
PROMISING PRACTICES IN STATE SURVEY AGENCIES

Issue Brief: Teleworking in State Survey Agencies

Introduction

Teleworking, broadly defined to encompass work practices based outside of the traditional office setting and facilitated by telecommunications (1), is increasingly common in the United States as a method to attract and retain talented employees, enhance productivity, and reduce overhead costs, while also helping employees better balance work responsibilities and family needs (2). Teleworking also may provide environmental benefits gained by reduced traffic, better air quality, and energy conservation (3). In 2004, 24.1 million employees teleworked at least one day per month, representing nearly 20% of the adult American workforce (4). Interest in teleworking among public sector employers also is on the rise, as demonstrated by Federal government initiatives promoting telework in Federal agencies, Federal funding for the Department of Labor "to encourage greater use of scheduling flexibility and telework options in the private sector" (5) and city and state agencies offering telework options to their employees.

Due to the travel required by surveyors, particularly in rural states, state survey agencies are experimenting with flexible work approaches that may help recruit and retain staff. Teleworking appears to be particularly well-suited to the typical tasks and responsibilities of surveyors given the high volume of time spent away from the office for facility visits, the capacity to complete and transmit required documentation from a home office, and the facility visit and documentation requirements that serve as inherent mechanisms to help structure day-to-day activities and monitor performance. The frequent face-to-face interaction required during surveys and occasional office meetings help minimize potential feelings of social isolation, a common concern about teleworking.

Summary of State Examples

This report describes the telework programs¹ in place at the state survey agencies in Indiana, Mississippi, North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. The information presented is based on interviews with agency staff and review of documentation supporting the telework programs.

The key features of the five telework programs, their impact, and lessons learned from the agencies' telework experience are summarized in this section. Detailed information for each state's program is presented in state-specific descriptions.

Key Features

The telework programs of the five featured state survey agencies differ in scope, design, and functioning. The sizes of the telework programs vary from three teleworking surveyors in Wyoming to 105 in Wisconsin. Program duration ranges from over 15 years in Indiana to less than one year in Wisconsin. The Indiana agency requires telework arrangements for all long-term care and Intermediate Care Facility for the Mentally Retarded (ICF/MR) surveyors, while the Mississippi agency offers the telework option to all long-term care surveyors. Participation in the Wisconsin agency's telework program is required for surveyors from all program types hired after March 2005 and optional for surveyors on staff prior to that time. The North Dakota and Wyoming agencies limit the proportion of teleworkers to maintain a balance of office-based and home-based surveyors, all of whom are trained in multiple

¹ Although not necessarily used by state survey agencies to describe their programs, the term *telework* encompasses home- and community-based workplace practices and is used in this issue brief for purposes of consistency.

program types. The agencies differ in the equipment they supply to teleworking staff, although most provide laptop computers and pay for home Internet service installation and monthly fees. Most of the agencies use or plan to use ASPEN Survey Explorer, and teleworkers in North Dakota and Wisconsin also have home access to the Automated Survey Processing Environment (ASPEN) Central Office (ACO).²

Impact

Teleworking is perceived to have positively affected many aspects of agency operations. Four agencies (all except Indiana) conducted pilot programs or trial periods to work through logistical, technical, and policy issues prior to implementing permanent telework programs. The Wisconsin agency's pilot program included an evaluation of the impact of teleworking on various aspects of job performance and satisfaction. The Mississippi, North Dakota, and Wisconsin agencies have analyzed impacts of teleworking on travel costs. Other evidence supporting the impact of the telework programs is largely anecdotal, drawn from observations of supervisors and management staff as well as intermittent verbal feedback from teleworking and office-based staff.

Based on cost analyses conducted in three states (Mississippi, North Dakota, and Wisconsin) and less formal examination in the others, the agencies have not identified significant travel cost savings as a result of their telework programs. Only the North Dakota and Wisconsin agencies have had or anticipate cost savings due to reduced office space. Teleworking has been particularly useful for reducing office commute time for the four agencies with only one office location in the state (Indiana, Mississippi, North Dakota, and Wyoming).

² CMS expects the states to manage and maintain the security policies and procedures of those employees working from remote locations. It is a state responsibility to verify and validate users through a state sponsored "challenge response" authentication process, thereby allowing users access to both state and federal data systems.

The agencies commonly credit teleworking as a factor in effectively expanding recruitment efforts beyond competitive metropolitan areas, resulting in larger candidate pools and increased access to professionals in rural areas. Teleworking also has increased agencies' flexibility to retain valued staff who are required to relocate due to family commitments. Staff at the Mississippi, North Dakota, and Wyoming agencies perceive that productivity, teamwork, and communication have remained effective under the telework systems, perhaps partly attributable to focused agency efforts to promote communication and ensure equitable workload across staff. Job satisfaction and morale appear to have been enhanced for teleworkers at these agencies. Wisconsin's pilot program evaluation reflected similar perceptions, finding that staff productivity, teamwork, communication, job satisfaction, and morale were maintained or improved by telework, although workload increased for some office staff as a result of obtaining information from on-site files on behalf of teleworking staff. Findings on increased job satisfaction and morale for teleworkers is anticipated by agency management to translate into higher retention rates.

Morale issues for office-based staff due to concern about teleworker productivity have arisen in one of the agencies (North Dakota) that employs staff through both office-based and telework arrangements; however, agency management indicate that teleworking surveyors accomplish more surveys on average than the office-based staff. The North Dakota and Wyoming agencies note that reduced travel time to conduct facility complaint visits and revisits has been an additional benefit of having teleworking staff located in various regions of the state.

Lessons Learned

Agency experience underscores the importance of strong organizational IT capabilities for implementing and maintaining an effective and efficient telework program. The North Dakota agency extols the perceived benefits to teleworker productivity and job satisfaction of secure home access to ACO. The introduction of

teleworker ACO access also appeared to increase job satisfaction for North Dakota's office-based surveyors as it reduced their time committed to assist teleworking colleagues with report revisions and also their concern about teleworkers' productivity. Agencies recommend establishing communication mechanisms to encourage feedback on problems encountered and suggestions for improving the telework system, particularly during initial implementation. Promoting routine opportunities for face-to-face interaction with peers and supervisors is strongly recommended; various policies on required office time for teleworking surveyors are utilized by the five featured agencies.

Noted characteristics of effective teleworkers include self-motivation, self-discipline, strong organizational skills, and independence. In view of the central role of e-mail communications and specialized computer software programs for teleworking surveyors, computer capabilities also should be considered when interviewing potential new surveyors. The agencies advocate developing clear documentation on telework

References

- 1 – Di Martino, Vittorio. The High Road to Teleworking. International Labor Organization, 2001.
- 2 - International Telework Association and Council, 2001
- 3 - www.ivc.ca/governments/usa/federalprogram.htm, 2005
- 4 - <http://www.ivc.ca/studies.us.html>, 2005
- 5 - <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/08/20040805-6.html>

policies and procedures and requiring teleworkers to sign a program agreement that explicitly states the agency's right to revoke telework status. Safety checklists guiding teleworkers in self-assessment of the home-based office environment also are suggested by several agencies. Training specific to teleworking is useful for surveyors and supervisors, highlighting the changes effected on traditional work processes.

Conclusion

Overall, the agencies appear to have successfully integrated their telework programs into daily operations, and all plan to continue their programs. Cost savings noted to date have been limited to reduced office space expenditures for some agencies. However, the perceived benefits of teleworking for surveyor retention, recruitment, and perhaps even productivity, are anticipated to lead to long-term savings. In the shorter term, teleworking has been found to increase flexibility and job satisfaction for surveyors seeking greater balance between work responsibilities and family demands.