



# Employer Telework Case Study

## Employer

National Institutes  
of Health

## Contact

Shirley LaBella  
NIH Telework Coordinator  
301-496-2288  
labellas@od.nih.gov

## Background

The National Institutes of Health (NIH), a part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is the primary Federal agency that conducts and supports biomedical and behavioral research to improve people's health and save lives. Flexibility is a practiced principle at NIH, necessary to accomplish research and research support at multiple locations. Employees here must have an adaptable work environment to effectively support mission-related needs.

Telework initially began at NIH as a flexible workplace arrangement benefit that was primarily used by employees as an accommodation to meet short-term medical needs. A successful one year pilot in 2001 to examine its benefits, costs, and impacts on employees, management, and the organization resulted in an expansion of the early initiative to a fully implemented program. Participation has grown steadily as

a result of several things, recruiting and retention efforts, a new leadership team, and continuity of operations planning. "Telework has proven itself to be a win-win strategy for increasing both employee satisfaction and productivity", says Christine Major, Director of the NIH Office of Human Resources. "Ours is an evolving model, with staff in a growing number of positions able to work effectively wherever they are and enjoy the benefits of telework." The goal of the program is to help staff be successful and effective with teleworking so that in the long term, they contribute to a business solution trusted by managers, peers and the organization – a responsibility not taken lightly by NIH.

## The Telework Experience

The telework experience is critical to NIH's human resources mission, something the HR leaders at NIH are very passionate about. According to Philip Lenowitz, the Deputy Director of NIH's Office of Human Resources (OHR), "Our mission – the whole reason we're here – has always been to

recruit and retain the best employees for NIH". From the employee's perspective, teleworking provides individuals the opportunity to support NIH's mission from a comfortable atmosphere, while avoiding the traditional daily work related stressors. Well-intentioned interruptions at work, the daily commute, and even technology overload are all work-related factors that can lead to stress. There are many more benefits to teleworking other than alleviating the stress factor though. Decreasing traffic and helping the environment, optimizing the use of technology, accommodating people with disabilities, and reducing absenteeism by allowing greater flexibility are a few more of the benefits. NIH leadership and management believe the resulting improvement in the quality of life for NIH employees can lead to improvements in morale, productivity, and retention.

An extensive telework policy has been put in place for NIH employees. Both full-time and part-time employees are eligible to apply who do not have any evidence of misconduct in their records and are not required to complete all their work onsite. In addition, the employee must be able to complete the majority of their work from a remote location that does not require the resources that working onsite provides (ex. constant face-to-face communication with team members, constant meetings with personnel outside their teams, usage of agency resources that can only be found onsite, etc.).

NIH provides very specific guidelines for establishing, monitoring, and measuring the effectiveness of telework arrangements. In order to be approved to telework, the employee has to develop a proposal via an agreement form and then discuss it with their supervisor. Among other things, the employee agrees to work diligently from a remote location in a space

that they have dedicated solely for performing their work offsite. Resources are made available to both those navigating and managing the process, for example, in-depth training courses for managers and potential teleworkers covering everything from performance management to setting up and actually working in a virtual environment. Personalized guidance from knowledgeable internal experts is available for completing or reviewing proposals. As supervisors analyze proposals and monitor arrangements, they look at tasks, the effect on work groups, and office needs to reduce the potential for negative impacts to either individual or group performance. The IT and HR organizations are very proactive parts of the program, providing support to make user experiences, whether managerial or individual, as smooth as possible.

## Challenges & Investment

In spite of the challenges that come with implementing telework, NIH has been able to adopt the teleworking concept for a wide variety of positions. While many positions at NIH are conducive to teleworking, internal organizations are encouraged to look at further utilizing the opportunities it presents, e.g., the technology. NIH does research on an extremely wide variety of health matters. The medical research field is a more difficult scenario for teleworking because an employee cannot take an entire research laboratory home with them. They often can, however, telework doing some tasks such as transcribing findings into reports, journals, etc...

Out of necessity then, teleworking is very customizable at NIH, due in part to the nature of the work and the support needs that may be involved, e.g., with regard to types of arrangements or equipment to be provided. Employees with certain responsibilities who telework regularly may

be issued Blackberries and laptops or, in cases where a Blackberry isn't appropriate or available, wireless broadband cards might be used to allow employees to connect into NIH wherever they get a cell phone connection.

## Program Outlook

The teleworking program at NIH has a very positive outlook. It has the support of the top NIH leadership, all of whom encourage staff to take part if the nature of their work is a good fit for it. As with the investment of resources, the NIH telework policy, telework training, and outreach to managers and staff are all works in progress.

## Success Tips

- ✓ Collaborate with others. If you have a question or want to see how teleworking is being addressed in organizations similar to yours, don't hesitate to ask.
- ✓ Employee feedback is one of the most valuable tools to a newly implemented program. Utilize the employees that have been a part of the program and work with them to find out what works, what needs improvement, and for promoting the program.
- ✓ With any new initiative, always be open to learning new technologies. Technology advancements, especially those within communications, are always expanding and can be utilized to help further your program.
- ✓ Encourage telework solutions that seek to provide efficient use of resources. Telework is not an all-or-

nothing proposition, but rather is intended to promote flexibility, so being flexible with how it's implemented is important.

## Helpful Resources

- ✓ The general atmosphere and culture of NIH greatly contributed to the success of telework in the Agency. When your mission involves finding the next medical breakthrough, implementing a flexibility initiative like telework is more readily accepted.
- ✓ NIH has established a Telework Focus Group to further expand telework.
- ✓ The agency consulted other government agencies, such as the Office of Personnel Management, General Services Administration, National Science Foundation, and the US Department of Agriculture, among others, on teleworking issues.