for more convenient access to authoritative telework information. One result has been the development of *Telework.gov*, a one-stop website for information on Federal telework. *Telework.gov* is designed to provide all the information an agency needs to develop or expand its telework programs. Along these same lines, the International Telework Association (www.telecommute.org) and the General Services Administration have both produced reports on recommended practices for successful telework programs in public or private sector environments. 🏠