Federal Telework: Obstacles and Opportunities

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Whitepaper Overview:

Despite over ten years of increasingly explicit legislation that encouraged, and now requires, telework, less than 7% of federal employees do so with any regularity. Global Workplace Analytics latest white paper, Federal Telework: Obstacles and Opportunities, offers insights from agency leaders on what’s holding telework back and what can be done to move it forward. As in the private sector, the biggest barrier is cultural. Managers need to learn how to manage by results, not presence. Beyond that, federal telework managers say they desperately need better training and better access to collaboration tools such as videoconferencing.

Highlights:

Despite long-standing laws and mandates that require federal employees to telework to the maximum extent possible, only 32% were considered eligible in 2012, and less than 7% did so at least once a week.

Eighty-eight percent of those surveyed say they would telework if they could.

Out of a federal workforce of 685,000 employees, only 2.1% telework three or more days a week.

Telework growth from 2006 to 2011

- Federal government: -1.7%
- Private sector for-profit: +39.4%
- Not-for-profit: +34.3%
- State government: +54.6%
- Local government: +51.5%

If those who were eligible in 2012 (32%) and who wanted to telework (88%) did so at the same 2-day-per-week average as existing government teleworkers, the federal government could have saved over $6 billion a year and reduced greenhouse gases by more than two million tons a year. The reduction in oil imports as a result of gas savings—even when necessary driving on telework days is figured in—could have totaled more than 5 million barrels of oil and almost half a billion dollars a year.

In the DC area, 28% of federal employees are considered extreme commuters thanks to commutes of over 90 minutes a day. By teleworking they could save 22 eight-hour days a year they’re now wasting on the road. They’d also save as much as $6,600 a year in commuting and other expenses (net of extra home energy costs).
Referring to himself as the Teleworker in Chief, the President has repeatedly stated his position in support of telework (he works from home, and is very mobile, after all).

On average, federal offices are occupied less than half the time and only 70% are occupied during peak hours.

What's the obstacle to telework? Mainly middle management resistance—72% of those surveyed report it had a moderate or greater impact. Sixty-five percent say it’s a cultural issue—government managers don’t know how to manage by results. Insufficient access to technology was an obstacle according to half of the respondents.

The solution? Training in results-based management, greater accountability, and better access to collaboration tools. Nearly 90% (87%) of the survey respondents said easier online file access, collaboration tools, and access to video conferencing would 'make a difference, likely help or definitely help'.

Over 60% of the respondents felt that providing a budget specifically for telework training and technology would ‘likely’ or ‘definitely’ help. And another 25% said it ‘might’ make a difference. The need for results-based management training tied with “culture change” training for the highest ‘very important’ ratings. Manager training was rated ‘very important’ or ‘important’ by nearly 100% of respondents.

For a technologically adept workforce in a global, mobile workplace, management styles that were born in the days of sweatshops and typing pools don’t work at best, and sabotage success at worst. A sea of desks with a manager standing on a balcony counting heads isn’t useful, or even possible, today.

**Quotable quotes from survey write-in comments:**

"When it comes down to a choice between buildings and people, it's the people that matter—they're the productive assets."

"Technology helps. Even just being able to see one another's availability on chat, was a big help."

"Telework opens the door on many topics. It's not a silo topic. Mobility is in everything we do and as such should be integrated with other policies and organizational goals."

"The distinctions between mobile work and telework are sometimes polarizing. It ought to be just work."

"One of the side benefits of telework is that it forces you to get comfortable with technology tools that can make you more effective when you are in the office too."

"We are living in an increasing global and mobile world. It would be a rare employee who doesn’t at least occasionally work away from their desk or collaborate with others using technology."

"There is not enough time for innovation in government. Much of the daily work in government is simply keeping the fires from being too bright. There's always a new priority."

"I think the conversation on telework and mobility is important because it opens the door on other conversations the government is too afraid to have. For example, it forces conversation on:
- Entitlement
- Special treatment
- Degree of Trust between managers and employees
- Management through line of sight vs. outcomes
- Identifying and communicating actionable outcomes"