

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF TELECOMMUTING
TECHNOLOGY IN THE FUTURE

ARTICLE

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by

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Introduction

Within the next five years, law enforcement agencies throughout California will need to explore telecommuting implementation programs that facilitate efficient work away from the primary work place. Selected police personnel should have the ability to work and make decisions from their home, travel location, or satellite office location. In order to be effective, police managers will be required to effectively manage telecommuting issues throughout the organization. Managing resistance and skepticism, supervising telecommuters, and managing change will impact the organization.

The employee participating in the program could face issues such as isolation, lack of interaction with coworkers, household distractions, and perceived hindrance of career advancement. Chief Executives who manage these issues will benefit from telecommuting technology, as the employee will experience increased flexibility, increased motivation and commitment, reduced commuting time, and increased individual productivity. The combined factors would allow the employee to provide a better quality of service to the community and the organization.

Who are today's telecommuters? The 1999 Telework America National Telework Survey, conducted by Joanne H. Pratt Associates, found that today's 19.6 million teleworkers typically work nine days per month at home with an average of three hours per week during normal business hours. In this study, telecommuters were defined as employees who work at least one day per month at home during normal business hours. Teleworkers were found to typically be married, well-educated employees, the majority of whom are managers or professionals.¹

Telecommuting is the partial or total substitution of telecommunications technology for the trip to and from the primary workplace along with the associated changes in policy, organization, management, and work structure.² Simply put, it's moving the work to the workers, instead of the workers to work. Computers, cellular phones, fax, advanced communications links such as Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) and dial-up accesses have removed the physical barriers that once required workers to be in their offices.

There are three types of telecommuting. The most popular form of telecommuting is working from home. The employee designates work space at home to conduct business functions. Next is a satellite office location. These are remote office locations usually placed within a large concentration of employee residences, allowing employees at a single company to share common office space and reduce the time and expense of the commute to and from the main office facility. Third is the Neighborhood Work Center or Telecommuting Center.³ The neighborhood work center provides work space for employees of different companies in one location. Each company housing employees at these locations is usually responsible for the administrative and technical requirements of its employees.

The benefits of telecommuting are numerous. In addition to the obvious advantages such as reduced rush hour traffic and enhanced air quality, there are a number of less visible benefits like improved productivity and expanded geographic range. The ease with which a computer age employee can be linked to his or her office is a viable incentive to implement a telecommuting program.

The idea that telecommunications technology could substitute for travel dawned on people soon after the invention of the telephone. In the late 1870's letters and articles speculating on the potential of the telephone to replace face-to-face meetings appeared in various London newspapers. Science fiction books described videoconferencing machines that could accomplish the same goal.

An article in a *Scientific American* supplement from 1914 predicted that telecommunications would reduce transit congestion. These ideas resurfaced in the 1960's and 1970's, as computing technology began to permeate society and the energy crisis was an issue. But today, with fax machines and personal computers widespread and videoconferencing almost mundane, congestion on the roads is worse than ever.⁴

For decades, characterizing the typical workforce was as easy as strolling through the office halls. Most employees were core, permanent members of a single company who worked Monday through Friday at the same location with the same group of people on an ongoing basis. Each employee was assigned to a department and reported to one manager. Each employee also worked under a clearly-defined job description, performing the same types of tasks and projects until he or she found either a new job or retired. This could be used to describe some law enforcement agencies today.

Telecommuting enables employees to better manage their work and personal lives. When they work at home employees are geographically closer to their family members and the institutions and services with which they interact. Also, that means employees can intersperse work and family tasks instead of being absent from work the

entire day. Telecommuter's productivity is the same or higher when working at home, and being able to work at home is an employment incentive.⁵

The most widely used definition of a Telecommuter is, "an employee who regularly spends at least one day a week working off site."⁶ Using this definition, a telephonic survey was conducted involving 16 medium-sized, urban California law enforcement agencies. Each agency was asked if they practiced telecommuting and whether or not they had any formal policies and procedures addressing it. Each agency's respondent was the rank of Lieutenant or above. The following agencies were included in the survey; Santa Monica, Culver City, Brea, Redlands, El Segundo, Yuba City, Claremont, Chico, Redding, Whittier, Stockton, Glendale, Buena Park, Huntington Beach, Santa Rosa, and Laguna Beach. Agencies surveyed ranged in size from 150 to 700 total personnel.

From the 16 agencies surveyed, only the Claremont Police Department regularly permits telecommuting. The City of Claremont permits telecommuting on a city-wide basis and has a formal policy outlining the telecommuting program's policies and procedures.

According to the Society for Human Resources Management, only 27 percent of companies (public and private) with active telecommuters have formal policies about how telecommuting should be handled.⁷ The remaining 15 agencies surveyed have no written policies or procedures on telecommuting or working away from headquarters.

Most agencies surveyed indicated that working from their residence was necessary at times due to the nature of their management position; however, none

were compensated if they chose to catch up on their staff work from home or an off-site location. Several managers surveyed indicated that their departments have shown interest in telecommuting concepts at one time or another; however, there was no continued interest and/or support.

Telecommuting is a fairly new concept being introduced to law enforcement. Unlike private industry, many of law enforcement personnel are required to staff positions requiring their presence on a seven day per week, 24 hour per day basis. Uniform patrol is the best example of this.

The backbone of any police organization are the men and women who are required to respond to a citizen's call for service. The need continues to exist for an available police officer to respond to radio calls. Despite the need for continued face to face service, there appears to be some room for telecommuting implementation in limited areas of law enforcement organizations.

Currently, the following public organizations are actively engaged in telecommuting practices; Board of Pharmacy, CalPERS, Franchise Tax Board, Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs, Department of Personnel Administration, Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST), Department of Motor Vehicles, Department of Social Services, and the California Integrated Waste Management Board.

There are several contributing factors as to why these public organizations have implemented telecommuting programs. They include, office space, overhead, productivity, morale, attendance, retention, employee effectiveness, employee

performance, and recruitment.⁸

It is apparent that implementing telecommunications technology in a medium-sized, urban police department is worth exploring further; however, it should be approached with caution and patience. The strategy for setting up a telecommuting program will depend on organizational and implementer characteristics, preferences and circumstances. There is no single, simple recipe. Telecommuting has become an increasingly mainstream alternative with the number of telecommuters growing to more than 11 million in the United States, up 15 percent from 1995.⁹

Understanding the potential problems associated with implementing a telecommunicating program is essential to its success. Awareness of these problems will assist law enforcement managers in determining what program will make sense for the organization. Before proposing a telecommuting project, ask the question, "What is in it for us?" This exercise will determine what reasons support implementation of a pilot program.

In some ways, setting up a successful telecommuting program is like painting your house, much of the success is dependent on the preparation. If prepared, telecommuting implementation will be easy. Becoming educated on the subject of telecommuting is important. Knowing what you are doing before beginning a project is common sense. For telecommuting implementation it is critical.¹⁰

Telecommuting is not a one-size fits all proposition; nor is it a concrete set of standard operating procedures. There are many types of telecommuting arrangements and programs and ways to implement them. Telecommuting is a progressive concept,

constantly being refined.

Telecommunication's programs vary in their impact and operation in any given organization. Telecommunication implementation affects individual workers, their co-workers, their organizations and their customers. It is very important to create a telecommuting program to the organization's individual workers, needs, mission, culture and circumstances.

Despite the fact that telecommuting has been around for awhile, telecommuting implementation is still associated with organizational culture change. Changes in the organizational culture, no matter how beneficial, can be fragile and difficult at the beginning. Telecommunication's program implementers will usually need to draw on a solid understanding of both telecommuting and the organization to make them work cohesively and overcome the initial resistance.¹¹

Finally, there are well-known questions to telecommunication implementation. Typically, nervous, inquisitive, and change resistant employees, including management, will barrage telecommunications facilitators with questions. The educated implementer should be prepared to handle these. The unprepared, uneducated implementer will magnify existing discomfort as well as implementation difficulty.

Telecommuting is changing the way people work as well as the interaction among employees, managers and workers. The transition can be unnerving for everyone. While it may seem that telecommuting employees are the ones making the biggest accommodation in terms of work style, in actual practice, telecommuting

requires the greatest leap of faith and causes the greatest consternation for managers.¹²

Management and supervisors will be the cornerstones of the telecommuting program's success or failure. Communication skills are the core. When you start to substitute e-mail and voice mail for face to face conversations, communication suffers. When you're implementing a telecommuting program, step one is to understand that there are a lot of issues at play beyond technology and that the cultural, managerial and interpersonal implications of telecommuting are really much bigger than technology.¹³

Management should focus on several identified areas of concern including, lack of face-to-face time, absence from the workplace, lost creativity, and unmet expectations. How does a manager know telecommuters are working if he or she can't see them? Managers have to learn new ways to measure productivity. This may also cause some resentment among other workers in the agency. Unless the Telecommuter is extremely sophisticated at coordinating, handing things off and leaving instructions, it can lead to a less rather than more productive environment. The inventiveness and energy that drive innovation can get lost when people are not interacting with one another on a regular basis. In addition, there is an assumption in telecommuting that somehow, home is going to be a friendlier, easier, quieter place to work than the office. That's not always the case.¹⁴ Training, education, and familiarization are all key characteristics for managers to assist in providing a smooth transition as primary stakeholders.

In order for a telecommuting program to be properly evaluated, an implementation team must be organized and several key positions must be identified. The team should consist of eight to ten department members in addition to a Telecommuting Project Manager. Each team member will provide their own expertise relating their position within the organization. Each will play an important role in the implementation process.¹⁵

Ideally, the implementation team should consist of the following participants; the Chief of Police or a designee, Department Legal Council, Human Resources / Personnel, Labor Representative, Training Manager, Disaster Coordinator, Information Systems Representative, Public Relations, and a representative from each Division of the Department.

Once a project manager has been selected and a transition team formed, an activity plan must be formulated to affect the changes needed to bring about the desired future.

The focus in the beginning should be on developing a telecommunications pilot project. A pilot project will benefit the agency, potential telecommuters, their managers, and their co-workers by establishing a solid base of experience on which to build. The purpose of the pilot project is to identify what does and does not work for the agency prior to a larger scale implementation of the telecommuting work option. The pilot project should encompass a broad cross section of job classifications. The pilot project should include units where there are multiple telecommuters to assess the impact of the unit. The project should be large enough to be evaluated for the agency as a

whole. It is important to also assess the satisfaction and effectiveness of staff who do not telecommute, as successful telecommuting is a team effort.¹⁶

Pilot projects typically last six months to one year. During this time, regular assessments and evaluations should be conducted, both by surveys and informal meetings of telecommuters, managers and non-telecommuting co-workers. At the end of the pilot project, the agency will have a strong sense of how appropriate telecommuting is for the agency and its staff.¹⁷ Keeping in mind adjustments may be necessary through experience, the following things should be done in order to properly implement, operate and evaluate the program.

- Develop a decision-making consensus of expectations from the program. Why is the organization interested in implementing telecommuting?
- Obtain top level support and agreement that the telecommuting program will be completely embraced by the Chief of Police.
- Obtain stakeholder support. Carry out negotiations or consultations, as necessary, with stakeholder groups.
- Form a telecommuting implementation team that is most advantageous to your organization. For optimal support and ease of implementation, identify who needs to be involved in planning.
- Identify the Telecommunications Project Manager and make him/her the single point of contact for the organization.
- Solicit interest in the concept from department personnel.
- Identify alternative workplace arrangements tailored to fit the organization's needs and capabilities.
- Develop an operating strategy and policy for the program. What are the parameters of the program? Who will be in it? How will it work?
- Develop implementation and change plans for management. What is the

schedule for implementation? How will it be implemented? How will the change be managed?

- Develop orientation training for the program. How will it be communicated?
- Develop policy instruments such as work agreements between the organization, manager, and worker.
- Establish mechanisms for coordinating, supporting, and troubleshooting the program once it is underway. Ensure adequate technical and policy support for the participants.
- Establish and implement a program awareness, promotion, and acceptance plan. Inform the organization why this is being done and how it will benefit them and the organization. In general, dispel information and anxiety.
- Establish and implement a monitoring and evaluation system to ensure that the program goals are being met and proper modifications are being made.¹⁸

While some telecommuters may do their required work at home or in the office with pen and paper, others will require a computer, a computer with a modem, or dedicated terminal to communicate with people and access the information needed to do their jobs. It is essential that the equipment used at home be compatible with central office equipment. Purchase of a laptop computer should be considered. A laptop eliminates the need to buy expensive computer furniture in which to house a regular size personal computer, allows greater flexibility, and makes it more convenient for the Telecommuter to use a single piece of equipment both at home and in the office. Typewriters, copiers, or fax machines may occasionally be necessary.

Perhaps the most significant implication that this issue has on leadership is the necessary buy-in to a change in management style relative to telecommuters. Some

leaders will accept it with open arms while others will reject it. "For a lot of old-school managers, this is such a big change that, if you don't train them, it's doomed to fail," says Richard Skinner, president of Clayton College & State University in Morrow, Ga., and head of Metropolitan Atlanta Telecommuting Advisory Council. "If you don't get the managers and leaders trained and prepared to do this, and to completely rethink how they view supervision, it's not going to work."¹⁹

Telecommuting is a product of the Information Age. The very nature of telecommutable jobs is tied to the manipulation of information. Managing the work of information workers is very different from managing production units. The products are often intangible, production standards are difficult to develop, and assessment of quality is often subjective in the short term.

The most successful philosophy for managing telecommuters is that of management by end result. The elements that should be built into this style of management are project schedules and key milestones, regular status reporting, peer and project reviews, team participation in decision making, trust, and Telecommuter agreements.²⁰

Telecommuting focus groups should be part of the evaluation process. Focus sessions should be held when the program is implemented in the agency which has had no previous experience with telecommuting. These sessions are an excellent way of determining how the program is doing in its early stages.

In order to effectively implement telecommunications technology in a medium-sized urban police department by the year 2005, a department must address it initially

as a small experiment and approach it slowly using the step by step process outlined in this report. Law enforcement agencies operate in traditional paradigms. Law enforcement agencies are unique in that this technology does not apply as readily to the profession as compared to many private industries; however, there is room for exploration. Certainly there are positions in police departments which can be easily identified as fitting the criteria to benefit from telecommuting.

The agency should begin by developing a transition management plan which must include complete support by top management officials and stakeholders. A telecommuting project manager must be appointed and designated by the Chief Executive Officer as the point person for the organization. The project manager will develop a telecommunications program implementation team. The implementation team will consist of a wide range of stakeholder representatives. The implementation team is responsible for developing an activity plan to include the a telecommunications pilot project. The target completion for the pilot project should be no longer than one year. Telecommuting employees should be chosen based on the criteria established in this report. An evaluation process should be part of the program including focus groups to monitor the program for efficiency. Command staff and peripheral managers must remain flexible and patient through the process.

If law enforcement organizations are going to continue to be successful, organizations must continue to look outside their walls and into the operations of other organizations including private industry. While law enforcement agencies may not want to initiate identical programs or configure their operations for profit, they have an

obligation to stay with, or ahead of the curve. Under the watchful eye of the community, organizations must continue to justify and compete for resources while searching for alternatives and improvements to standard operating procedures.

This is an opportunity for law enforcement organizations to explore an exciting alternative to traditional operations. Telecommuting will offer opportunities, challenges and ultimately advantages to law enforcement and the community we serve.

ENDNOTES

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