Thinking Outside the Cube: Telework

A Business Improvement Strategy for Your Company and for Employees with Disabilities
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Telework as a Business Strategy

Telework is an advantageous business strategy that also happens to be an important employment option for many persons with disabilities.

Businesses face an impending labor shortage in the coming decade as “baby boomers” retire in record numbers and subsequent, much smaller, generations assume the mantle. The competition for skilled workers will be a major factor in businesses’ decisions regarding employment policy, and progressive employers are looking at ways to restructure jobs for maximum benefit to both the company and their employees. One such strategy is telework, or telecommuting, an employment arrangement in which an employee or contractor of a company works at a remote location, usually home, using communications technology such as computers, telephones, videophones, and fax machines to fulfill the job requirements and interact with co-workers. The advantages to employers are many, most significantly reduced overhead costs and increased productivity. For employees, the signal feature of telework is flexibility, and this is especially true for people with disabilities, who may have mobility, sensory, and other limitations that would make traditional employment untenable.

A person can engage in telework from home, from a centralized location (“telecenter”), or from a “mobile” location such as a customer site or an airport. Tele-work can occur on a full or part-time basis, with a person working remotely as often as several days a week or as infrequently as several days a year. Most people who telework do so part-time, dividing their time between home and office.

Research conducted by the Telework Research Network estimates the potential cost savings to employers at as much as $10,000 per employee per year, when taking into account factors such as reduced overhead and increased productivity. And telework is a growth phenomenon: Some 45 million Americans worked remotely at least one day in 2006, and 28.7 million of those people teleworked at least once per month, an increase of 10 percent from the previous year and 39 percent more than in 2002.
Telework is most appropriate for jobs that can be performed individually, can accommodate flexible work hours, and involve a high degree of use of telecommunications equipment. Jobs that are particularly suitable for telework include word processing, customer service, computer programming, accounting, billing, claims processing, data entry, dispatching, editing, filling orders, researching, report writing, scheduling, transcription, graphics, auditing, and record-keeping. A careful analysis of business operations for any particular organization is likely to identify additional telework opportunities.

Benefits of Telework for Employers

Telework has many benefits for employers that may or may not be at first apparent.

A short list of advantages to employers includes:

- Reduced real estate costs and other costs associated with building use, making the business operation leaner and more ‘green’ due to energy conservation;
- Enhanced ability to recruit qualified new workers and retain high performers;
- Increased productivity due to fewer workplace distractions and interruptions;
- Reduced absenteeism (sick leave, family leave, personal leave);
- Greater employee loyalty and enthusiasm;
- Improved retention of those employees who otherwise would leave due to life changes (change in family responsibilities, family relocation, disability or illness);
- Decentralization that reduces vulnerability to terrorism and other business disruption;
- Continuity of operations during bad weather and emergency situations like pandemics and natural disasters; and
- Improved quality of internal communications.
Employers may have initial concerns about telework, but research has found that most of those concerns are groundless. Please look under “Helpful Resources” for more information on research studies cited.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Potential Problem</th>
<th>Pertinent Research Finding</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower worker productivity due to distractions at home</td>
<td>Supervisors reported improved or sustained productivity (100%) and improved overall performance (96.7%).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher operating costs to enable telework</td>
<td>One report estimated that telework results in corporate savings of $7,500 or more per employee per year.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Data security concerns</td>
<td>Employer-provided equipment and software, as well as policies and procedures for data protection, safeguard data.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strains on supervisory relationships, reduced operational efficiency and teamwork</td>
<td>Employers reported that productivity improved; very few supervisors (less than 10%) felt that telecommuters required more frequent interaction or needed to be closely monitored.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lower employee morale due to isolation</td>
<td>Employers reported improved employee morale and improved employee attraction and retention.</td>
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Corporate Social Responsibility and Telework

There are concomitant societal benefits from telework as well.

Telework benefits to society in general include:

- Reduced air pollution (carbon emissions) caused by commuting vehicles, which can slow environmental damage that leads to climate change;
- Reduced traffic congestion, which makes travel easier in urban areas;
- Less depletion of limited fossil fuel resources due to reduced gasoline consumption;
- Reduced costs of road maintenance and transportation infrastructure; and
- Broader employment horizons for qualified persons with disabilities.

Telework allows employers to recruit from a largely-untapped source of talent, persons with disabilities, and to retain employees who become disabled and might otherwise be unable to continue working. And it’s not just the right thing to do: industry research estimates that U.S. employers would save between $48 billion and $96 billion dollars annually in reduced short- and long-term disability payments, workers compensation, and personnel replacement costs by making telework available to their employees.

Benefits of Telework for Employees

Telework has advantages for many employees, and particularly for employees with disabilities.

Employee benefits from telework include:

- Fewer distractions and interruptions while at work, resulting in increased productivity;
- Increased flexibility for scheduling work, resulting in a healthier work/life balance;
- Greater job satisfaction and improved morale;
- Reduced commuting time, resulting in less stress and more time for personal activities; and
- Reduced costs for fuel, car maintenance, tolls, and public transportation, which can amount to hundreds of dollars in savings annually.

Telework is of particular interest to people with disabilities because it offers opportunities where it would otherwise be difficult to work. The ‘virtual office’ in many cases presents fewer barriers than the physical office, and because managers are required to evaluate teleworkers using performance-based measures, disability-related bias may be less likely to occur.

For people with mobility limitations like spinal cord injury or multiple sclerosis, telework can remove transportation barriers and reduce the fatigue and stress associated with commuting and a non-stop
9:00 – 5:00 workday. For people who use Medicaid-funded personal assistance services (PAS) to help with activities of daily living, their coverage may not extend to the costs associated with preparing for work and commuting (although Medicaid policies in many states are being changed to account for this gap). For people with chronic disease and mental illness, symptoms can fluctuate unpredictably, and telework can provide the flexibility needed to maintain long-term employment. For people with sensory disabilities (blindness, deafness) specialized equipment may be required for telework, but often state agencies may fund this.

That said, telework is not a legally or morally acceptable substitute for provision of reasonable accommodations such as readily-achievable architectural barrier removal at the worksite, nor can it be used as a way to keep employees with disabilities ‘out of sight’. While an employer is not required under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to allow an employee to telework, many employers recognize that telework is a low-cost, high-impact way to employ top-notch employees who would otherwise not be able to participate.
Telework Best Practices

Business benefits from employing proven best practices for telework.

There are a number of road-tested best practices that can inform both employer and employee decision making and lead to successful implementation of telework. All of these practices are equally, if not more, relevant for telework employees with disabilities.

Self-Assess

The decision to allow (or encourage) telework should be based on an assessment of job requirements and workgroup needs. Employers should formally define telework policies to determine the types of jobs that can be performed remotely and to define criteria for deciding whether an employee is a candidate for telework.

Employees considering telework should do an honest self-assessment to determine whether they would be comfortable working independently and willing to work with reduced in-person contact. A teleworker must have good time management skills, good written and oral communication skills, and must be (or learn to be) technologically literate. Most importantly, a teleworker must be self-motivated to achieve a high level of performance. The website TeleworkTools.org (www.Teleworktools.org) includes a self-assessment questionnaire that can help jobseekers evaluate readiness for telework and identify areas where skill development is needed.
Define and document expectations

Clearly define responsibilities and deliverables, stating task-and performance-based expectations such as response time, quality, and deadlines. Include plans for how co-workers in the office will provide back up or assistance, if needed. Create signed employer/employee agreements regarding use of computer equipment, data security, and compliance with company policies.

Provide the tools for success

Provide teleworkers with computer equipment for off-site use that is compatible with on-site equipment and provide “help desk” support for hardware and software problems. Update equipment as needed to be on par with office systems. Train supervisors in the use of performance-based evaluation methods to manage teleworkers. Managers should also receive training in telework-related issues such as how to facilitate communication among local and remote workgroup members and how to be equitable in assigning work and rewarding performance when not all employees are on-site.

Communicate

Agree on and maintain a communication plan. Use techniques like regular voice and e-mail contact, and schedule meetings with clear agendas. Schedule periodic in-person meetings and/or training sessions at the office.

Evaluate and improve

Identify and correct kinks in the system, especially if telework is essential for use in emergency situations. A successful telework program takes time to implement and will require course corrections along the way.

Acknowledgements

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Helpful Resources


Work Without Limits, a Massachusetts Disability Employment Initiative made possible by a federal grant to UMass Medical School, is funded by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CFDA No. 93.768). For more information on Work Without Limits, please visit www.workwithoutlimits.org