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# telework

*one size  
doesn't fit all*

## QUICK LOOK

- Differences in jobs and in people must be considered and addressed for work to continue to be performed effectively.
- Telework should not necessarily be offered to everyone.
- One of the biggest potential undoings of any new policy is backlash from employees who are not eligible to participate.

Telework is one of the hottest work-life initiatives on the market. It has been touted as a solution for finding work-life balance, increasing productivity, mitigating disasters, clearing congested roadways and helping the environment by lowering emissions. While the concept clearly has its benefits, it can also be easy to lose sight of the limitations on the feasibility and appropriateness for jobs within a particular organization.

It is important to remember that while many companies are reaping the benefits of a well-thought-out telework program, there are a number of factors to consider before diving into an all-inclusive set of telework policies. Every organization is different, every job is different and every employee is different. Changing where work is done is a major decision for an organization and an employee, and



differences in jobs and in people must be considered and addressed for work to continue to be effectively performed. Some of the major questions to ask include: Which jobs are most appropriate? Which employees are most appropriate? What equipment will be necessary? How will the program be perceived by those who don't qualify?

### **Which Jobs Should be Included?**

Unfortunately, not every job is suited for telework. Clearly, the coffee barista steaming lattes at the coffee shop down the street cannot do so from his/her own kitchen, but what about the accountant who is keeping track of sales? Telework benefits employees who need uninterrupted time, without co-workers dropping by, to perform their tasks. It is best-suited for work that involves, for example, writing, reviewing documents, data analysis, planning or research. It can also be a good fit for work that already involves considerable time on common telework tools, such as computers or the phone. One of the most cited concerns regarding telework is the decreased ability to monitor employee activity, so it is crucial that the work have some kind of measurable outcomes and that these outcomes have been agreed upon by the employer and employee.

One of the more recent developments in telework is the idea that telework can be a strategy for disaster mitigation. If telework is part of a continuity of operations plan, it is also important that the organization prioritize identifying "essential functions" and begin to determine if and how these functions can be carried out from a remote location.

Positions that may not be suitable for telework include those in which an employee must be physically present to perform his/her duties (e.g., police officer, nurse, receptionist). Organizations should think twice before

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making a telework program available to jobs that involve extensive face-to-face with the supervisor, other employees, clients or the general public, or jobs for which the organization cannot provide special facilities or equipment that is necessary (e.g., lab equipment). Traditionally, telework has not been an option for employees that need daily access to sensitive material which cannot be moved from the main office, such as classified materials. However, there is beginning to be more of an emphasis on how to make this data more secure electronically so that it can be accessed from outside the main office, especially in case of emergency.

Also realize that telework does not have to be an all-or-none option. If only a part of the job includes tasks that must be completed at the place of business, a form of telework may still be a viable alternative. The critical factor in this case is whether these tasks must be performed every day or whether they can be scheduled for certain days of the week. For example, a scientist that splits his/her time between conducting work in the field, reading recent research and writing journal articles may be able to work from home once a week to read and write. Finally, if questions remain about whether or not a particular job is a viable option for a particular worker, an organization can

set aside a trial period to see how successful telework is for both parties.

### **Which Employees Should Be Eligible?**

Even within a particular type of job, telework is not for everyone, nor should it necessarily be offered to everyone. The characteristics of the employees who participate in a telework program are a crucial component of the success of the program. Employees who work "virtually" should be organized, conscientious and motivated, and should require minimal supervision. They should be willing to set up a proper home office and be disciplined enough to work within limitations on work time. One common challenge for telework employees has been feelings of isolation and being cut off from colleagues. Though regular e-mail, teleconferences and visits to the office can help alleviate some of this, employees who thrive on interaction with co-workers should consider this carefully before signing up to work from home. Telework is not suitable for employees who require on-the-job training, who need close supervision, who need to provide close supervision or who simply thrive on interaction with co-workers.

If supervisors are involved in determining who teleworks, one way to minimize subjectivity is to require that

recent performance appraisals reflect performance that is more than “satisfactory” (e.g., scoring at least four out of five on average).

If an employee is considering teleworking, he/she should ask himself/herself the following questions and be prepared to discuss the answers with his/her supervisor:

- Are you prepared to make changes to your home (e.g., setting up a home office)?
- Can you work without regular monitoring or supervision?
- Are you successful in planning your own schedule?
- Will you be satisfied working without interacting with others in your office?
- Do you meet your deadlines?
- Are you computer literate enough to work consistently without assistance?
- Are you successful in communicating any problems to your supervisor or team?

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An organization should also consider the characteristics of the supervisor. An individual who is in charge of supervising telework participants should be willing to keep an open mind when trying out the telework arrangement and, most importantly, should be capable and willing to manage by results

rather than focusing on “face time.” If this is not the case, the organization may need to think about additional supervisor training.

#### **What Equipment will be Used?**

One key consideration in implementation of a telework program is what

equipment will be needed and who will pay for it. For some jobs, providing home equipment for employees is simply cost-prohibitive. Some employers provide telework employees with a computer, a high-speed Internet connectivity, an e-mail program and a phone line. In fact, uniform IT tools and support can facilitate a smooth transition to telework by providing some consistency in issues that arise and solutions to those issues. Some employers even choose to provide tools such as a fax machine, three-way calling and a voice-mail system.

A note about security: One of the biggest concerns among organizations considering telework is the potential for decreased security if employees are working from home. To maintain data protection, an employer should consider network security tools, such as firewalls and virtual private networks, and security applications for the computer, such as anti-virus software (some organizations even utilize encryption).

### What About the Employees Who are Not Eligible?

One of the biggest potential undoings of any new policy is backlash from employees who are not eligible to participate. When implementing a telework policy, it is imperative to consider and be responsive to potential jealousy from ineligible employees.


An important step to take to prevent telework backlash is to ensure eligibility criteria are well defined and transparent. All employees should be aware of this information from the get-go so that the program is not seen as a form of favoritism. This can be accomplished through a well-thought-out program that includes written policies and incorporates the considerations mentioned above, combined with an effective communication plan. In addition, there should be clear-cut

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expectations of employees who are teleworking. This sometimes takes the form of a “contract” that clarifies the rules and expectations, such as hours the employee will be available and when he/she should report to the office.

The pièce de résistance of most telework policies is the added flexibility the policy gives employees. Incorporating this concept into other jobs through other means can go a long way toward countering any perceptions of unfairness. This may include giving employees who are on a shift more flexibility with which shift they are working, allowing compressed workweeks or simply encouraging more flexible hours generally.

In short, telework can be a source of tremendous benefit to the employer and the employee. It can be a vehicle for employees to accomplish more in less time by giving them the ability to work without interruption, to save money on things like gas, parking and dry cleaning, to reduce commuting time and to spend more time with family. For employers, it can reduce demand for office space, increase employee productivity, reduce absenteeism, improve morale and job satisfaction, and improve recruitment and retention. However, it is also important to recognize that telework is not a catch-all solution that will work for everyone. Careful thought must

be put into what jobs will be eligible, what equipment is required for different jobs and which employees will be allowed to participate. Finally, if not all employees will be eligible to participate, it is crucial that requirements are transparent and understood and that the organization has put thought into other flexible alternatives that all employees will be able to use. 

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