

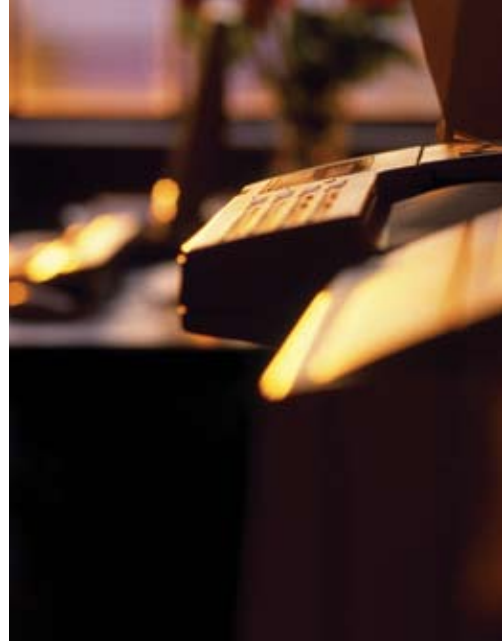
home WORK



States Open to Employees Telecommuting, But There Are Obstacles

Technology now allows many people to work from anywhere, not just the typical office setting. Many state governments offering this benefit to their employees have found telecommuting provides benefits beyond the original reasons, often traffic and air quality. But growing the program in many states has run into problems.

By Mary Branham Dusenberry



Homework isn't as bad as it used to be.

In fact, many people, including employees in state government, are asking for it. Telecommuting is an option many states offer their employees as an alternative to working daily in a state office building.

Virginia is one state actively pursuing expansion of its telework program. Gov. Tim Kaine and the state legislature are pushing to have 20 percent of the state's work force telecommuting by 2009.

"Telecommuting has a lot of benefits," Kaine told *State News*. "From what I've read, it improves employee satisfaction and brings higher productivity. Happier people who aren't spending so much time in the car creates its own value."

Kaine signed an executive order in September 2006 creating a state office dedicated to encouraging public and private employees to work at home.

Traffic congestion in various parts of Virginia—including the Washington, D.C., area—in part is behind the efforts to encourage more employees to work from home or telework centers.

That reasoning is similar to why Arizona implemented its telework program nearly two decades ago.

Maricopa County, which includes Phoenix, failed to reach federal standards for air quality, and employers were charged with reducing employee trips to cut pollution. State government was no exception, according to John Corbett, administrator of Arizona's Telework Program.

The six-month pilot program between the state and AT&T, which began in 1989, proved successful. Not only was the program helpful in travel demand management, it also increased participating state employees' productivity and improved job attitude because there was a better work environment, Corbett said.

Virginia, too, has noticed other benefits outside the goal of reducing traffic congestion.

The Benefits

"The benefit for the state is a well-managed telework program produces higher worker productivity," Kaine said. "There's more

work done and more citizens served."

The work-life balance is often touted as a benefit for telework initiatives, both in public service and private industry. Virginia offers several alternatives, including telecommuting, for its state government work force to address the work-life balance issue.

"I think of how many parents with kids are somewhat hemmed down during school years by responsibility to family, and that's the way it should be," Kaine said.

Many people, he said, may not be able to work the traditional 9 to 5 schedule, but by offering options like flexible schedules and telecommuting, those people may be open to working for state government.

"It's a great way for any organization to take advantage of a talent pool that might not be available to you," he said.

Telecommuting is becoming a perk many employees expect. In *Fortune* magazine's most recent "100 Best Places to Work," 82 of the top 100 companies allow employees to telecommute at least 20 percent of the time.

"For a lot of people entering the work force, they are interested in flexibility, so it's a real handicap if you don't have it," said Sara Wilson, director of the Virginia Department of Human Resource Management and president of the National Association of State Personnel Executives (NASPE). "It really is trying to focus on work/life balance ... everybody has different issues they need to take care of."

Wilson and others believe telecommuting can be an important recruiting tool. And that will become even more important as state governments across the country face workers reaching retirement age—up to 29 percent of state work forces could be eligible to retire within five years and 13 percent of the employees could retire within a year, according to Leslie Scott, NASPE association manager.

"The Gen Ys and the next generation ... they expect it," Scott said. "They would be shocked if it weren't offered."

Corbett said states could face a "very large senior moment when people start retiring and the new generation comes in ... if we're not making the workplace more flexible to attract and retain our

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Arizona Telework Program

employees with programs like this.”

Chuck Wilsker, of the Telework Coalition, said the technology available today eliminates the need for many people to be tied to an office setting.

“If you spend your time on the phone and on a computer, you can probably do that from any location,” he said.

Scott said if the definition of telecommuting is expanded, there may be more people counted among telecommuters. “With everybody walking around with Blackberries and cell phones,” she said, “is that telecommuting?”

Wilsker calls telecommuting a “win-win” situation.

“It’s better for society in general,” Wilsker said. “It’s great for employees because it adds to the work-life balance, and it reduces tremendous amount of costs.”

In addition to fuel costs, Wilsker said those working at home can save on wear and tear on vehicles, dry cleaning for work clothes and eating out. He said it also saves money for companies and governments that offer the perk by cutting absenteeism and the need for office space.

According to NASPE, six states— Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Oregon, Virginia and Texas—offer telework programs in all agencies and programs throughout state government. At least 34 states offer telework programs in selected agencies and regions.

Kaine’s goal of 20 percent of the state work force, then, would seem attainable. But he estimated that only 3 percent to 4 percent of the state employees were telecommuting in 2006.

Arizona’s goal is also to have 20 percent of state employees telecommuting. After 17 years, the state recently reached 19.74 percent participation rate in Maricopa County. Now, Corbett said, the state needs to maintain that number.

The International Telework Association and Council (ITAC) estimated that only 16 percent of the country’s 135.4 million workers worked from home at least once a week last year. The National Technology Readiness survey, released last year, found that only 11 percent of workers telecommute regularly. The study, produced by Rockbridge Associates Inc. and the Center of Excellence in Service at the University of Maryland, also found

only 2 percent of Americans telecommute full-time.

The Roadblocks

Those interested in expanding telecommuting opportunities in government have found it to be a difficult task. There is the problem of access to systems because of broadband availability, as well as the problem with state servers being able to handle remote access from multiple locations. And there’s always the issue of security.

Following the theft of a laptop and external hard drive from the home of an analyst for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs last May, technology officials are hesitant to give their blessing to take government computers home. In fact, an August 2006 survey found 40 percent of the 200 federal technology officials surveyed said security breaches are major concerns for them. Gerald T. Charles Jr. with Cisco Systems said security concerns seem to be slowing government efforts to increase the number of telecommuters.

But Wilsker, with the Telework Coalition, said available technology can eliminate at least part of those concerns.

“Technology exists where you can keep (sensitive) data on a corporate server, have an employee go home and get on a government computer and government network and access that information,” he said.

While security is a concern, it’s not the only roadblock for telecommuting. Technology requires an investment and security requires a plan, Kaine said. But he believes the biggest problem in expanding the number of telecommuters is people.

“A key obstacle is just training managers about how to take advantage of it,” he said.

Virginia’s human resources department offers training for managers of telecommuters. Wilson calls the management style: “managing from results rather than watching them sit there.

“You have to know what the goals and objectives are,” she said.

Wilsker said the opposition “runs the gamut from no leadership at the top to no desire at the bottom.”

He said it's often mid-level managers who oppose telecommuting, but employees themselves sometimes have problems with the change.

"There are a lot of employees who don't like the idea of being isolated at home," he said. "One negative people have come up with is that some people who did it (telecommute) occasionally felt the feeling of isolation."

These are among the "myths" Telework Arizona addresses on its Web site. Corbett said Arizona evaluated its telework program, including opinions from front line supervisors, mid-level supervisors, management, the legislature, the public, the coworker and the teleworker, and found 13 common misperceptions about telework programs. All are addressed on the Web site, www.teleworkarizona.com.

"In any relationship, you have trust issues," Corbett said. That mistrust, he said, is often based on past relationships. "What has to happen is you have to build a new relationship around the two. Make sure you correct the right people, with the right skills and the right home atmosphere. You need to have thorough policies and training so you help to answer all the questions."

The Telework Arizona Web site offers a self-evaluation for its employees to determine if they fit the telework model. It's then up to the employee to take that information to his or her supervisor to be considered for telework.

Not every job is conducive to telecommuting. Virginia, like the federal government, says managers need to say why employees are not eligible to telecommute instead of giving reasons why they would be eligible.

The Future

NASPE discussed the telecommute option at its January meeting. "I think our membership would like to encourage it.

They see it as an advantage in recruiting, particularly with a young work force," Scott said. "They have to listen to their IT folks, make sure the information is secure."

Scott said there are also limits on the number of people who can come into a network through an outside source. Accessing the server from home creates a strain on the system. She said those problems could limit the growth of telecommuting in state governments.

"My guess is it will be there. A few more people will telecommute, but it won't be booming. There are too many barriers to overcome at this point," Scott said. "Technology problems could be overcome before the mindsets are."

Nevertheless, increasing the number of telecommuters is at the top of Kaine's list for Virginia. And he thinks it could help other states as well, if governors and other state leaders buy into the option.

"It helps with something new if leadership comes from the top," he said. "It really helped when I signed the executive order when I said this is a key priority."

Corbett echoed those remarks. "You need a champion within the organization to carry the ball and to keep management interested in telework. Managers need to be online," he said. "They need to know all their concerns will be addressed through the selection of proper employees."

Kaine said it also helps for state government to find private sector partners that have successful telecommute programs.

"We in Virginia are fortunate in that there are some private companies that do it well," he said. "They are very anxious to tell their story and share what they can so we can do our job."

—Mary Branham Dusenberry is managing editor of State News magazine.



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