Telework: As a Business Improvement Strategy

Telework can build workforce diversity.

Telework, or telecommuting, is an employment arrangement in which an employee or contractor of a company works at a remote location (typically from home) and uses communications technology such as computers, telephones, video, and fax machines to interact with others in conducting company business.

More than 45 million Americans work remotely each year, and at least 8% of American workers have an employer that allows them to telework one day per month or more. There are many benefits for employers in addition to helping recruit and retain high performing workers:

- Reduced real estate costs and other overhead expenses;

- Increased productivity – fewer workplace distractions and interruptions;

- Reduced absenteeism (sick leave, family leave, personal leave);

- Greater employee loyalty and enthusiasm;

- Decentralization that reduces vulnerability of business operations;

- Continuity of operations during emergency situations.

Telework has advantages for employees, including employees with disabilities.

Telework is a valuable tool for workforce retention, since it appeals to many workers because of the flexibility it offers them in coping with the often conflicting demands of modern life. Telework is of particular interest to people with disabilities and their employers, because it offers a way to expand work opportunities in situations where it would otherwise be difficult to work.

For people with mobility limitations like spinal cord injury or multiple sclerosis, telework can remove transportation barriers and reduce the fatigue and stress associated with commuting and a non-stop 9:00 - 5:00 workday. Telework can also be a viable work option for people with conditions as diverse as mental illness, chronic fatigue or chronic pain, multiple chemical sensitivities, autism, and respiratory disease. For many people with chronic illnesses, symptoms fluctuate unpredictably, and telework can provide the flexibility needed to maintain long-term employment. In addition, because managers

are forced to evaluate tele-workers using performance-based measures, disability-related bias may be less likely to occur.

The greatest barrier to implementation of telework programs is employers' lack of information about, and experience with the practice. Employers initial concerns tend to evaporate with experience.

In addition to offering cost savings and enhanced productivity, telework allows businesses to retain employees who become disabled and might otherwise be unable to work. Businesses can easily and inexpensively implement some road-tested telework best practices including defined responsibilities, a communication plan, and signed agreements.

Perceived Potential Problem	Pertinent Research Finding
Lower worker productivity due to distractions at home	Supervisors reported improved or sustained productivity (100%) and improved overall performance (96.7%).
Higher operating costs to enable telework	One report estimated that telework results in corporate savings of up to $7,500 per employee per year. Employers can obtain an individualized estimate of the dollar advantages of telework using a cost-benefit analysis tool on the JALA International website, a premier telework consulting firm.
Data security concerns	Employer-provided equipment and software, as well as policies and procedures for data protection, help to safeguard data.
Strains on supervisory relationships, reduced operational efficiency and teamwork	Employers reported that productivity improved. Very few supervisors (less than 10%) felt that telecommuters required more frequent interaction or needed to be closely monitored.
Lower employee morale due to isolation	Employers reported improved employee morale and improved employee attraction and retention.

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