Implementing Telework: Lessons Learned from Four Federal Agencies

By Scott P. Overmyer

This article is adapted from Scott P. Overmyer, "Implementing Telework: Lessons Learned from Four Federal Agencies" (Washington, DC: IBM Center for The Business of Government, 2010).

Telework has been touted as a winning strategy for government. A study by the Telework Research Network claims potential savings for the federal government of nearly $3.8 billion as a result of reduced real estate costs, electricity savings, reduced absenteeism, and reduced employee turnover.

The recent passage of the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 substantially changes the status of telework throughout government. Instead of each agency developing its own telework policies and procedures, the legislation sets forth a government-wide framework which both endorses and encourages the use of telework throughout the government. Case studies were developed of telework practices and experience at the Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA), the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO), the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

What Is "Telework?"

Definitions of telework are many and varied. While some include detailed descriptions of the conditions and information, telecommunications, and computing (ITC) equipment required, others give a broader set of conditions involving proximity to the primary office or place of work. For the purpose of this report:

Telework is defined as any work conducted away from the primary workplace, part-time or full-time, which is facilitated or aided in some way by information and telecommunications technology.

The Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 definition of "telework" or "teleworking" includes a work flexibility arrangement under which employees perform the duties of their position, and other authorized activities, from an approved worksite other than the location from which the employee would otherwise work.

Understanding Risks Associated with Telework and Mitigation Strategies

Investment in telework is not without risks. However, for each risk, there is a mitigation strategy that can often reduce it to a manageable level. Table 1 discusses a number of well-known risks associated with telework investment, and mitigation strategies for each risk.

Management Resistance Remains a Primary Concern

A major challenge to successfully implementing telework in the federal government is management attitude and organizational culture. A 2009 survey of federal executives and decision makers indicated that while 83 percent personally support telework, 42 percent felt that their direct manager, and 31 percent felt that their agency leadership were not supportive of telework programs and alternative work arrangements.. A 2008 survey showed that only 35 percent of government managers actually endorsed telework.

In our 2010 survey, nine of the 15 federal telework coordinators who responded said that some form of management resistance was the primary impediment to increased levels of telework in their organization. Overcoming this kind of resistance is essential if telework is to become standard practice and widespread in the federal sector. In a report on a conference on telework, Gross (2006) recorded a number of comments among participants regarding management resistance to telework. For example, some managers suggested that the manner in which federal budgets recapture excess funding may be an impediment to the realization of cost savings from telework, while others questioned productivity studies that support telework. These concerns should be considered when implementing the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010.

Table 1: Telework Risks and Mitigation Strategies

Risk Category	Specific Risk	Mitigation Strategy
Technology Risks	Nonexistent or insufficient technology to support teleworker job duties and expectations	Strategic technology/telework planning, technology checklists and guidelines
	Technology failures/operational issues	Technology support/help desk, peer communications
Operational Risks	Teleworker underperformance	Goal-setting, performance evaluations, clear telework agreements and teleworker expectations
Social Risks	Poor work-life balance/low job satisfaction	Performance monitoring and measurement, goal-setting, appropriate teleworker selection, ability to withdraw from telework
	Adverse reactions from co-workers	Regular communications, monitoring and distribution of all workloads, teleworker training for non-teleworkers
Organizational Risks	Management resistance	Pilot programs, education, training, peer pressure, disciplinary action
	Lack of face-to-face communication	Teleconferencing, regular on-site meetings
	Lack of teleworker visibility to management	Career development, regular communication between teleworkers, on-site peers and managers, engagement in office activities and recreational opportunities

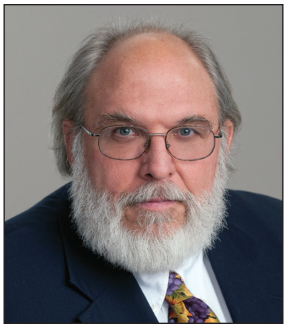
Management resistance can be overcome by first addressing managers' concerns, second, by educating managers on how to manage teleworkers (and educating teleworkers on how they are to be managed), and finally, by supporting telework in the federal workforce with executive champions such as Office of Personnel Management Director John Berry, an ardent supporter of telework. Research has shown that key elements of overcoming management resistance include management supported pro-telework initiatives, pilot programs, and support from professional organizations.

Case Study 1: Defense Information Systems Agency

The Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA) is one of the pioneers in implementing telework within the federal government and the Department of Defense (DoD). Telework at DISA started in 2001 after an appropriations bill was passed in 2000 (Public Law 106-346), which included a mandate that each agency establish a policy under which eligible employees may participate in telecommuting to the maximum extent possible. Today, there are approximately 3,500 approved applications for teleworking in DISA. This represents a significant expansion over the 50 initial workers in 2001. The current maximum telework schedule is now three days per week.

Establishing policy for equipment use was one of the easiest hurdles at DISA. A more difficult hurdle was the cultural change required for telework. A key to successfully implementing telework at DISA was that agency senior leadership, including the director, embraced telework and championed the practice. Based on their own previous experience in industry, several members of DISA's Senior Executive Service assuaged the concerns among some of their colleagues by sharing their experience of telework as a practice that works. They emphasized the importance of setting performance standards and ensuring employees know what is expected of them.

DISA human resources specialist Aaron Glover reports, however, that some managers still worried that, "If I can't see them, how do I know what they're doing?" Glover points out, however, that even if an employee is in the office, it's not possible to watch them 100 percent of the time, to know their every action. In order to overcome this issue, DISA did extensive briefings to SES-level managers and their subordinates on performance measurement and management in a telework environment.



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Case Study 2: U.S. Patent and Trademark Office

Telework at USPTO started in 1997 in the Trademark Office with 18 examining attorneys who partnered to share offices on the campus and work from home a couple of days per week. Agency-wide the telework initiative has grown to over 5,500 people teleworking on a regular and recurring basis.

USPTO also placed great emphasis on management training. According to Danette Campbell, senior advisor for telework at USPTO: "I believe that for folks to be in management positions, whether they are managing teleworkers or not, there should be more in-depth training." PTO offers management training in an effort to increase the skills of managers of teleworkers. The nature of the training, mostly facilitated discussion, is primarily about managing people, whether or not they are teleworkers. The same kinds of management activities should be done in both bricks-and-mortar and virtual environments. Ongoing communication is critical, and perhaps the most important concept in managing teleworkers.

Case Study 3: Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation

Telework at FDIC started in 2000–2001. FDIC currently has more than 8,000 employees. In 2009, approximately 27 percent of these were recurring teleworkers (defined as teleworking once, twice, or three times per week). The number of episodic teleworkers (defined as those who telework on short, one-time type of projects) was also at 27 percent.

FDIC undertook two nationwide pilot programs:

- Home-based pilot program: The home-based pilot program was limited to the bank-examining employees. They were allowed to work from home any time they weren't examining regulated banks.
- Task-based pilot program: The task-based program was for the balance of the FDIC workforce, including managers and supervisors.

From a telework program manager's perspective, Susan Boosinger said she would like to find more ways to inspire reluctant managers to permit telework. Encouraging managers to try telework themselves can elicit the "ah-hah" moment when they recognize the benefits and develop into program supporters. There are still pockets of managers who believe that in order to work effectively, an employee must be at their office desk. Boosinger anticipates that in the next five to ten years, telework will become a mainstream practice, and management resistance will disappear.

To overcome this resistance, Boosinger cites the best three methods: "Education, education, and education!" Providing telework education teaches managers the benefits of telework and how to successfully manage teleworkers. Also, making managers accountable for supporting telework for their employees might be persuasive in increasing telework participation.

Case Study 4: National Institutes of Health

As of December 2009, there were 18,440 full- and part-time government employees working at NIH. As of May 2010, 30 percent (a total of 5,624 people) of eligible employees were teleworking.

According to NIH telework coordinator, Shirley LaBella, NIH has many of the same challenges and difficulties faced by other agencies in implementing telework. "I think we'll always have to address some managers' reservations about telework because employee issues continually evolve. I think we'll probably always have a feeling by some managers… that they want the person right there. They want to see them. Their presence means productivity," stated Dupuis. "This is a group that we work with and try to have a paradigm shift with, and we've been successful with that, no doubt."

NIH responded to this issue in several ways. Communication with managers proved to be a key in overcoming resistance. Managers were also encouraged to try small pilot programs. Even if an employee is allowed to telework only one day per pay period in the beginning, these pilots had the ability to demonstrate to managers that teleworkers can be effective and productive. Managers were also encouraged to try telework themselves to get a feel for how it works.

Recommendations for Managing in a Telework Environment

Agencies should develop effective measures of performance. While there were significant variations in the form of performance measurement, cost-benefit, and goals, each of the case study agencies emphasized the need for some form of measurement for teleworkers and managers. This could be in terms of work output, work quality, or some other relevant metric.

Managers must base individual evaluations on performance, not on presence. Knowing that a worker is in a particular place at a particular time is not useful as a measure of performance, unless they are attending a meeting, are a security guard, or are working on an assembly line. Managers will need to know what the worker is doing, and must be able to measure their performance in a meaningful way.

Agencies should place increased attention on "managing for results," and managers will have to manage proactively. With positions that are eligible for telework, location is largely irrelevant. Agencies will need to manage by measuring results, rather than by "butts in seats." Even teleworkers will not be at their desk for the entire eight to 10 hours of their workday, and shouldn't necessarily be expected to be. Most teleworkers will be every bit as accessible as those in the office. This may be a difficult concept for some managers, but if an employee can answer help desk calls from a remote location, and provide good customer service, wherein lies the problem? It's all in the measurement of results.

Managers should embrace a more proactive and "inclusive" management style. Just because someone is not physically present in the office does not mean that they should be excluded from meetings, conferences, and communication with the rest of the team. It is to everyone's benefit to include teleworkers in routine collaborative office activities.

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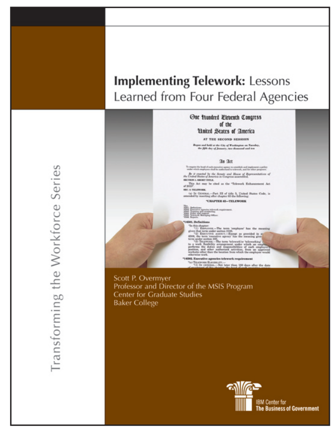

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