

## ***Telework Arizona: A State Government Innovation***

### **Overview**

The State of Arizona is one of the pioneers in telework. Nearly 20 years ago, state government began a pilot project in conjunction with AT&T to determine the feasibility of telework as a trip reduction strategy. In 1996, the Governor mandated a telework program for all major state departments, and subsequent governors have reinforced that program through new executive orders. The current goal is a minimum 20% participation rate among full-time, state employees in Maricopa County, which encompasses Phoenix and most of the state workforce. That goal has been achieved with more than 4,200 teleworkers identified in the latest reporting period. <sup>1</sup>

Conditional upon management approval, any state employee may telework, at any frequency. In reality most employees telework one or two days a week at their residences. Before an employee may telework, he/she must complete an 11-item survey to determine his/her suitability for telework. <sup>2</sup> Most state employees (83% in a survey of the workforce) believe their job tasks can be performed via telework, and currently there is a wide variety of jobs which are undertaken through telework: research and analysis, programming, administrative functions, technical analysis, claims review, medical transcription, and call center activities.

Because of the importance of telework to many employees, they often are willing to use their own equipment when departments and agencies are unable to provide computers and cell phones to employees. Some departments do loan equipment to employees to use at their residences. Others take advantage of a statewide nonprofit program of donated computers, which have been refurbished and then loaned to employees who otherwise could not telework.

Training for successful telework is considered essential in the State of Arizona. According to a state official, both teleworker training and supervisor training are required to participate and they undergo training together. Supervisors and teleworkers participate in several exercises, which help them anticipate what it will be like to work apart from the office one or more days a week. These exercises help them identify and resolve potential complications before they become problems. Understandings reached during these training sessions become part of a formal telework agreement, which is signed before telework begins.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that this information about teleworking pertains to all state teleworkers.

<sup>2</sup> That questionnaire is available at the following link:  
<http://www.teleworkarizona.com/telefiles/assess.asp>

## **Benefits of Telework**

Research and data collection have been an integral part and guide for the state's telework program since its inception. Arizona utilized an outside evaluator for a large assessment of its early telework activities, and results from that assessment continue to support the effort. Surveys still are used whenever a new agency begins its telework initiative.

**Increased Productivity** - Surveys have shown consistently that after a start-up period of six months, nearly all teleworkers and a large majority of their supervisors believe there is increased productivity from telework. The increased productivity is due to fewer interruptions and distractions, the ability of employees to work at peak performance times, and reduced stress from commuting. It was found also that telework employees work more effectively and perhaps harder—so that they will be able to continue teleworking.<sup>3</sup>

**Improved Morale** - For employees, there were benefits of improved morale and a more positive attitude toward their jobs, because of their ability to control some aspect of their work schedule.

**Other benefits** - Supervisors have become more focused on accomplishments, which often requires more communication between themselves and their employees about expectations, itself a positive activity.

- Increased communication about goals has reduced the amount of necessary supervisory time;<sup>4</sup>
- There have been no discernible differences among those who telework and those who do not in their rate of promotions, although there could be many reasons for this finding;
- Very few employees--only 11% of all teleworkers in the large evaluation--felt they were missing important workplace information when they teleworked, a result which is probably due to the predominant schedule of being away from their offices only one or two days a week; and
- A relatively small percentage of co-workers (one in four) who do not telework believe that teleworkers makes their job more difficult, perhaps because supervisors and teleworkers have training exercises dealing with the burden of telework on co-workers.

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<sup>3</sup> Ninety-two percent of the teleworkers and seventy-two percent of the non-teleworkers disagreed with the statement that they would get less work done if they worked from home part of the time.

<sup>4</sup> Only 24% of non-teleworkers, presumably mostly supervisors, believed that it takes more time to supervise a teleworker.

While the large majority of telework experiences in Arizona have been positive and nearly 20% of a large and diverse workforce is a notable accomplishment, there is still resistance and limitations placed on the number of teleworkers by some supervisors and senior level managers. Right now, only one in five state employees actually does work off-site even for a limited amount of their workweek. Nevertheless, state officials are very satisfied with the progress they have made, their current telework initiative, and future prospects.

**Teleworker A** *This administrator has an extensive history with telework. He worked previously for the State of Arizona, resigned, and then in 2005, was rehired as the statewide director of an administrative office. Currently he telecommutes one or two days per week and his weekly schedule varies due to a significant number of meetings outside the office, which occur because of his administrative responsibilities, training offsite, and personal, job-related volunteer service on boards of several nonprofits and Governor's Councils. He finds that telework is not only much more convenient but that it enhances his efficiency.*

**Teleworker B** *This employee has been performing research and analysis for about 11 years with a state government agency. Trained as a lawyer, he began telework five years ago once his department initiated telework after one of the gubernatorial directives. Currently, he works at home a few days each month on a flexible schedule.*

*His motivations for telework are primarily personal: to save time and avoid the commutes. Telework has proved beneficial for his convenience and has not detracted from his work performance. He believes his work output and work quality are the same regardless of where he works. And despite placing a high value on social interaction with co-workers and colleagues, he does not feel that intermittent telework has reduced his job satisfaction.*

*He believes teleworkers probably can supervise other teleworkers as well as office workers. Overall, he is satisfied with his telework arrangement and does not believe his career opportunities will be impeded. Working independently is the most important characteristic of a successful teleworker, according to this employee.*

### **Next Steps in Arizona**

Because of the positive experiences over the past decade with telework and the support for the program from different governors in both political parties, it is likely that telework will be used more aggressively by state agencies as a business strategy to attract and retain qualified employees. According to a state official with detailed knowledge of the program, that expansion may be quite pronounced in coming years as leaders and senior officials of departments and agencies recognize the strategic value of telework. Most new telework is likely to occur from adoption of telework by existing employees in mid-level job titles. A

small number of new telework positions may occur with new employees and at entry-level ranks. There will also be future positions that are virtual, that is positions that are full-time telework.

Most of the impetus for expansion of telework will be due to the state's need to attract and retain employees and be facilitated by technological improvements and a worsening of commuting conditions for state employees.

Yet increased telework for other purposes also may be a factor. For example, the Arizona Department of Administration in October 2006 incorporated telework as one pandemic planning strategy. All divisions were asked to identify their critical function employees and then lead them to internal websites where employees negotiated telework agreements with their supervisors, received instructions on available remote connectivity services, and performed their critical business functions from home as a test of emergency planning.

Arizona's progress has been quite remarkable not only for a state entity but for any type of organization. And they share freely their information about what has worked and what has not, including step-by-step suggestions for designing and implementing various stages of a telework program. Officials in other states and organizations have access to extensive practical information on the state's excellent website. See

<http://www.teleworkarizona.com/Handbook/prototype.htm> or the home page of the website: <http://www.teleworkarizona.com/>

*NOTE: This case study was a product of a 3-year federal Department of Labor telework research study.*