



A Centuries-Old Idea with Modern Value and Appeal

QUICK LOOK

- ⇒ Modern telework is both a comfort and necessity for many people, because it affords them the autonomy, trust and freedom to do what they need to do when they need to do it.
- ⇒ A fundamental problem with informal telecommuting is that it's often inequitably offered to employees — some managers allow their employees to telecommute while other managers don't.
- ⇒ Most teleworkers are knowledge workers, meaning they are paid for their ideas and thoughts.

When the ancient Roman senators sealed deals in bathhouses decorated with gilded mosaics, they were telecommuting, according to the word's definition in the *WorldatWork Telework Trendlines 2009* survey report, which defines the practice as “periodically or regularly performing work for one’s employer from home or another remote location.” And since then, for the very powerful, most important business deals have not been made in the boardroom but in a variety of semiprivate social enclaves, from the country club to the luxury yacht to the charity ball. Doing work away from the office is a long-standing tradition.

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MODERN TELEWORK

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What is new today is the nature of the telework population, the type of work that is done and the reasons for using this ancient work practice, which is one of several workplace flexibility initiatives alongside options like flexible hours, compressed workweeks, job sharing, phased-in retirement and sabbaticals. In this article we'll explore data from the *Telework Trendlines 2009* report, commissioned by WorlDatWork and conducted by The Dieringer Research Group, to demonstrate how contemporary telework has advanced from its early roots, suggest a modern perspective for understanding why telework is a powerful best practice for all organizations, and provide some tips for making telework work. (Note that in this article, we use the term "telework" in a general sense to refer to working away from the main office regardless of frequency. This differs from the definitions used in the report.)

Home is Where the Work is

No longer is doing business in comfort the sole purview of the executive. The *Telework Trendlines 2009* report found a staggering 33.7 million Americans work remotely at least one day per month, an impressive 17-percent increase from 2006. And unlike years past, where ultrapublic places such as cafés and libraries were popular for getting work done, the 2009 report shows that 87 percent of telecommuters are working out of the privacy of their homes. Our version of

the Roman baths — Starbucks — has declined in popularity, most likely due to high-speed Internet access becoming more available in everyday households coupled with high gas prices that encourage employees to keep their cars parked in the garage. Nonetheless, modern telework makes it possible to work independent of a particular location, allowing anyone — and potentially everyone — the opportunity to be productive where and when it suits them best.

The Freedom of Flexibility for All

The *Telework Trendlines 2009* report shows a tremendous increase from 2006 in both occasional telecommuting (a whopping 5 million more people telecommuted at least one day per month) and regular telecommuting (2.2 million more people telecommuted at least one day per week in 2008). Note, however, that unlike our ancient Roman counterparts, telecommuters today are not doing the "big deals" when they're working away from the office. Nor are they teleworking simply to avoid office distractions, as they've done in the recent past. Instead, the authors' client

surveys show that the key reasons people telework today are:

- To avoid the commute (e.g., decrease stress, gain more work time)
- To be available in case of a personal emergency
- To have the flexibility to attend to dependent-care responsibilities (e.g., to pick up/drop off children, take an aging parent to the doctor).

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Letting Go is Hard To Do

Although teleworking is on the rise, *Telework Trendlines 2009* shows that occasional telecommuting is growing faster (a 17-percent increase from 2006) than regular telecommuting (a 10-percent increase). (See Figure 1.) Occasional telecommuting is usually done on an informal, ad hoc basis while regular telecommuting (i.e., working remotely at least one day per week) requires a formal program. Thus, these growth-rate data suggest that organizations still hesitate to

FIGURE 1: CHANGES IN TELEWORK FROM 2006 TO 2008

	Number of U.S. Adults in 2006	Number of U.S. Adults in 2008	% Change Between 2006 and 2008
At least once per month	28.7 million	33.7 million	+17.4%
At least once per week	22.0 million	24.2 million	+10.1%
Almost every day	14.7 million	13.5 million	-8.2%

implement formal programs. Why? Because formal programs legitimize telework by making it an accepted and encouraged organizational practice. This declaration puts a stop to old-fashioned eyeball management and requires managers and employees alike to build new skill sets. Challenging for sure, but beneficial for all as research suggests that the main bottom-line organizational benefits of telework, such as improved employee retention and recruiting rates and increased productivity (as well as cost savings and workspace flexibility), are best achieved through modern, well-designed formal programs that track, train and communicate with their teleworkers.

Living Up to Telework's Potential

A fundamental problem with informal telecommuting is that it's often inequitably offered to employees — some managers allow their employees to

telecommute while other managers don't. Consequently, negative perceptions prevail about telework's feasibility for individual employees as well as the benefits it can achieve for the workgroup. For example, of the respondents in *Telework Trendlines 2009* who do not currently telecommute, 44 percent replied that they thought their managers would not support telework. This perception is a relic of an outdated workplace environment where telecommuting is seen as a privilege doled out at the sole discretion of the manager, instead of an accepted work practice with formal rules and expectations that is clearly linked to bottom-line metrics. The result is that stakeholders' inaccurate perceptions can limit the positive outcomes telework can achieve.

Another perception that limits telework's potential is revealed in the *Telework Trendlines 2009* finding

that 61 percent of those not currently telecommuting (23 percent of everyone surveyed) believe their jobs are not suitable for telework. Yet it seems unlikely — considering that 52 percent of respondents had incomes of more than \$75,000 — that those taking the online survey were food servers, truck drivers, casino dealers or in other such location-dependent jobs. Instead, this belief is another relic of program informality. Employees are experts at their jobs, not experts at job design. The authors' applied experience shows that employees and managers alike need assistance in understanding how telework can work for them. A formal program that offers employee-suitability and job-suitability assessments is a necessary component for successful modern teleworking. (For more information on how to include all employees in a telework program, see "Tips for Teleworking an 'Un-teleworkable' Job.")

Tips for Teleworking an "Un-Teleworkable" Job

Many jobs that are considered "un-teleworkable" actually have components that can be completed while working remotely without negatively impacting co-workers or employee performance. Examples of such jobs include positions in law enforcement, health care and hospitality industries. Defining participation by job title and the common misperception that telework arrangements need to be full-time or multiday arrangements can easily lead to good telework candidates being omitted from a telework program.

Telework programs include all types of employees, and the most common telework arrangements are one or two days per week. The most effective approach is to open a telework program to all employees and investigate each individual's ability to participate.

The following process will help an organization investigate the ability of employees to participate in a telework program.

Investigate job tasks:

- Does the employee have a number of job tasks that can be completed as, or more, effectively in a remote environment?
- Can these job tasks be combined during at least a one-day period?
- Can the employee complete his/her job tasks without the need for special equipment or files that cannot be accessed remotely?

Investigate collaboration needs:

- Does the employee have job tasks that need to be accomplished in the office every day?

- Does the employee participate in frequent informal brainstorming types of sessions that need to be conducted face to face?
- Are co-workers cross-trained to do some of the employee's job tasks that need to be accomplished in the office?

There are employees whose job tasks and/or collaboration needs will not allow them to telework; however, it is worth allowing all of your employees to investigate whether a telework program will work for them. With the proper information and tools, this approach will allow your organization to maximize its results from the program as well as address potential equity issues.

Despite the negative perceptions on employees' parts, *Telework Trendlines 2009* offers some hope that resistance to formal telework programs is waning. The report finds that the number of employees who think their employer would allow telecommuting is greater than those who think their employer would deny them this practice (54 percent vs. 44 percent). This response suggests that telework advocates have been making some headway, and that organizations that do have robust telework programs are indeed serving as modern role models in the corporate world.

Telework's true potential lies in designing a formal program that achieves outcomes at the organizational level (increased employee attraction, retention, productivity, etc.). Such a program is successful because it meets all stakeholders' (employer, manager, employee) needs in clear and measurable ways by using data, collected at key program milestones, to uncover and address concerns. Formal programs provide data that reveal what training employees need and what job tasks are most suitable for telework. And formal programs offer data-driven performance measures that boost managerial confidence because they link teleworker performance to both workgroup and organizational goals, moving beyond tracking employee productivity to demonstrating how it impacts real bottom-line results. Most certainly, formal programs do require more planning and implementation effort, but the result is a program that overcomes negative perceptions and sustains benefits over time, a program that realizes its full potential. (For more information on making telework feasible at your company, see "Making Telework Work for All Stakeholders.")

Making Telework Work for All Stakeholders

A strong formal program is based on data collection and communication at key program milestones.

Phase 1: Investigation

- Conduct a survey to identify existing telework practices, attitudes, benefits and concerns.
- Create a "telework message" that describes the goals of the telework program and how telework will be investigated; communicate this to ALL employees.
- Identify key high-level stakeholders that will affirm the program's goals.

Phase 2: Design

- Use the data collected in Phase 1 to identify:
 - If the organization will do a pilot or proceed to a full rollout of the telework program
 - What types of telework and other flexible work schedules will be available to employees
 - Training needs for teleworkers, managers and nonteleworkers
 - Concerns and barriers that need to be addressed.
- Develop policies and procedures that cover all aspects of the program.
- Create a Web portal to serve as a central repository for program information, documents, forms, training schedules, etc.
- Work with managers to map organizational goals onto workgroup goals, and to link workgroup goals to individual teleworker goals.
- Develop a "telework message" about why and how telework will be implemented as well as what tools and support will be offered; communicate this throughout the organization.

Phase 3: Implementation

- Provide assessments to identify suitable job tasks and employees.
- Provide training to employees on the skills needed for effective remote work.
- Provide training to managers on how to effectively manage remote employees.
- Provide training to all employees on how to use the program and access program information.
- Develop a "telework message" about the nuts and bolts of the program (what schedules are available, how eligibility is determined, etc.) as well as how ongoing metrics will be applied; communicate this throughout the organization.

Phase 4: Support and Growth

- Collect data on bottom-line metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of the program.
- Fine tune trainings, documents, policies and other procedures to address concerns that popped up during implementation.
- Develop a "telework message" about the program's participants and success; communicate this throughout the organization.

The Average Teleworker

The *Telework Trendlines 2009* report provides a snapshot of the average teleworker that is not unlike the average ancient Roman senator who conducted critical state business in an opulently furnished bath. According to the report, the average teleworker is male, about 40 years old, a college graduate and living in a household earning \$75,000 or more per year. Sounds like the good old boys' club, right?

Perhaps. Most teleworkers are knowledge workers, meaning they are paid for their ideas and thoughts. Despite recent advances, the bottom line is that most knowledge workers in the United States are male, thus most traditionally teleworked jobs (e.g., engineers, software programmers) are held by men, while women are still overrepresented in fields like clerical and administrative jobs that are traditionally perceived as less teleworkable (though our experience shows that these types of jobs, too, do have teleworkable elements). However, because telework facilitates juggling the often conflicting roles of work and family, some experts have suggested telework should be viewed as a business strategy for attracting and retaining female talent in all job arenas. Thus, the underrepresentation of female teleworkers in *Telework Trendlines 2009* suggests that organizations are not fully using telework programs to their advantage.

Modernizing Telework Thought

Telework has changed over time in terms of how and why it is used and by whom. Most organizations on "Best Companies" lists offer telework or other flexible work programs. And recently the federal government has taken huge steps forward in telework implementation because, as Cindy Auten, general manager of the Telework Exchange, said, "Agency


managers now understand that telework has a tangible effect on business operations and can effectively support their missions, especially through continuity of operations."

It's now time to move beyond defining what telework can do and learning more about why telework works. A modern theory suggests that telework has a positive impact on employee job attitudes and productivity because it creates a psychological contract between the employee and the organization. As with a personal relationship, the relationship between an employee and organization should be based on trust and reciprocity, according to the article "Psychological contracts in the workplace: Understanding the ties that motivate," by Denise Rousseau, which appeared in issue 18 of the *Academy of Management Executive*.

The idea here is that when organizations permit employees to telework, they are implicitly acknowledging that they trust and value the employee and care about the employee's professional and personal life. Telework embeds employees within their organization because it helps ensure they are getting the best "deal." Thus, telework achieves its many positive outcomes because it creates a distinct and shared connection between employer and employee.

Conclusion

Modern telework theory transforms not only the way we do work, but also the very nature of the employee-employer relationship because it indicates that the psychological bond created by telework is as real as any paper contract. Indeed, psychological contract theory tells us that telework works because it is personal — by valuing telework, organizations deem their employees of great worth. Although reminiscent of the noblesse oblige seen in times of old, this is

truly a modern workplace attitude, and one well worth encouraging at your company. Organizations willing to modernize their approach to telework will be worthy of the finest laurel wreath, enjoying tangible benefits that are sustained in the years to come. 

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