

Committee on Government Reform – Hearing Testimony for July 8, 2004

THE BEGINNING OF TELEWORK IN FAIRFAX COUNTY GOVERNMENT

Fairfax County government has been involved with telework since 1994 when the board of supervisors asked staff to look into the feasibility of telework for the organization. I was the staff person assigned to that project and the subsequent pilot program.

For its research, Fairfax drew heavily on the work of the federal government General Services Administration, the Office of Personnel Management, and other federal agencies with telework programs in place. In addition, Arlington County, Virginia, the Commonwealth of Virginia, and Montgomery County, Maryland offered information and insight based on their experience with telework.

In 1995, Fairfax established a one-year telework pilot program for 50 teleworkers from 14 agencies. Based on the federal government's example, the program was evaluated based on data gathered throughout the pilot. The results were positive. Overall, managers were satisfied with the telework arrangement. They reported that customer service was the same or improved, as was communication between the teleworkers and their supervisors. Problems with telework arrangements turned out to be few and were quickly resolved.

Teleworkers reported that they got more work done on a telework day than on a typical day at the office. Managers agreed. Teleworkers also said their morale was higher and they felt trusted and valued as good performers.

Telework was cost effective. Minimal start-up expenses were off-set by demonstrated productivity increases. And one year of this small pilot saved 180,000 commuting miles and 6,000 commuting hours.

Based on these results, the board of supervisors approved telework as a work option in April 1996. But despite interest in the pilot program, and increased enrollment for several years thereafter, telework didn't really take off.

THE NEED TO EXPAND TELEWORK

In the fall of 2000, the board of supervisors endorsed the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) goal---to increase telecommuting in the region to twenty percent of the eligible workforce by 2005.

For Fairfax, this meant reaching a goal of 1,000 or more teleworkers---twenty percent of the approximately 5,000 jobs suited for telework.

In January 2002, the county began an effort to expand telework and "reintroduce" it to the workforce. (For clarification regarding my role, I retired in 2001 and was asked to return on a part-time basis as the telework program manager.)

We developed a marketing campaign directed to all county employees and training sessions targeted to potential teleworkers and their supervisors.

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The marketing relied heavily on communication---both formal and informal---to publicize the county's commitment to telework. The methods of communication included:

- Briefings for employees at all levels;
- Discussions with department heads and senior managers;
- A telework web site on the county's intra-net;
- An e-mail box for questions and comments;
- Announcements in the daily electronic news bulletin;
- Features in the biweekly employee newsletter;
- "Recruitment" Posters and flyers posted in each department;
- A telework procedural memorandum from the county executive – basically the Standard Operating Procedure for telework in the county. And the county executive's challenge to department heads to telework at least one day a month;
- Special events such as a Telework Expo and;
- Coverage in local newspapers including the Washington Post.

The training provided information on why the organization supports telework; what telework is (and is not), and who is eligible. It showed potential teleworkers how to craft a "business case" for telework, plan and organize work, maintain communication with coworkers and supervisors, and use the available technology for best results. For supervisors, training also addressed ways to manage workers they didn't see every day.

The expansion effort more than tripled the number of teleworkers. By October 2003, the county was past the half-way mark towards its goal of 1,000 teleworkers. When Fairfax reaches that goal, county teleworkers will save 59,000 commuting hours and 1.8 million commuting miles in a year. This equates to more than 800,000 pounds of pollutants removed from the air.

THE FAIRFAX TELEWORK PROGRAM TODAY

The Fairfax county government program is much like other programs offered by public and private sector employers. It began as a successful pilot, showed promise, reached a plateau, declined, and now demonstrates the potential for renewed growth.

The definition of telework in Fairfax is reflective of other programs nationwide. It is: *Work performed from home or another location during an employee's normal work hours and on a regular basis such as one day a week. Telework can also be set up on a variable schedule for special projects, or for periods of recuperation or family and medical leave.*

It is a structured program. A work agreement is signed by the teleworker and supervisor and approved by the department head. Departments have the flexibility to implement telework within basic program guidelines.

Eligibility is determined at the department level based on established criteria regarding the suitability of the work and the worker, and the ability of the work unit---the division, branch, or team---to operate with some workers off-site.

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The teleworker provides the home office space and pays for utilities, Internet service provider (ISP), additional phone line or cell phone, and other equipment as needed.

The county provides loaner PCs, pagers, long distance access, and basic office supplies as needed. Employees can also use the county's telework site in the human services building in Alexandria, Virginia. This site, known as the south county center, is particularly useful to employees who live or work in that part of the county.

The profile of Fairfax teleworkers is reflective of the county's workforce. For example:

- The average age is 46;

- The average salary is \$58,000 (20 percent above the average \$49,000 for the total workforce);

- The average years of county service are 13;

- Teleworkers spend an average of 1 hour and 20 minutes to commute 38 miles to and from work.

Diversity among teleworkers mirrors the composition of the county workforce in terms of race and ethnicity. In terms of gender, however, there are three times as many women as men teleworking, while the workforce is evenly divided.

Every department participates in telework and teleworkers' jobs fall into various categories:

- Not surprisingly, the majority---58 percent---are in management, staff, fiscal, and technology positions;

- 14 percent work in health and human services;

- 13 percent are in administrative support positions;

- 7 percent hold uniformed or sworn public safety jobs and;

- 8 percent are in engineering and inspections.

THE CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Support from the top levels of the organization is absolutely essential but it is not enough to guarantee success.

It takes persistence and time for telework to take hold in a large, public sector organization. It's crucial to stay on message. It's necessary to do a lot of hand holding to reach critical mass and enable telework to become as common a work option as flexible schedules or compressed work weeks.

Managers are a key constituency. Telework can be viewed as one more thing to manage and one more potential employee relations problem. Supervisors need support to develop the skill and confidence to manage a distributed workforce. We need to recognize that their resistance comes from real concern about accountability---their own and that of the teleworker.

Technology remains a challenge. Most teleworkers are non-technical people who have to learn new things about technology to succeed. At the office, employees have access to on-

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site technical support. Employees working at home forego the proximity and comfort of tech-support. A positive result of Fairfax's telework expansion is hands-on technology training and help-desk support for all teleworkers.

Fairfax has secure, reliable, web-enabled access to e-mail and network applications. (The county uses Citrix Metaframe technology.)

But we face challenges with telecommunications support. We need uniform, cost effective ways to handle long distance calls, privacy of the teleworker's home phone number, access to department cell phones, and services like unified messaging for call forwarding and voicemail.

Finally, we must take into account that telework doesn't appeal to all employees--- regardless of the type of work they do. Some employees and supervisors prefer a flex-schedule or compressed work week. Some employees *want* to come to the office every day and, if they are not already doing so, could be encouraged to use a car pool arrangement. Employees should be able to choose and to combine options.

Despite these challenges, Fairfax is making progress and remains committed to telework as one strategy to reduce traffic and air pollution in the region. I am personally convinced that telework is a viable way to improve the quality and productivity of the workforce.

A Great Way to Work **FAIRFAX TELEWORKS**

FAIRFAX TELEWORKS - Quick Facts

- **Telework means working from home or another location during your regular work hours.** County employees telework one or more days a week, biweekly, monthly. Or, telework may occur on a variable schedule for special projects, and for periods of recuperation or family and medical leave.
 - ✓ Telework is voluntary on the part of the manager and teleworker. Telework requires management approval.
 - ✓ Telework is structured---for example, there's a work agreement signed by the teleworker and manager.
 - ✓ Telework is not for everyone and doesn't fit every job. Eligibility for telework is determined at the department level based on the suitability of the work, the worker, and the work unit (branch, section). The question to ask is: *Are there 8 or more hours of work that can be done effectively from another location once a week, biweekly, monthly, or on a variable schedule?*
 - ✓ Telework focuses on work results rather than where the work is performed.
- **Telework benefits the region, county, teleworkers, and managers.**
 - ✓ **It's good for the environment.** It reduces pollution from vehicle fuel emissions. It reduces traffic congestion. Telework is one strategy for meeting air quality standards.
 - ✓ **Telework makes good business sense.** On average, teleworkers are 20% more productive on telework days. Teleworkers save commuting time and miles. Many employees say telework decreases stress and increases overall job satisfaction.
 - ✓ **Managers can strengthen their skills** by 'tele-managing' remote workers. Telework is also a way to assure the continuation of business operations when weather or other events disrupt travel to the main work site.
- **Response to telework is positive from employees at all levels.**
 - ✓ There are over 500 teleworkers in county government as of October 2003.
 - ✓ A recent survey shows that 96% of teleworkers are very satisfied with it.
 - ✓ Most county departments have teleworkers.
- **The Department of Information Technology provides secure and dependable remote access to the county's network.** Teleworkers can access the applications they use at the office.

Working From Home Gains Converts Governments Warming To Telecommuting Option

By Lisa Rein
Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, December 8, 2002; Page LZ03

To policymakers aching to break up Northern Virginia's traffic gridlock and reduce the region's dangerously high car emissions, Richard Sleeman's home office means one less vehicle clogging roads between his subdivision in Sterling and the Fairfax County Government Center.

To Sleeman, 48, a computer systems administrator assigned to cubicle 838.7 in the Pennino Building on Government Center Parkway, working from home one day a week means a more productive day, more time with his wife and daughter and a lot less stress. He doesn't have to crawl through 20 miles of traffic along Route 7 and Fairfax County Parkway.

"I can do virtually everything at home short of a face-to-face meeting," said Sleeman, a 20-year veteran of county government who keeps track of billing and clinical information for the Community Service Board, which serves the mentally disabled and substance abusers in Fairfax. "And I get so much more done. People don't pop by to distract you."

Sleeman's work arrangement, dubbed telework, has become the norm for 350 county workers in Fairfax, the Washington area local government leading the way in encouraging flexible work arrangements. Although teleworking has for years been the domain of private companies and, slowly, the federal government, county governments are starting to recognize that salespeople and entrepreneurs aren't the only ones who can work from home.

The region's other county governments are slowly starting telework programs, too. In Maryland, about 40 Montgomery County employees work from home, 27 in Rockville and fewer than 50 in Anne Arundel County.

Loudoun County has 60 teleworkers, Arlington about 20 and Alexandria is looking into a program, according to the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, which tracks teleworking in the region. Prince George's and Prince William counties do not have formal programs but allow some employees to work from home on an as-needed basis.

"It's a major behavior change for people who think, 'We work for the taxpayers, we're public servants and I need to be seen to be at work,'" said Carol Goldberg, the county's telework program manager, who devotes her workday to recruiting new converts, training

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them and their bosses and making sure their home computers are hooked up with the county's system.

Goldberg was managing the county's payroll department in 1995, when she was asked by the county Board of Supervisors to launch a pilot telework program for 50 employees. Now, she tries to round up 15 new teleworkers every month from a pool of 5,000 potential candidates in the county's workforce of 11,000 -- employees whose jobs lend themselves to independent, computer-based work.

The county has a teleworking goal. By 2005, 20 percent of the eligible employees should be logging on to computers from home at least one day a week. The target was set for the region two years ago by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments at the direction of Supervisor Gerald E. Connolly (D-Providence), who served as the planning agency's chairman. The target in Fairfax is 1,000 workers.

"We've been more hidebound in the public sector, where employees are concerned that if they're out of sight they'll be overlooked," Connolly said. "But local government employment is substantial and can make a big difference. We're hypocrites if we don't get into this game in a serious way."

The current crop in Fairfax is as diverse as the county's workforce: accountants, administrative assistants, analysts, buyers, cable producers, engineers, librarians, planners, real estate appraisers, social workers, human services workers, tax specialists, paralegals and police officers.

Police officers?

Not every cop walks a beat. Lt. Brett Reistad, for example, transferred last May to the internal affairs division, where he inspects command stations and other police buildings to ensure that policies and procedures are uniform. It's largely independent work, writing up inspection reports. Reistad, who worked patrol for a decade and criminal investigations for eight more years, is setting up an office in his Manassas home, where he plans to telework at least two days a month.

"It's a matter of taking a floppy disk home and working on the same document from home," he said.

The benefits he anticipates? A break from his 50-minute commute between Prince William and the Judicial Center and flexibility to be available should one of his four children and step-children get sick and need to stay home from school.

"The difference is taking a day of sick leave, versus sitting behind the computer and being productive," Reistad said.

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Fairfax, the region's largest local government, is also the most proactive in encouraging teleworking one or two days a week. Managers are encouraged to suggest the arrangement to self-motivated employees whose jobs don't always require them to report to an office. Everyone gets a manual with tips on setting up a home office, accessing the county's computer network, forwarding phones and staying by the phone.

Bosses are encouraged to telework themselves, Sleeman, the systems administrator, supervises two computer analysts, both of whom telework.

Fairfax officials have a bureaucratic term for the ideal telework arrangement: transparency. It means that when an employee is talking on the phone or communicating electronically with a vendor, client or someone outside of county government, the person on the other end, ideally, has no idea the employee is at home, possibly in bathrobe or slippers.

"You could be a buyer in the department of purchasing and you could be in your cube and the vendors don't know where you are, and that's a good thing," Goldberg said.

The system is not for everyone.

Maha Bichay, a county accountant who works two days a week from her Springfield home, said she has encountered managers who oppose giving their workers such wide latitude in their workday.

"I run into people who say, 'Do you really work when you're at home?' " Bichay said. "But really, an employee can play here or there."

Bichay was one of the pioneers to test telecommuting seven years ago, when her two children were toddlers and she wanted to spend as much time as possible with them. Her husband's job requires a lot of travel, she said. Now, she is behind her computer at 7:30 a.m. so she can pick up her kids from school at 3:20 p.m., two days a week.

"When I get my kids, I consider that my lunch break," Bichay said.

Her job is suited to independent work on the computer. She reconciles tax payments by Fairfax residents with the county's financial accounts. Besides a flexible schedule, the change to teleworking boosted Bichay's self-esteem at work, she said.

"It starts with your supervisor trusting you," she said. "They want to see that you can produce. You want to prove to them that you could do better when you're home. It becomes your responsibility."

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