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Consider the Alternatives

Association Management, November 1999 It's a
manager's worst nightmare--a valued and experienced
employee walks in with news that his wife just accepted a
transfer and the family is moving out of the state. In
today's highly connected world, however, this doesn't
necessarily mean a six-month search for a replacement,
capped off by several more months of on-the-job training.
Many associations have found that adopting telework
programs helps them retain valued employees, provide
more flexibility, and contribute to civic goals.

The Oracle Applications Users Group, Atlanta, an
independent software association for which I had served
as a volunteer for many years, faced a similar situation in
1995, when circumstances led to my desire to work as a
paid employee. OAUG wanted to retain my experience in
association communication, but I lived in Northern
Virginia and a move to Atlanta was not feasible. So I
drafted a proposal recommending that I work as OAUG's
communication manager from my home office. The
agreement has resulted in a mutually beneficial
arrangement whereby OAUG gains my experience, and I
hold a highly desirable position with flexible working
conditions.

Evaluating potential pluses

"Usually, there's a champion who gets excited about
telework and proposes a program," says Joanne H. Pratt,
president, Joanne H. Pratt Associates, Dallas, a consulting
firm for companies implementing telework programs. But
you needn't wait for a champion to come forward; the

first step is to evaluate whether telework suits your organization.

"The first thing I ask an agency is, 'What problems are you trying to solve with this program?'" says David Fleming, telework program consultant, Department of Personnel Administration, State of California, Sacramento. "This is not some trendy program that you should adopt just because it seems like the right thing to do," explains Fleming. "Rather, it's something that you institute to get the job done better."

Pratt recommends an analysis based on your association's mission. "Ask yourself, 'Why are we in business, and how do we satisfy our customers?' That focuses your attention on how to get the job done, rather than concentrating on imposing artificial telework guidelines."

Telework programs can offer several advantages:

- **Increased productivity.** With a focused work environment and fewer interruptions, employees get more done in less time. A teleworker since January 1999, John Edwards works from Savoy, Illinois, as publications director for the American Society of Animal Science, Tucson, Arizona. "A series of phone calls can easily extend a two-hour task to four hours. With most phone calls handled now by in-house staff, I don't have nearly as many interruptions."

- **Improved employee loyalty and retention.** "We hope to help our employees improve their quality of life with this program," says Cynthia M. Quinn, controller of the American Society for Industrial Security (ASIS), Alexandria, Virginia. Telework programs can also reduce absenteeism in cases where employees provide care for children or parents or when employees have other personal challenges, such as frequent medical appointments.

- **Access to talented people who would not otherwise be available.** The details of the telework program now in place at the American Society of Animal Science evolved from Edwards's proposal addressing a solution to his relocation situation.

- **Reduced need for expensive office space.** Associations tight on office space can relieve that burden when employees work off site. However,

keep in mind that setting up an off-site workspace can involve setup and maintenance costs. Refer to the companion article, "Telework Toolkit," for more details.

- **Association contribution to civic goals.** Associations in large urban areas often have many employees who regularly spend hours commuting on the highway. To help reduce traffic congestion and pollution, many local governments offer free assistance to associations in setting up telework programs. Home offices can also keep employees off the road during bad weather or extended road construction.

Facing the challenges

Despite the benefits of effective off-site workspaces, you must carefully consider the operational changes that a telework program can fuel.

- **Some managers feel that a telework policy reduces their control over employees.** Managing staff from afar does, in fact, require a shift toward a management-by-objectives paradigm in which managers establish overall goals and define individual areas of responsibility in terms of expected results. OAUG, for example, evaluates my performance based on the quality, quantity, and timeliness of projects I deliver, not by checking to see if I'm at my desk at a certain time or meeting a certain dress code. Fleming provides training to California state government managers in new styles of management, and for some, it can be a difficult transition. "It's a shift from policing to results-oriented management," he says. "We believe this creates better managers overall. There should be no difference in the way a teleworker and an office worker are managed and evaluated. The same factors important to evaluating office workers--the quality of the work, communication, initiative, and teamwork--are also important for off-site staff," says Quinn.

- **Some jobs are just not conducive to telework.** When I drafted my original proposal, I carefully listed all job duties and analyzed them to ensure that they could be performed off-site. But jobs requiring lots of face-to-face meetings or an employee's physical presence (such as a mailroom manager) won't fit into a telework program.

Consequently, many associations need to evaluate eligible jobs on a case-by-case basis. To minimize resentment among employees whose jobs aren't conducive to telework, set consistent expectations as to which jobs are eligible for the program. Consider specifying a minimum service requirement before an employee can participate.

- **Support groups may be affected.** Just like any far-reaching personnel issue, telework programs should not be created in a vacuum. Enlist the assistance of the human resources department in program development. Departments like information technology (IT), communication, and facilities management may have valuable input for program policies, particularly in the case of the IT department, which will undoubtedly be called upon to provide support to off-site workers.

- **Job performance expectations may not be as clear for the off-site employee.** Formulate specific rules that apply to all teleworkers and address them in an overall policy like the one described later in this article. Managers and staff should jointly set expectations that are specific to an individual job. These might include deliverables and deadlines; response times; goals and objectives; and attendance at meetings, whether those events are conducted in person or via teleconferencing.

- **Telework is not for everyone.** Ask most people if they'd like to work from home, and their initial reaction is, "That would be great." But when faced with the actual decision, many people decide that telework isn't appropriate for them. Associations considering off-site work options should develop a self-screening evaluation for employees. Often associations worried about a telework stampede find that some employees withdraw themselves from consideration during this self-evaluation phase. The American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA), Chicago, offers a sample screening and evaluation form on its Web site. (See the sidebar, "Online Information on Off-site Work Options" for more details.)

Who does make a good teleworker? "A good teleworker is a good employee," says Fleming. Trust is critical. If you can't trust an employee to get the job done in the office, you shouldn't consider that employee for a remote-office environment.

Self-evaluations for employees should ask questions like
these:

- Are you highly self-motivated and self-disciplined?
- Do you like working alone and enjoy solving
  problems on your own?
- Do you work well without supervision?
- Do you have excellent written and verbal
  communication skills?
- Do you have limited distractions at home?
- Can you leave work at quitting time?
- Are you good at prioritizing tasks?
- Are you extremely familiar with your job and with
  association policies and practices?

If telework is to be successful, the answers to all or most
of these questions should be yes.

Employee benefits

Employees often respond positively to the telework
opportunity because it offers many advantages to those
who are able to work efficiently and successfully off site.

- **Increased flexibility.** The employee has more
  control over the workschedule. In fact, some pilot
  programs come about when a valued employee
  needs work flexibility to deal with medical
  concerns or other personal issues.

- **Improved quality of life.** Telework provides a
  better balance between work and personal
  concerns. "I enjoy 'driving my mouse' rather than
  my car to work each day and living in the place I
  choose to live," says Edwards.

- **No mobility concerns.** If the employee moves, the
  job moves, too. When I moved from Virginia to
  Texas, my job came with me.

The out-of-sight office can have its downsides, though.
The biggest disadvantage is the isolation. Many
associations encourage partial telework, where the
employee works from home for part of the week and
visits the office for the remaining days. When this isn't
possible, encourage the employee to become involved in
local professional groups. I belong to the Texas Society
of Association Executives, Austin, and the San Antonio
SAE--professional contacts that allow me to get out of the

office and meet with others on a regular basis.

"The freedom of working alone comes with a price--the burden of solitude," says Edwards. "We all have wished for days where people would just leave us alone, and with telework, we get our wish--in spades."

Home office habitues also must be able to set aside household distractions, like chores, neighbors, and children. Conversely, they must also be able to put work aside and shut the door, or personal life will suffer.

Teleworkers can feel left out of the team. Managers must provide just as much feedback to off-site staff as to office workers, encouraging everyone to communicate frequently via telephone, e-mail, and other means--and reminding staff to include counterparts in important meetings--in person or via teleconference. And, most important: Make sure managers give teleworkers the same opportunities for advancement as those in the office.

Setting up a program

If you are inclined to adopt a telework program, begin by suggesting that your human resources manager draft specific guidelines for approval by you and your board of directors. (See the sidebar, above, for information, guidance, and sample documents.) Once the program is approved, establish a formal telework policy. "The biggest mistake companies make is lack of planning," says Joanne Pratt. "You can't just decide to turn it on tomorrow." A well-thought-out, written policy is essential to ensure that the program is administered fairly and consistently. Your policy should be comprehensive, but flexible enough to adapt to the different needs of each job. Make sure it covers the following points:

- **Equipment.** Equipment needs could include telephone lines, remote connectivity, computers, office furniture, fax machines, and other items. Determine exactly what will be required to perform the job and who is responsible (the employee or employer) for providing these items. If one of your association's objectives for the program is that it helps to retain and attract employees, strongly consider having the association provide all necessary equipment.

- **Responsibility for approving the telework arrangement and the parameters for that**

decision. Determining eligible candidates should depend on both the employee's temperament and abilities and the job tasks to be performed.

- **Liability and insurance coverage.** Because of differing work arrangements and state regulations, have legal counsel review these details.

- **Workspace requirements.** Determine the size and characteristics of an efficient office. For example, decide whether a completely separate room in the house is required, or if an outside entrance is preferable in the case of an employee who meets with members or suppliers.

- **Working hours and response times.** Supervisor and employee should agree on core hours during which the employee will consistently be available and the kind of turnaround time that is reasonable for certain requests.

- **Reporting, deadlines, deliverables, and employee evaluation criteria.** Often a policy will specify that these will be determined and documented between the teleworker and manager.

Making it work

Many associations establish a pilot program with just one or two employees to evaluate the feasibility of telework for their organizations before rolling it out to the entire department or association. Training is also critical. In most cases, telework will be new for both employees and managers, so it's important to provide training on what to expect. Because people are naturally resistant to change, training programs can help address their concerns. David Fleming, of the Department of Personnel Administration in California, recommends three levels of training that he has found effective in managing teleworkers in several state agencies in the California government:

- a program orientation for executives;
- a session for managers and supervisors; and
- a session for teleworkers and their co-workers (who may or may not be teleworking).

As with any new program, follow up frequently with managers, employees, and co-workers to discover problems and resolve issues. Fleming recommends focus group sessions "to discuss issues that have arisen and to keep the air clear."

Above all, encourage constant communication. With my arrangement, because I rarely visit the office, I keep my supervisor and co-workers informed about what I'm working on with frequent e-mail communication, telephone calls, and a monthly status report. In return, they add me to distribution lists and inform me of meetings, so I know what they're working on and what meetings I should attend. Because managers can't observe in person when something goes amiss with a teleworker, both must make a special commitment to maintain open and frequent communication to solve problems before they become major obstacles.

"Telework isn't a passing fad like hula hoops," points out Pratt. "It's inevitable. It's the way we're going to be working in the information age."

With careful thought, a good plan, thorough training, and constant follow-up, your association can reap the benefits of a telework program.

Laura Bray has served as communication manager via telework for the Oracle Applications Users Group, Atlanta, since 1996. She now works for Meeting Expectations, Atlanta, OAUG's contracted association management company. E-mail: laurabray@earthlink.net.

Related Sidebar(s)

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