

TELECOMMUTER/TELEWORKER SELECTION-

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I'm most often asked by managers considering the implementation of a telework strategy either "Why shouldn't we only allow those who volunteer to telecommute to do it?" or "I have so many staff who want to telecommute that I don't know which ones to choose." Two questions that can cause an unhealthy amount of expensive aggravation – EEOC and all that – if not dealt with properly.

To use the extremes of the situation to demonstrate the range of the issue: either you can try to avoid the problem by allowing everyone to telework or you have a selection problem. On the other hand, if you employ people only as teleworkers, you especially have selection issues to deal with – how do you justify NOT employing people to work from their home offices, who generally apply in the course of business to work for you?

This article will help you identify the potential traps surrounding telework program participant selection and provide some guidance on how to avoid them.

Do you have the required corporate culture?

You have to be feeling pain of some kind! It might be pressure to drive cost out of your bottom line – from a VC or foreign competition, an inability to recruit/retain staff, i.e., cost avoidance. Without the pain, you will find it difficult to overcome the inevitable resistance to change that will come with the shift from a "line of sight" management style to a "results-oriented" one. These drivers help the organization to absorb and support change more easily.

I'm sure a lack of pain is why government at all levels fails so miserably to implement telework programs – there is no 800 lb. gorilla breathing down their collective necks! They know that if they wait long enough, the new government will tire, change or can be obfuscated by experienced civil servants – watch "Yes Minister" on PBS for a demonstration!

Unfortunately, managing a distributed workforce requires results oriented management, and some managers are uncomfortable with the more confrontational atmosphere that accompanies extracting quantifiable commitments from their staff. In the enterprise sector, staff will either come to understand that they should "get with results oriented management" or that their employer is not compatible with their career aspirations.

Do you have an effective annual performance review process?

This is probably the most important prerequisite to keep you out of the courts! Without a performance review process that is not only honest, but also timely, you will be leaving yourself open to potential charges of discrimination and/or favoritism.

Too often, performance reviews are dishonest. In order to avoid hurting the feelings of the reviewee and to spare the reviewer discomfort – after all, they do work together – the review doesn't say what often should be said, resulting in glowing reviews all round! People like to spare themselves from uncomfortable encounters. This is very cozy, but without honesty, how can you justify selecting one employee over another unless

you have a credible record to support why you made a particular decision?

Additionally, review programs that only provide "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" categories are totally useless. Judgements should be on a scale of 1-5 at least; however you describe the categories of achievement is irrelevant. Otherwise, how can you accurately differentiate between candidates? Tell me, how

many managers craving a peaceful life will judge their staff other than satisfactory? The Feds are moving toward a "0" or "1" style categorization system – again, maybe symptomatic of its systemic problem?

In conclusion: establish a performance review program that can protect you from accusations of inequity in your teleworker selection process.

Is the work to be teleworked location-independent?

Is the candidate's activity "teleworkable"? Does the work absolutely have to be carried out at the office all day and every day? Analyze the activity performed. Do not be blinded by the job title. A Fire Chief can be more productive writing timely incident reports from a home office, while (s)he can remember the event, rather than sitting in the fire house being distracted by the XFL® and debating whether to buy the next meal ingredients from Safeway or Costco.





To help determine whether a job is teleworkable, establish metrics that take into consideration and weigh the importance of:

- Whether the work activity requires in-office access to confidential or other information available only at the office.
- Whether the job requires personal contact and a face-to-face with colleagues and clients
- Whether the work can be easily moved to and from the office (electronically or physically)
- Whether task outcomes can be measured and monitored using IT
- Whether overriding security considerations prohibit remote working.

It's the analysis of what's done, NOT the job title, that determines a teleworkable activity or job.

Do your employees have the right stuff?

Often an employer wishing to accommodate valued employees, suffering from circumstances beyond their control, in order to retain the benefit of their services will allow them to telecommute. These exceptional circumstances might be related to bearing or adopting a child, to the chronic illness of a loved one, to recuperation from surgery or to accommodate a person with a disability that makes commuting too difficult.

Besides these special circumstances, which are relatively easy to legally justify and are always appreciated, selecting between apparently equally qualified employees can be difficult. Not everyone is suited to be a teleworker/telecommuter, especially because they tend to need to possess more of an independent entrepreneurial spirit. The main skill set criteria for the selection of a teleworker should include:

- The ability to work with minimal supervision and feedback
- A record of consistently following policy and procedures
- Good organizational skills – to structure time, meet deadlines, and control work flow
- Technological savvy
- Clear and consistent communication skills
- A record of reliability – few, if any, unexcused absences
- A suitable home office environment, including connectivity

Now you should understand why a “satisfactory/unsatisfactory” categorization is just not discerning enough for the teleworker selection process.

Do your managers have the right stuff?

So ... the teleworker selection process is buttoned up, but the other side of the coin is choosing which managers are suitable to be part of a telework program.

As I said in the intro, the managers who interact with telecommuters/teleworkers have to possess certain attributes. Even managers with none of their staff working remotely and so not directly involved in the program need to at least understand the work environment of those who are involved.

Managers of a distributed workforce should be:

- Comfortable using results-oriented management. Managers should not feel that their authority is undermined, threatened or weakened in any way because they can't see the heads of their staff protruding above their foxholes! Managers should not feel that “out of sight means out of control.”
- Experienced in easily identifying & setting objectives, goals, and milestones.
- Experienced in establishing metrics to monitor activities
- Technologically savvy – experienced w/relevant hardware, software, and equipment
- Able to clearly communicate expectations and standards
- Able to coach, mentor and counsel staff to help to ensure their good performance
- Able to evaluate performance and be gutsy enough to then reward (and discipline!) their staff to achieve the desired performance results
- Able to procure for the team the resources – IT connectivity, collaborative tools, etc., – needed to get the job done. Without the resources being available to achieve the results expected, managers have their hands tied before they start.

To Reiterate

- Feel the pain or resistance to change and inertia will win the day.
- When you identify the teleworkable positions by activity, not job title, the activity wins the day.
- Use a valid, consistent, honest performance review process for teleworkers and telework program managers or the EEOC and lawyers will win the day. ■

The International Telework Association and Council (ITAC) is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the economic, social and environmental benefits of telework (www.telecommute.org). Telework Network Inc., facilitates the implementation of telecommuting /telework programs from business case justification to rollout (www.teleworknetwork.com). Edwards is also Chair of the Telework Subcommittee of the NVTC Transportation and Telework Committee.