



Telework Insights:

A Current Look At Telework In The Federal Government And Promising Practices To Support A 21st Century Workforce

issue

The desire to telework among Federal employees and management support for telework appears to be at odds with each other—creating a missed opportunity for agencies and employees to maximize performance and engagement. There is a significant amount of research that highlights the benefits of telework to organizations, management, and employees.

insights

According to the 2018 Federal Work-Life Survey Report (FWLS), employees reported the use of telework improved performance (72%), increased the desire to stay at current agency (76%), improved morale (83%), and other outcomes that benefit both employees and management. Additional research indicates telework, as a work-life intervention, improves engagement by supporting employees' ability to manage their professional and personal responsibilities (OPM, 2016), and in turn, high engagement improves organizational performance.

implications

Telework, as a strategic business practice, is an effective tool to support management goals and overall organizational effectiveness. The Federal Government must continue to maximize flexible work arrangements to attract and retain top talent especially considering...

- 1) the anticipated increase of Federal Employees with family and dependent care responsibilities (from 36% to 64%),
- 2) the current record low unemployment rates, and
- 3) more than half of Federal employees express the desire for more telework opportunities (58%).

ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper serves as a current review of telework in the Federal Government, presenting current issues, insights, and implications for practice. This review is the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) continued commitment to support agencies to Actively Manage the Workforce and Improve Performance Management and Engagement, as prescribed by the current President's Management Agenda. The information presented is a review of research conducted by OPM and is intended to build evidence to improve program effectiveness. The featured OPM research sources used in this review include:

- **Federal Work-Life Survey Report (2018)** – OPM's first comprehensive and systematic evaluation of work-life programs and employee needs.
- **Status of Telework in the Federal Government Report to Congress (2010 – 2018)** – OPM's required annual report to Congress addressing the telework programs of each Executive agency.
- **Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) Report (2010 – 2017)** – OPM's annual survey that serves as a tool for employees to share their perceptions in their work experiences, their agency, and leadership.

In addition to OPM's research, this review includes insights from studies in the public and private sector, highlighting telework as a resource for organizational leaders and employees to optimize their flexibility, while supporting overall organizational effectiveness.

BACKGROUND

In 2010, the Federal Government began a major change initiative after the President signed the Telework Enhancement Act (the Act). The Act supported the Government's ability to achieve greater flexibility in managing its workforce. A key provision of the Act requires each Executive agency to establish a policy under which eligible employees are authorized to telework. The Act encourages agencies to implement telework to the maximum extent possible, as a workplace flexibility that helps maintain continuity of operations and reduces management costs while also improving Federal employees' ability to manage their work and life commitments.

WHAT IS TELEWORK IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT?

Telework is a flexible workforce strategy leveraged to increase organizational agility and develop flexible teams that can be readily aligned to current and emerging business needs (Posthuma et al., 2013). OPM defines telework for the Federal Government as a strategic business practice that allows an employee to perform work during any part of regular, paid hours, at an approved alternative worksite on a routine or situational basis (e.g., home, telework center).

There are two categories of telework:

Routine telework occurs as part of a previously approved, ongoing, and regular schedule

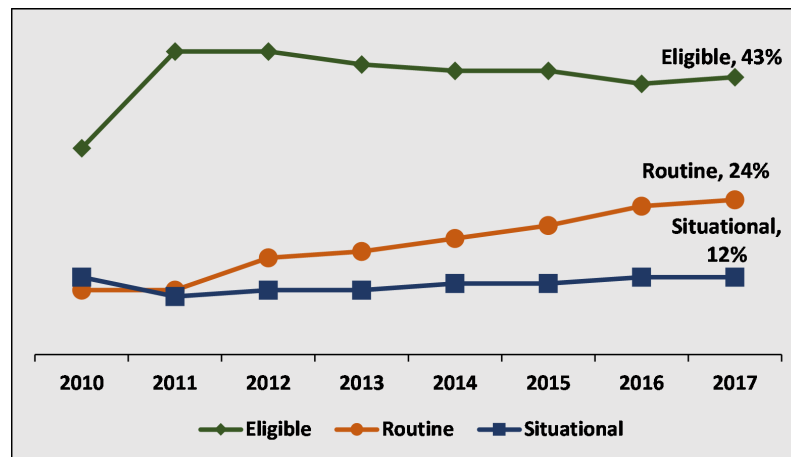
Situational telework is approved on a case-by-case basis, where the hours worked were not part of a previously approved telework schedule.

ISSUE

According to the FEVS (2010 – 2017), in 2010 when the Telework Enhancement Act became law, approximately 19% of Federal employees reported they teleworked (10% Routine and 9% Situational). By 2014, participation significantly increased to 29% (18% Routine and 11% Situational). Since then, participation has increased and appears to have plateaued--telework participation increased only one percent between 2016 and 2017 (35% to 36%). Nonetheless, while telework participation has increased over time, eligibility rates have remained stable (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

TELEWORK PARTICIPATION AND ELIGIBILITY SINCE THE TELEWORK ENHANCEMENT ACT



Telework Type	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Eligible*	32%	47%	47%	45%	44%	44%	42%	43%
Routine**	10%	10%	15%	16%	18%	20%	23%	24%
Situational**	12%	9%	10%	10%	11%	11%	12%	12%

Source:

*OPM Telework Report to Congress, 2011, 2012, and 2018

**FEVS, 2010 – 2017

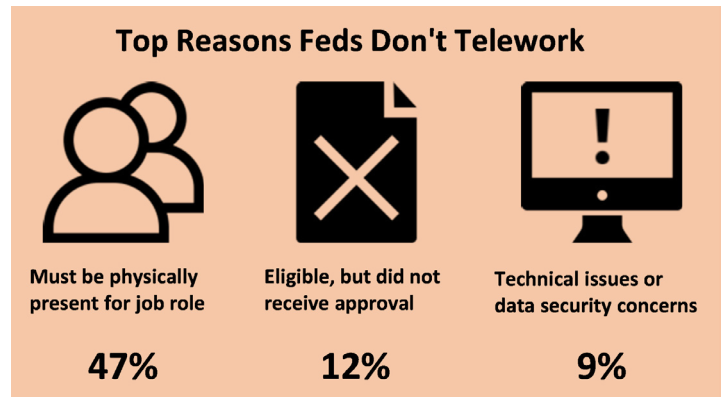
On average, employees who telework do so approximately two (2) days per two-week pay period (FWLS, 2018).

To understand the gap between telework eligibility and use, OPM asked all Federal employees about the perceived support they receive to telework and value of telework. Shown in Figure 2, 43% of Federal employees said their immediate supervisor supports the use of telework and fewer perceived support from their senior leadership (38%). More than half of employees with a supervisory or management status (53%) agreed that telework supports their employee’s ability to perform their work, with nearly one-third (31%) indicating no opinion, and 15% disagreeing (FWLS, 2018).

The desire to telework among Federal employees and management support for telework appears to be at odds with each other—creating a missed opportunity for agencies and employees to maximize performance and engagement. Attitudes and personal interests of management are critical components in the successful achievement of organizational change (Detert & Pollock, 2008; Moss Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992).

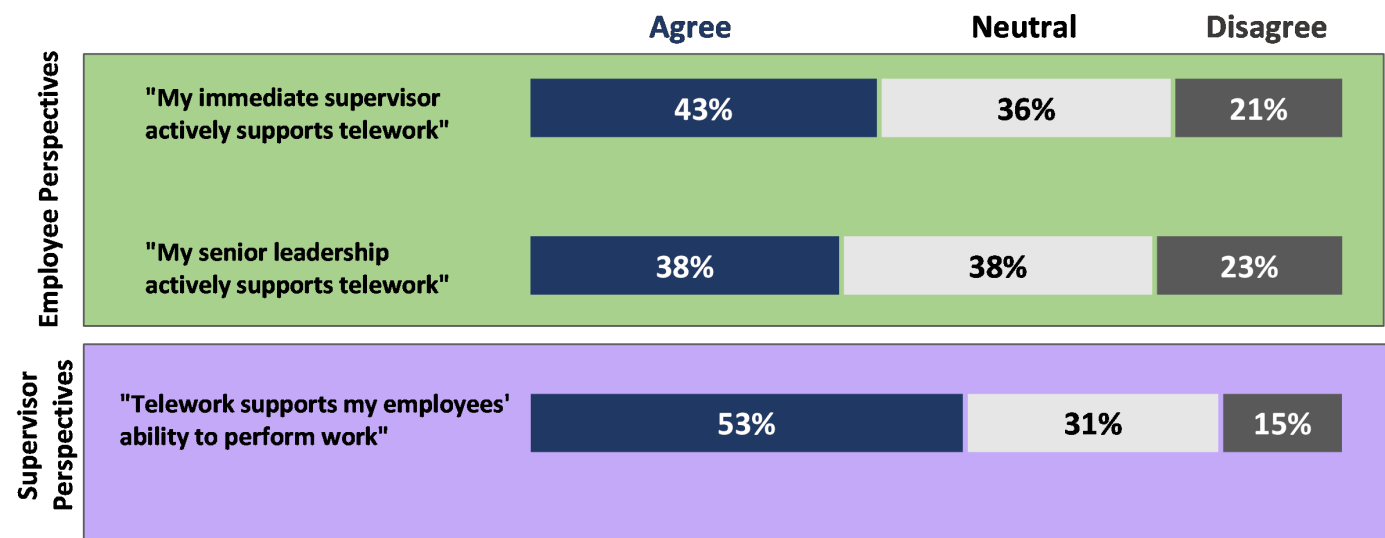
In addition to asking Federal employees about perceived support and value for telework, the survey asked employees why they did not telework. Employees

indicated that they had a job that requires them to be physically at work (47%), did not receive approval even though they are eligible to telework (12%), or have a technical issue or data security concerns that prevents them from teleworking (9%) (FWLS, 2018).



Management attitudes toward telework can be as important as technology and formal policies in determining the conditions in which telework may truly be implemented as a practice (Breugh & Frye, 2008; Julien, Someville, & Culp, 2011; McNamara, Pitt-Catsoupes, Brown, & Matz-Costa, 2012). Likewise, organizational management support is critical to ensure sufficient resources are made available for effective implementation of telework programs.

Figure 2
Telework Support: Employee and Supervisor Perspectives



INSIGHTS

According to a 2018 Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) benefits survey, 70% of companies offer their employees telecommuting opportunities, a threefold increase from 1996. In addition, 2012 data from Gallup (2012) showed that 39% of employees across the private and public sector in America teleworked in some capacity, meaning they spent at least some of their time working in a location different from their coworkers. In 2016, that number grew four percentage points to 43%. With current record low unemployment rates, the Federal Government must continue to maximize flexible work arrangements to attract and retain top talent if it is to compete with other sectors.

and retain talent, support performance, and maintain an organization's continuity of operations.

Supporting Recruitment and Retention

In terms of attracting and retaining top talent in the Federal Government, a 2017 Gallup study reported 37% say the ability to work where they want at least part of the time is "very important" when considering to take a new job. Federal Work-Life Survey results revealed Millennials, employees born between 1980 and 1995, indicated the ability to telework was an important factor when making a decision to take a new job (51% for Millennials and 43% for all other cohorts). Likewise, Millennials that telework indicated a greater intention to remain in their current job compared to all other generational cohorts (82% for Millennials and 74% for all other cohorts). Understanding the needs of Millennials have become increasingly important as the number of Federal Employees eligible to retire increases, eventually leaving Millennials (with varying levels of institutional knowledge and training) as the largest percentage of the workforce (Kornanik & Shindell, 2014).

Compared to all other generations, Millennials were more likely to rate telework as an important factor when considering a new job (FWLS, 2018).

Reducing Absenteeism

Telework can help employees deal with many issues, including family and dependent care issues, and minimize the amount of time employees take leave (thus maximizing mission accomplishment). OPM estimates Federal employees miss about 3 days of work every three months because of last-minute family and dependent care problems. By 2022, the number of Federal employees with a responsibility to care for a family member or dependent is expected to increase from 36% to 64%. More specifically, those with adult dependent care (e.g., elders, adult dependents) responsibilities are expected to double to 31%, while the number of employees with child care responsibilities is expected to remain virtually the same. This anticipated rise in the number employees with adult dependent care responsibilities will increase the need for agencies to provide greater workplace flexibilities and other associated family and dependent care support services.

Feds who telework said their participation...

Improved their morale



83%

Improved their performance



76%

Increased their desire to stay at their agency



72%

Helped them to better manage stress



77%

Improved their health



68%

Telework Benefits and Other Outcomes

There is a significant amount of research that highlights the benefits of telework. According to OPM's research, Federal employees said their use of telework improved their performance (72%), increased desire to stay at current agency (76%), improved morale (83%), and other outcomes that benefit both employees and management (FWLS, 2018). Additional research shows telework, as a work-life intervention, assists leaders with driving engagement by supporting employees' ability to manage their professional and personal responsibilities (OPM, 2015).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Telework, as a strategic business practice, is an effective tool to support management goals and overall organizational effectiveness. Below are some ways telework can play a critical role to recruit

Telework can be used in conjunction with leave or other workplace flexibilities. Using a more comprehensive approach to telework can provide employees with valuable additional time by reducing commuting time or by allowing employees to temporarily care for a family member who resides in a different geographic location. An increased use in telework can help avoid absenteeism and support employee performance.

OPM estimates Federal employees miss about 3 days of work every three months because of last-minute family and dependent care problems.

Continuity of Operations

The Telework Enhancement Act also requires Federal agencies to incorporate telework into their continuity of operations (COOP) planning. Incorporating telework into continuity plans means that these plans identify ways for an organization's staff to perform the duties and responsibilities necessary to continue the organization's essential functions during any type of threat or emergency from a telework location.

Federal agencies have adopted telework as a critical component of their agency COOP. Use of telework in this capacity enables Federal organizations to continue functioning through hazardous weather, pandemic, physical attacks, or any other event that would result in the closure of Government buildings. According to one estimate, the Federal Government would gain \$60 million in additional productivity per day if it were able to maintain 100 percent of agency operations during an unscheduled leave/ unscheduled telework day (Mobile Work Exchange, Mobility Progress Report: Are Federal Agencies Passing the Test 2014).

There is a direct relationship between an agency's COOP plan and telework. Both programs share a basic objective: to perform and maintain agency functions from an alternative location. According to the 2017 annual telework report to Congress, many agencies reported emphasizing telework in COOP plans or guidance and conducting regular telework drills. Additional strategies included encouraging or requiring those employees under a telework agreement to telework during Government closures related to weather emergencies and disruptions caused by special events.

MOVING FORWARD

OPM's 2016 Status of Telework in the Federal Government report reinforced concerns about job suitability and its impact on eligibility. While participation in telework continues to increase steadily, eligibility rates have remained stable. OPM encourages Federal agencies to take steps, where appropriate, to revisit assumptions that informed earlier eligibility determinations to consider whether eligibility could be expanded. It is recommended that agencies evaluate telework eligibility and telework agreements on an annual basis.

It is also important to note that there are still challenges with management attitudes to overcome in order for the Federal Government to maximize mission accomplishment. Many case studies from the private sector show that line managers are likely to be reluctant about telework when organizations do not provide sufficient IT infrastructures, when managers do not possess the right skills to use IT, and when managers are not given adequate communication and performance management training to manage virtual teams (Peters, Bleijenberg, & Oldenkamp, 2009). Agency leaders, telework program managers and other HR professionals at every level of the organization should work together to understand and develop best practices to support the needs of their organization and employees.

OPM will continue to develop and provide guidance on how to best implement telework as a strategic business practice and understand the beneficial outcomes, as well as share best practices. To learn more about telework in the Federal Government and discover useful tools for program management, please visit www.telework.gov.



DATA FOR FIGURE 2

Employee Perspectives	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
My immediate supervisor actively supports telework	43%	36%	21%
My senior leadership actively supports telework	38%	38%	23%

Supervisor Perspectives	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Telework supports my employees' ability to perform work	53%	31%	15%

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