

The TeleWorkSpace

by John Edwards, Chairman, NVTC Telework Subcommittee

Welcome to the first in a series on Teleworking, or Telecommuting, as it is also called.

Over the next several months, we'll cover many of the issues, myths, must-dos, challenges, tools and resources that can help you either get a program going or sharpen up and/or scale up an existing program.

Telework strategies can help you:

- Remain competitive in a fierce global economy,
- Have a more comprehensive Operational Continuity Plan,
- Recruit & Retain skilled staff,
- Be an "Employer of Choice" by providing your staff reasonable work-life balance, and;
- Contribute to reducing our destructive and wasteful traffic congestion; if not, we will lose all federal highway funding.

So, to kick off, we'll set out the "Five Keys of a Successful Program."

1. The support of a top "Executive Champion" must be totally unequivocal.

Any hint of a lukewarm attitude toward telework will be seen as an opportunity to sabotage the program with impunity. This person is often, but not always, the person who helped to establish the Business Case for telework in the first place.

It must be made clear to all staff, at all levels, that telework in your company is not just a fad, that it is to be adopted whenever practical, and that they are to proactively make it available as a work option, along with flex-time, job sharing, or compressed workweeks. Telework is adopted as a sound business policy to benefit the employer, employees and society at large.

2. Develop a consensus of expectations for the program. Answer the question "Why should we be interested in implementing telework?" in terms of your organization's mission, strategic plan, culture, functional organization structure (such as traditional pyramid or a flat teamwork, virtual or strictly face-time styles), level of union/employee involvement, cross-organization communication and collaboration habits, and legal structure.

3. Put together a Project Planning Team, consisting of the stakeholders, which should be led by the Telework Program Manager, who should have a genuinely open channel of communication with the "Executive Champion," identified above. The stakeholders *must* all be included from the start. Include the following disciplines or activities, even if such a department doesn't exist:

HR – important because, even though they may fear that their empire is threatened (it isn't) in actuality, it will grow in importance. Your Human Resources Department's involvement will be critical in the establishment and adjustment of policies and procedures. They will be carrying out an indispensable activity: training.

Finance – important because they won't believe your numbers unless they are involved in producing them. They can generate the activity-based cost identification needed for your business case.

Facilities/Real Estate – important because they too may think that their empire is threatened (it isn't) and it too will actually grow in importance. Only they can bring about the genuine, not notional or anticipated, savings in real estate, which often provide the biggest bottom line benefits.

IT – important because they determine the most cost-effective solutions to provide the connectivity needed to get the job done in terms of speeds, levels of security and type – dial-up, DSL, cable, a WAN, VPN, wireless, etc. IT will be a great booster for telework – this is their baby after all!

Managers – important because they often fear their authority is threatened by not knowing how to control out-of-sight staff and therefore think that telework will stop them getting the job done. They need to learn how to feel comfortable managing by results. Without buy-in, they can easily sabotage your telework program.

Legal/Risk Management – important because they can identify activities that might get out of control, such as worker's comp and third-party insurance, federal laws concerning pay for hours worked, Health and Safety, IPR, software licensing, and participant selection criteria. In addition, they will be writing the policy changes and agreements needed to articulate the program.

Employees (and unions, if applicable) – important because intellectual capital is your most valuable asset and it will cost you dearly to replace it. They may think that they'll have to carry more workload and might harbor feelings of resentment and jealousy because they are not having money and attention invested in them. Their buy-in can make or break a teleworking program.

External "Clients" (depending on your relationship with them) – important because they justify the organization's existence: "No customers, no money...no food." (Jeffrey Gitomer, the "Sales Guru.")

4. **Make sure you have Regular Performance Reviews in place** and used. This is the one thing, above all else, that will pay off ten-fold. Without it, how can you decide, without potential charges of favoritism, bias or discrimination, which 15 of 25 applicants should telecommute and who will be included in the first phase to be rolled out? How can you say "no" to Richard and "yes" to Jane?

5. **Carry out a Baseline/Benchmarking Survey.** This is needed to provide data against which to judge the program later; you can't tell how you are doing unless you know from where you started. It identifies the investment needed to equip teleworkers, training needs are identified through the attitudinal questions, and it provides the basis for the detailed Business Case (or cost/benefit) analysis.

It is important to note that these are suggestions of ideal telework practices, but how many of these items you need to have in place before the first teleworker gets online that first morning depends on how large an organization you have, and how strong your aversion to risk. Most smaller employers know the answers to most of these keys intuitively, so decisions will come easily. Even if you decide not to implement all of these suggestions, at least review and consider each one. ■

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