

Teleworking: Some Texas Initiatives

By Dr. Zeny S. Panol

Assistant Professor

Mass Communications

Southwest Texas State University

San Marcos, Texas

In this era of the virtual corporation, three Texas cities ranked in the top ten of *Fortune* magazine's 1995 best places that "serve the evolving workplace": Austin [7], Dallas [8], and Houston [9]. This new workplace embraces the "work anywhere, anytime" paradigm—a flexibility, experts insist, facilitated but not dictated by communications technology.

In this work environment, teleworking¹ recorded the most significant increases. Estimates vary widely: a LINK Telework survey found that some 15 million corporate employees in the United States now work from home full time or part time; the February *PC World* estimates more than 11 million, with 68 percent of companies offering telecommuting programs. By 2000, the number of telecommuters in the United States will reach 30 million.

The Texas Experience

In 1995-96, the Texas Department of Transportation, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and the Federal Highway Administration commissioned the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) to study telecommuting programs in Texas. The research focused on the employees at six public agencies or businesses² who work at home on a daily or part-time basis. (The table shows comparative data on the six TTI case study programs.)

The study identified some laws or policies that encouraged teleworking in Texas. For example, the Employee Trip Reduction program requires employers with more than 100 employees to develop and implement programs to increase vehicle occupancy and reduce the number of commuters driving alone. Also, the 1993 state legislation encouraging state agencies to establish telecommuting programs to streamline government spending led to the development of telework programs.

Highlights

Formal guidelines spelled out the roles and responsibilities of the employer and teleworker. Highlights emerging from these telecommuting arrangements include:

The establishment of formal advisory committees or informal networks to provide opportunities to interact and discuss potential problems and needs.

The wide range of technological sophistication of telecommuter equipment. Workers have second telephone lines and links to the main computer systems in some arrangements; in others, they use laptop computers and check in by telephone.

The identification of ten industries that have the greatest potential for telecommuting in major

urban areas in Texas. These are: educational services; health services; manufacturing-durable goods; business and repair service; mining; communications and public utilities; public administration; finance, insurance, and real estate; other professional and related services; and wholesale.

While the case studies show that telecommuting programs are being successfully used in government and private agencies in Texas, some hesitancy was noted. The most often cited reasons were management concerns about lack of supervision and potential abuse by employees. Indeed, much of the telework literature mentions the need to change the approach from management by sight to management by results.

Benefits

Social. The study specified the benefits of telecommuting to society: reductions in traffic congestion and the associated costs of road maintenance and public transportation; reductions in energy consumption; improvements in air quality.

Surveys of the six Texas cases indicate average savings of about 38 miles per one vehicle trip (or 76 miles round trip). Another study of a Texas telecommuting project-the GTE Pilot Program in Dallas done in 1995 by DBR and Associates-reported a 92 percent decrease in vehicle miles traveled and a 76 percent reduction on all trips during telecommuting days.

Organizational. Among the benefits cited by employers in the TTI study were: increases in employee productivity, morale, and commitment; decreases in sick leave; and improvements in the retention and recruitment of employees. Pioneers in the field say that 20-30 percent increases in productivity are common.

Employers also noted reductions in overhead. For example, from 1991-96, the number of attorneys increased at the Commission on Appeals Department of the Texas Workforce Commission, but office space needs during this same period were reduced.

Other benefits to employers included expanded opportunity to hire disabled employees and more effective use of computer and communication technology. Organizations with telecommuting options are viewed as more adaptive and better poised to exploit the advantages that new generations of telecommunication and computer technologies offer.

Employee. The employees participating in the TTI study listed several benefits of telecommuting, including: reductions in the stress, time, and costs associated with commuting; flexibility in working times; increases in productivity and job satisfaction; and improvements in family life.

Components of Successful Programs

The TTI study and a review of available research in the United States and abroad point to elements that appear to affect the success of telecommuting programs:

Financial, technical, and policy support from management executives.

Clearly defined policies and guidelines and signed agreements outlining management and telecommuter expectations and responsibilities.

Selection of job tasks. Appropriate telecommuting jobs do not require extensive interaction with the public or coworkers.

Selection of telecommuters. Good candidates are self-motivated and self-starters, can work independently, and have extensive experience.

Selection of managers and supervisors. The case studies have identified the following characteristics: management by objectives, trust in employees, and good communication skills.

Establishment of communication methods. Techniques include establishing regular times for phone calls, using e-mail and pagers, and setting hours.

Equipment and support. Although equipment, cost sharing, and requirements for use vary, telecommuters must be properly equipped.

Monitoring systems. The case studies used monitoring mechanisms, evaluation procedures, or advisory committees to identify and address problems.

Notes

1. Telework or telecommuting is working for an organization either at home or at a satellite work site at least part of the time while connected to the office via some form of telecommunication technology.

2. The six public agencies and businesses examined were: the City of San Antonio-Information Services Department; Mobile Oil Corporation, Dallas; Rice University, Houston; State of Texas-Comptroller of Public Accounts, Austin; State of Texas-Texas Workforce Commission, Austin; and the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission [TNRCC]-Region 12, Houston. Selection was made to provide a cross-section of agencies and businesses, work settings, geographical locations, and telecommuting programs.

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2 October 1997

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