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Feature

Bringing the Office Home

State and local governments embrace telework programs to counter pain at the pump.

Wylie Wong



Jeffrey Porter, IT platform director for Fairfax County, Va., says employees are more productive when they work from home.

NICHOLAS McINTOSH

Fairfax County, Va., has long been an advocate of telework technology. About 1,400 county workers telecommute at least once a month, sometimes as often as once a week. As rising gas prices become a pain point for staff, the county wants to increase the telework ranks.

"Some employees live in the county, while some live in Maryland; Washington, D.C.; West Virginia; and other counties in Virginia," says Fairfax County's IT Platform Director Jeffrey Porter. "The county has an ongoing telework effort to help reduce traffic congestion and help employees save on gas and reduce commute time, thus improving their productivity."

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Faced with soaring fuel costs and a desire to go green, state, county and city governments are pushing telecommuting and instituting alternative schedules, such as four-day workweeks. New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, for example, requested that

all state agencies develop telework and alternative-schedule plans. Similarly, Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine in July directed state agencies to improve and expand their telework and alternative-schedule programs.

Telework has always made sense in government because it aids recruitment and retention and facilitates continuity of operations, says Gil Gordon of Gil Gordon Associates, a management consulting firm. Telework increases job satisfaction, work/life balance and bolsters productivity. If an emergency strikes, such as inclement weather or a pandemic, business operations can remain up and running. In fact, Fairfax's heaviest telework days are when it snows, Porter says.

Most recently, energy conservation has spurred telework adoption. "There's a school of thought that government should be a model employer, and if we're talking energy consumption reduction, public-sector employees can practice what the government preaches," Gordon says.

To successfully implement telework, managers must establish performance metrics for employees, but IT departments also play a major role in teleworker productivity, says Utah CIO Stephen Fletcher. IT not only must furnish computers, collaboration tools and application access, but also must provide security, training and help-desk support.

Fairfax Taps Thin Clients

In 2000, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors Chairman Gerry Connolly set a regional goal of having 20 percent of the eligible workforce teleworking by 2005. In response, Fairfax County Executive Tony Griffin directed an organizationwide effort that pushed the county past the goal and continues to swell the ranks of teleworkers.

The county's Department of Information Technology invested heavily in its technical infrastructure to support telework, rolling out the Citrix Presentation Server (now called Citrix XenApp) thin client for remote access to centralized applications. Starting with just five or six Citrix servers, the county now has a farm of approximately 50 servers hosting about 140 applications, including Microsoft Office and departmental business applications.

Fairfax County teleworkers use their own home computers or county-issued notebook computers with their own Internet access. PCs must have antivirus software installed; users log in to a Secure Sockets Layer virtual private network via a web browser.

A portal provides access to everything employees need to work remotely and to communicate with their colleagues, Porter says. Workers can exchange instant messages, share and collaborate on documents, and make online help-desk requests.

One thing telecommuters can't do: upload files to the county or download files to their home computers. However, they can access and save files on network drives. "We always have to protect our constituents' data," Porter says. "We don't want home files mixing with county files, and vice versa."



Utah outfits state workers with the technology they need to telework, says CIO Stephen Fletcher.

ERIK OSTLING

This fall, Fairfax IT plans to bolster communications. Adding video capability to its collaborative software suite will allow two or more employees to hold videoconferences. And a softphone implementation will enhance telework by allowing workers to use the county phone system from home.

Teleworkers can get technical support around the clock. The main help desk closes at 7 p.m., but the county's network operations center operates 24x7, so if employees work at night or early in the morning, they can still get assistance. For troubleshooting, IT has remote-control software at its disposal.

York Judges Work Around the Clock

York County, Pa., doesn't have a formal telework policy, but it does support employees who need to work from home on occasion, as well as those who travel. Teleworkers log in to county applications remotely through Citrix XenApp.

The technology is especially helpful for on-call probation officers and the county's 19 magisterial district judges, whose services are needed at all hours of the day, says Tom Williams, assistant director of technology for York County.

For example, on-call probation officers sometimes get calls at 3 a.m. from a sheriff's deputy who has arrested someone for violating parole. The deputy needs the probation officer to sign a 72-hour detainer to hold the person for three days. In the past, probation officers would have to drive into the office to do the paperwork. Now, they just pull out their Panasonic Toughbook tablet PC (equipped with a wireless air card for Internet access), log in through Citrix, sign

the paperwork with a digital pen and e-mail it to the deputy.

Some magisterial district judges have set up home offices, and if they're on call or have arraignments all day, they can connect to a prison or central booking center and adjudicate from home using a notebook computer and webcam, Williams says.

Williams is installing and testing SSL VPN technology and will require workers to log in through the VPN as an additional layer of security.

Utah Spurs Economic Development

Telework not only helps Utah's Department of Workforce Services recruit and retain its employees, it also creates jobs in rural areas where there are fewer opportunities for work. About 290 of the department's nearly 750 eligible employees work from home.

The department, which provides food stamps, childcare and Medicaid eligibility services, was having problems retaining Salt Lake City staffers because living in a metropolitan area gave them more opportunities for higher-paying jobs. Telework has allowed the state to attract rural employees for those positions.

"For rural workers, it's considered a good job with a good hourly wage. We can shift our work out there, and they can stay in their hometowns and do a good job for us," says Greg Gardner, deputy director of Workforce Services.

IT provides each teleworker with phone and Internet service, a PC with no hard drive and a CD to boot up and connect to Workforce Services' applications through Microsoft Terminal Services, says Mark VanOrden, IT director at the agency. By deploying a thin-client system, the IT department protects applicants' data. Employees are not allowed to print documents or receive faxes unless they agree to keep the peripherals locked in their home offices, he says.

Utah currently uses a mainframe but is in the process of switching over to a new web-based system that will make it easier for employees to determine an applicant's eligibility for services, Gardner says.

Supervisors can monitor productivity through software that tracks the number of calls and cases the teleworkers handle. If teleworkers need advice, they can exchange instant messages with their supervisors. IT uses online videos to train teleworkers on how to use the technology.

Overall, teleworking provides a huge benefit to government, CIO Fletcher says. "We're happy to have people telecommute because they are more productive and it has the potential to save energy and office space," he says.

I.T. Approval

While employees' supervisors must approve telework requests, IT departments should also be part of the approval process, advises Michael Cannon, director of information and technology in Rockville, Md. That's because some applications that employees need might not be remotely accessible for security, bandwidth or technology reasons, he says. Geographic Information Systems (GIS), for example, are too bandwidth-intensive for telecommuters to access because of large graphics files, Cannon says. And some applications simply can't be used remotely because the manufacturers have yet to make them accessible from the web.

Utah Compresses Its Workweek

In August, Utah became the first state in the country to switch to a four-day workweek. Gov. Jon Huntsman made the move to reduce the state's energy consumption and help employees deal with \$4-per-gallon gas prices.

About 17,000 out of 24,000 state employees now work 10-hour days, Monday through Thursday, with Friday off. Utah CIO Stephen Fletcher says the state can shift to the compressed workweek because it offers more than 850 services online.

"We're actually providing citizens more access to government than in the past," says Fletcher. The state is now open for business 44 hours a week, between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m., Monday through Thursday.

The move doesn't affect the data center, which operates 24x7 and has a weekend staff. And some IT workers in critical positions, such as state hospitals and correction facilities, continue to work five eight-hour days.

Telework ROI

The Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS) introduced its virtual-office concept in 2006. In the agency's experience, a home-office setup runs about \$1,552 per employee and includes a router, an IP phone, a thin-client device, a keyboard and mouse, and a 19-inch LCD monitor.

Here's the return on investment AHCCCS reaps:

- **Increased productivity.** The number of claims processed jumped from 5,440 per month to 7,242 per month, a 33 percent increase.
- **More personal time.** A teleworker who lives 26 miles away and has a 35-minute commute saves more than 280 hours per year in commuting time.
- **Cost savings.** That same teleworker saves \$660 per month in vehicle costs, including gas, oil and maintenance. The state also saves \$449 per month in

indirect costs (such as road maintenance and traffic services) by having fewer cars on the road. In total, one teleworker averages \$7,000 in personal savings per year, while the community saves \$15,765 per year.

Available at www.teleworkarizona.com, Arizona's Virtual Office Toolkit provides a step-by-step guide to developing virtual offices.

Boulder Tweaks Telework Policy

Boulder, Colo., which has a few dozen employees telecommuting at any given time, is updating its telework policy to further reduce its carbon footprint and to give flexibility to employees, says Eileen Gomez, the city's human resources director.

The city is also running out of office space, so boosting the number of telecommuters will help save money, she says. To prevent a worker shortage when baby boomers retire, the city hopes to convince some employees to continue working part time from home.

"We're modernizing our policy and opening it up more to our employees because we're a very environmentally sensitive city and because we're having some difficult issues with [office] space," Gomez says. "We also want to be more family friendly and give people more flexibility, [to do things like] care for their elderly parents at home."

To telework, the IT department relies on employees to have all the underlying technology, such as personal firewalls and antivirus software, installed on their computers, says Don Ingle, the city's IT director. The city uses Citrix for remote access to 200 city applications and provides e-mail access through the web.

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