



Employer Telework Case Study

Employer

United States Department of
Agriculture

Washington, DC (with
employees assigned across the
country and the world)

Contact

Mika J. Cross, Work/Life and
Wellness Program Manager
(202)603-5540

mika.cross@dm.usda.gov

Background

The USDA has a workforce of approximately 120,000 employees and provides the nation with leadership on food, agriculture, natural resources, rural development and related issues based on sound public policy, the best available science and efficient management. The Department is a vastly dynamic organization whose vision is to enhance agricultural trade, improve farm economies and quality

of life in rural America, protect the Nation's food supply, improve the Nation's nutrition, and protect and enhance the Nation's natural resource base and environment.

The Telework Experience

The USDA's telework program has been in place for more than 7 years. A newly updated Telework Program policy was quickly published in January 2011, to ensure consistency and synchronization with the requirements and guidance of the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010. Its new policy presumes that all positions are eligible to participate in telework. Unless there is thorough justification provided by management and verified by local Telework Coordinators, certain positions are not eligible for telework based on the following criteria:

- 1) Daily, face-to-face interaction with the public or customers is required and cannot be performed from an alternate worksite;
- 2) The use of specialized equipment is required and not available from an alternative worksite;
- 3) Access to classified material or information on a daily basis is required and cannot be accessed from an alternate worksite.

A new, standardized USDA Telework Agreement Form was developed in February 2011 and is required for all teleworkers and telework arrangements, both ad/hoc or situational and regular or recurring. The agreement form indicates whether teleworkers are coded as emergency essential or mission critical (for COOP purposes) and allows for maximum flexibility in implementing telework, especially during unplanned events or emergencies when Unscheduled Telework may be a suitable option as authorized by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). 9% of USDA employees were teleworking on a regular basis and 14% on an infrequent basis as of 2010.

In Spring 2011, the USDA rolled out its new interactive telework training--delivered both in-person and via LiveMeeting--so that employees around the globe could meet the training requirements for telework and join in the sessions, straight from their desktops. Courses are designed to emphasize the importance of managing by expectation and performance outcome rather by virtue of location or proximity to their supervisor.

After determining eligibility of USDA positions and notifying eligible employees of their status in June 2011, the USDA is now focused on meeting its aggressive FY2011 participation goals: 50% of all eligible positions participating in ad/hoc telework arrangements and 30% of all eligible positions participating in regular/recurring telework arrangements. When this goal is met, it would mean a 70% increase from the 2010 numbers reported.

Challenges and Investment

Several challenges arose for the USDA during the implementation of new changes

to its Telework policy, the primary being how to consistently apply the program across the Department, with as little variance as possible, while taking into account the several labor unions that were involved in collective bargaining. Additional challenges included:

- Defining the applicability of telework for its large demographic of remote, mobile and field workers that was traditionally considered ineligible for telework.
- Identifying the technology options for remote access and collaboration that are currently available--in different pockets with varying security policies, for investment across the Department, and for enterprise-wide use.
- Transitioning the workplace culture that traditionally viewed work as being done "in an office where you can be seen" to a culture that embraces workplace flexibility and measures success based on performance rather than location.
- Ensuring that Telework Coordinators understand their responsibilities, the law, the new policy and how to best report on their programs.
- Educating employees that telework is a benefit, not an entitlement, and that there are certain responsibilities and levels of accountability which must be met in order to demonstrate success and expand the participation of those who already have been teleworking.

Program Outlook

Areas and Agencies will be required to report their participation levels on a bi-monthly basis to the USDA's Telework

Managing Official (TMO). These reports ensure consistent application of the new telework program policy and better accountability in how the program is administered, which will also be delivered to the Secretary of Agriculture in ongoing Cultural Transformation reports.

Fiscal Year 2012 Telework Program goals and initiatives include:

- An automated Telework Management System (TMS) which will consistently track and report telework agreements, types of arrangements and other important statistics relative to telework eligibility and participation.
- Standardized telework eligibility statements on all position descriptions in order to facilitate recruitment initiatives in alignment with diversity recruitment, hiring of people with disabilities and the veterans' employment initiatives.
- Forming an employee-based Work/Life and Wellness Council with the Labor Management Forum to take a grass-roots approach to identifying challenges and capitalizing on successes for addressing workplace issues, including the ground truth on how telework is being implemented and expanded across the Department.
- Developing a telework web portal from the USDA's learning platform, AgLearn. This website will serve as a central resource for telework training, news and policy updates and for structuring a community of practice for all employees, supervisors and managers interested in learning more about the USDA Telework Program.

- Piloting full-time telework arrangements that look at how implementing telework on a permanent, large-scale basis can offer the USDA significant cost savings with regards to a decrease in locality pay, transit subsidies, utility costs and real estate.

Most Helpful Resources

Secretary Vilsack's Cultural Transformation initiatives have given the Telework Program momentum across the Department and have increased visibility on the effect of telework on the workforce and in relation to employee morale.

An internal partnership between the Office of Human Resources Management and the Office of the Chief Information Officer has helped to quickly overcome technological barriers to teleworking and strengthened the ability to enable mobile work.

The USDA Work/Life and Wellness Team, including Telework Coordinators, meet regularly and have direct access to the Department's Work/Life and Wellness Program Manager, who helps interpret policy and provides program guidance and oversight on a regular basis.

Success Tips

Best practices include:

- Engaging local Telework Coordinators on all policy changes and initiatives in order to form a collaborative working environment that is open to new ideas and suggestions and that will identify best practices.
- Creating a strategic marketing plan that includes written articles in the

new monthly Cultural Transformation newsletter, *My USDA*; employee access to an all-USDA telework email inbox; in-person Telework Program brown-bag forums, luncheons and meetings.

- Socializing the new telework program initiatives with the USDA Labor Management Forum for informational purposes and pre-decisional involvement.
- Developing interactive training that focuses on management by objectives and performance, specifically related to telework.
- Linking return-on-investment of the telework program to reductions in transit subsidy funding, recruitment and retention initiatives, strategies for the hiring of people with disabilities and other strategic human capital goals.
- Promoting and educating the workforce on the fundamentals of the new telework program so that they can effectively request to participate in the program and understand the process of negotiating agreements with their management teams.

**Copyright © 2011 Commuter
Connections/Metropolitan
Washington Council of Governments**

800-745-RIDE

www.commuterconnections.org