

CREATING
A
SUCCESSFUL
TELECOMMUTING PROGRAM

By

Wanda E. Flowers
Chief Counsel
Sunoco, Inc.
Labor EEO and Employment

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	Page 3
What is Telecommuting.....	Page 4
Why Consider Telecommuting.....	Page 5
Creating an Effective Telecommuting Program.....	Page 8
Ideal Candidate for a Telecommuting Program.....	Page 8
Suitable Jobs for Telecommuters.....	Page 9
The Remote Office.....	Page 10
Conclusion.....	Page 11

CREATING A SUCCESSFUL TELECOMMUTING PROGRAM

Introduction

Recently, many law firms have allowed their key personnel to work from home or from smaller satellite offices. Other firms have been inquiring about ways to allow telecommuting to occur. For law firms and other professional firms and associations, changes in culture and technology over recent years make telecommuting an interesting option to consider. Factors to consider in arriving at a decision include the steadily rising costs to set up and maintain the traditional work environment, decreasing appropriateness, from a business perspective, of the traditional work environment and new technologies providing virtual office capabilities, with potentially greater benefits than traditional office solutions.

Moreover, in today's fast paced world, the old model for the professional work environment is often less appropriate. Thirty years ago professional services were usually provided in a central city environment. In many cases those services were provided by professionals typically working a normal business day. In many metropolitan areas this is no longer the case. Most business is no longer conducted in the central business district, but in many locations spread all over the metropolitan area. The work day has expanded with clients often expecting, even demanding, to reach their service representative, including attorneys, at odd hours throughout the day or the evening, particularly where the client base is spread over several time zones. Finally, many people need greater flexibility in their working patterns due to changes in personal

demands. Telecommuting can provide very attractive alternatives permitting flexibility to both the employee and clients.

The concept of telecommuting has been around for a relatively short period of time. In 1985, Boas Shamir and Ilan Salomon published “Work-at-Home and the Quality of Working Life” in The Academy of Management Review. In 1986, Telecommuting: How to Make it Work for You and Your Company was published by Gil E. Gordon and Marcia M. Kelly. At that time 17.3 million Americans were already involved in some kind of telecommuting program. According to one study conducted in 2007, nearly 40% of the companies in the United States have telecommuting work policies. Approximately 27 million people work from home.

What is Telecommuting?

Telecommuting is typically a volunteer arrangement that allows an employee to work from an alternate workplace. In this flexible work arrangement, an employee can work from home or from a satellite location. Under a telecommuting arrangement, an employee works varying hours at the office and at the alternate location. Telecommuting moves the work to the workers, instead of the workers to the work. It substitutes telecommunications for the trip to and from the workplace. When considering a program, employers should do a cost-benefit analysis of implementing a program. Telecommuting differs from telework, which is an arrangement that allows an employee to work permanently from home.

Why Consider Telecommuting

I. Employer Benefits

A. Cost Efficiency

Telecommuting programs lead to real estate savings to the employer. There is a reduction in the amount of floor space used in offices, which means fewer desks, and copiers. Moreover, telecommuters have the ability to share space when they travel to the office. If an effective telecommuting program is in place, employers are in a position to control expansion expenses. Because the positions are carefully selected, relocation costs and hiring expenses are reduced.

B. Recruitment and Retention Tool

Telecommuting also increases an employer's ability to retain experienced employees and thereby reduces the company's recruiting costs. Telecommuting increases an employer's flexibility in recruiting new individuals, improving the odds of hiring excellent employees. It may enable an employer to recruit or retain an employee who is otherwise unavailable because of geographical restraints or time limitations. It attracts new talent and helps retain high performance employees. Moreover, it increases the labor pool, making employers attractive to semi-retired workers, homemakers, and to people with disabilities. Companies demonstrating through their policies that they understand that employees have lives outside of the office are more attractive to job candidates.

C. Increases Productivity

Telecommuters are typically more focused workers because they are not subjected to office-related distractions and interruptions. Companies generally find that employees

who telecommute are 10 – 30% more productive. Telecommuting can help create a culture that emphasizes flexibility and cooperation to achieve goals, thereby creating a results-oriented and more productive culture. Because of greater flexibility, there is less down time. Employees have the ability to work on snow days and during sick leave.

D. Decreases Absenteeism

Employees who telecommute take two to four fewer sick days each year than other employees. The National Safety Council says that on an average workday, 1 million employees are absent from work because of stress related problems. Telecommuters can work from home when a minor illness or sick child keeps them from the office. Telecommuting programs reduce the number of unscheduled absences and any costs associated with those absences.

II. Direct Benefits to the Employee

A. Improved Employee Morale

People who telecommute see it as an employee reward. It is a vote of confidence from their employer. Telecommuters have more control over their time than their in-office counterparts. This lets them work at their peak times and adds flexibility to their overall day and schedules. Both trust and increased flexibility can increase the employee's job satisfaction, reducing turnover, and increasing the company's ability to attract excellent employees. It helps employees accommodate child care and elder care issues.

B. Reduces Commute Time and Expense

Major benefits also accrue to employees who telecommute. Those who do not drive into work don't have to pay daily or monthly parking expenses and they are spared lengthy commute time to work. According to a study conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), offering telecommuting options is among the top five approaches being used by companies to help employees deal with the rising cost of gasoline.

C. Improved Health

Employees who routinely put in long hours or overtime at work increase their risk of becoming ill. Companies expend substantial amounts on medications for high blood pressure, heart disease, depression, diabetes, chronic infections, cancer and even death. Most of these conditions have been directly linked to stress in the workplace. This increased stress can easily lead to burn out and reduced productivity on the job. Telecommuters can work whenever they're most comfortable, thereby reducing the level of stress associated with work.

D. Work-Life Balance

Working from home gives a worker more time by eliminating the commute time. A more flexible schedule means that workers can arrange work around life activities, like a parent's birthday or a child's soccer game. Under a telecommute arrangement, the employee is not forced to miss life events.

Creating an Effective Telecommuting Program

Developing a telecommuting program depends on several factors, including the organization size, business and service offerings, strategic goals, management and culture. A detailed plan that shows implementation phases, costs, process steps, resources required and expected results must be created as well. The key to a successful program is to set and manage measurable goals.

When creating a telecommuting program, it is essential to develop a comprehensive telecommuting policy and to identify a coordinator to implement the policy. The Telecommuting Coordinator is responsible for the day to day operations of the program. The person assuming this role must organize training for telecommuters, determine which jobs are suitable for telecommuting and ensure compliance with federal, state and local laws as well as Company policies, procedures, and guidelines. Moreover, the Coordinator should also be responsible for ensuring that the employees understand, read and sign the policies.

Ideal Candidates for a Telecommuting Program

It is important to determine who the best candidates are for telecommuting. Not all employees will be successful candidates for such a program. Employees who have performance or conduct issues are not the best candidates. Since it is an employee privilege to be a telecommuter, the ideal candidates possess more than minimal enthusiasm for the job. They are used to setting and meeting deadlines and have reasonably high levels of job performance. Successful telecommuters are self-motivated, independent thinkers who are able to work productively on their own. They are well

disciplined, have excellent work habits, are well organized, and can plan ahead.

Telecommuting positions are primarily for salaried individuals, not hourly employees.

In addition, employers can establish specific criteria to determine which employees are permitted to participate in a telecommuting program. Tenure with the company can be used as a criterion in the decision-making process. Many companies require a minimum number of months of consecutive employment in order for employees to be eligible for telecommuting. By doing so, employers reward loyal staff and feel confident that these employees will succeed in this type of arrangement.

To succeed in a telecommuting arrangement, the employee must also have good communication skills and collaborate well with others. Communication can take many forms, including e-mail, telephone, internet chats, and face-to-face meetings. A process must be developed that provides clear deadlines for all assignments with lots of feedback. The main reason for these criteria is that telecommuters will not be monitored regarding how much time they spend working each day, but rather they will be evaluated on the basis of their output.

Suitable Jobs for Telecommuters

Some jobs are more suited for telecommuting than others. The best positions for telecommuting are independent results oriented positions where performance is measured by outcomes. Telecommuting is ideal for data processing jobs or for jobs requiring intensive thinking and writing tasks. Employees doing research and policy development or telephone tasks will likely be successful telecommuters. Project work or work involving the review of cases, including legal work, will be suited for telecommuters.

Other jobs suitable for telecommuting include sales, marketing, customer service and management.

Even an employee performing a job that is well suited for telecommuting should be expected to come into the office pursuant to a set schedule. Successful programs usually have employees spend time each week in a centralized “core office”. When in the office, employees have access to heavy duty printers, copiers, and other office support systems. Time in the office also keeps everyone involved with the office team. Some companies have a “core day” when everyone is expected to be in the office. Having a “core day” allows management to schedule meetings or social gatherings to address feelings of isolation, lack of interaction with colleagues, and out-of-sight out-of-mind fears that these employees might harbor. Schedules should be posted that include information on how to reach telecommuters. This information is important so that if an emergency arises, employees and managers can reach each other immediately.

The Remote Office

Several other policies need to be put into place to cover the remote office itself. Compliance with OSHA requirements (safe working conditions within the home) have to be considered. Each telecommuting site needs to be visited to make sure it meets all the requirements in terms of equipment to operate and in terms of environmental considerations. Broadband policies need to be developed that clearly designate who will pay for the employee’s high internet access which will be necessary for the employee to access e-mail as well as ensure that the employee remains connected to the Company network. A decision needs to be as to whether telecommuters will be provided a

company laptop or use their own equipment. It must be determined who will provide other items, including desk, chairs, bookcases, filing cabinets, telephone lines and cell phones.

Additionally, Employers need to establish effective security policies. Because employees working from home provide another avenue for security threats to enter the workplace, it must be decided who is responsible for ensuring a secure environment in the remote location. Safety and other environmental concerns need to be addressed. Employers need to decide who will be responsible for insurance, loss or damage to equipment or loss of data. Further, the program policies and procedures should establish how expenses will be reimbursed.

Conclusion

Many benefits accrue from a carefully planned and successfully managed telecommuting program. What's crucial to understand is the purpose of telecommuting. Telecommuting is not a substitute for day care. It's not free vacation time. Employers offer it to make employees' lives easier and keep them productive when they can't come to the office. The goal is to create happy employees through a better working environment. It's also important to remember that telecommuting policies and preferences can vary from company to company. Some employers may allow telecommuting for the entire work week, while others may prefer that telecommuting employees do so only once or twice a week.

Telecommuting programs require planning and will take time, patience and a certain amount of experimentation to organize. For the new telecommuter, there is

always an adjustment period – sometimes two or three months. It takes time to learn how to manage time, communications and projects while working in more than one location.

Well designed, well organized, and well managed telecommuting programs can increase productivity, improve client satisfaction, and result in greater employee morale.

Certainly recent advances in technology make it possible to seriously consider telecommuting as an option.