

Employer Telework Case Study

Employer

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Background

TIGTA's telework program grew out of a task group that had been formed to make TIGTA a better place to work and to position the agency as an employer-of-choice. Every time the task group met, its members talked about wanting the flexibility to work from anywhere. "Telework just seemed to fit the bill," recalls Donna Leach, Human Resources Specialist & Telework Program Manager.

The task group talked with the inspector general (IG—the head of the agency) and proposed a pilot program. TIGTA itself was formed January 1999. The agency implemented its telework pilot in September 2000. The pilot was supposed to last nine to 12 months, but after six months the agency cut it short and made plans to move ahead. Program implementation began in August 2001.

The Telework Experience

"There was so much change with TIGTA being new," recalls Leach, "but our upper level management and our IG were very supportive." The telework policy was restructured based on feedback received during the pilot, then the agency developed manager and employee training. The three-day manager training program focused on issues like: how to deal with employees, how to tell an employee he/she can't participate, how to deal with conduct and performance issues for remote employees, virtual teams, and more.

September 11, 2001 interrupted the training process, and the program was put on hold for the remainder of that year. The training began again in January 2002.

Part of the manager training involved putting the four managers who had participated in the pilot program at the podium, where they talked about their experiences. "On the whole, most were open to it but were not sure," says Leach. "One of the advantages was we already had employees spread out in offices around the U.S., and they already managed virtually. So we stressed managing deliverables rather than managing employees. If you manage products and deliverables you're going to know it if there's a problem."

The IT and human resources departments were very involved in setting up the program. "We had our IT people working with HR to help set up high-speed Internet access (either DSL or cable modem) at employees' homes," explains Leach. "We met weekly with IT staff to resolve problems as they arose, and we answered questions and provided support to make implementation as smooth as possible."

About 90 percent of TIGTA employees participated. Leach says as of April 2006, 17.85 percent of TIGTA employees telework four to five days a week; 24.35 percent telework two to three days a week; 5.91 percent telework one day a week; 39.83 percent participate on an episodic (task-related) basis; 4.73 percent are ineligible to telework (mostly due to the nature of their job, or in some cases performance issues); 6.97 percent choose not to participate.

Leach gets detailed program stats because she asked her IT department to put a field in TIGTA's management information system that will track participation levels. She says the agency's audit staff has the most full-time participants, while the investigations division has the most "episodic" participants.

Leach says participation has been such that no significant internal marketing efforts have been needed. The telework program is covered, however,

as part of the new employee orientation just to let people know it's available.

Indeed, the program has been so popular that the agency uses it as a recruitment tool. TIGTA mentions the program in its vacancy announcements, highlighting telework as one of its employee benefits. "We don't say you can telework as soon as you're hired, though," notes Leach. "We recommend people wait six months before requesting permission to telework."

Leach credits the telework program for aiding employee retention, although she notes that her evidence is anecdotal. "We have a fairly low attrition rate," she reports. Moreover, positive responses to the program have been fairly high on the two telework-related questions asked in the agency's employee satisfaction survey.

Challenges & Investment

TIGTA combined the implementation of its telework program with an agency-wide technology upgrade, moving all employees from desktop to laptop computers — which it leased instead of purchased. Security costs were built in across the board.

For employees who telework two or more days a week, the agency pays half the cost of broadband Internet installation and access; gives them a multi-port router (which allows them to access the Internet separately for personal versus government use); and gives them a printer. Full-time teleworkers get an agency-paid second phone line and a locking file cabinet.

"We had minimal outlay, the way we structured this," explains Leach. "We reserved \$400,000, and it didn't cost a quarter of that."

Other than some employee frustrations in setting up their broadband connections, Leach says the only obstacles in launching the telework program "were the normal things that can happen when you change something. There's an agitated state at the time when you're making changes. When we were setting it up, the IG was so behind the program that it helped things go smoothly."

Program Outlook

"I don't think we'll ever go back," predicts Leach. She says the program has been so successful that the agency has taken it to the next level: hoteling.

"One of our executives went to our Atlanta office and noticed a lot of empty desks," she explains. The

agency realized the large number of teleworkers there enabled it to get rid of some space. Then it looked at its Dallas location — with the same result. "When one of our executives or a real estate analyst sees that we have excess space, or when a space is scheduled for renovation, we look at how many teleworkers we have and see if we can cut back on leased space," says Leach. "We thought we would save approximately \$100,000 in Atlanta, but then rent went up, so we might have saved only about \$50,000. The balance would be attributable to cost avoidance rather than savings."

The space reductions allowed them to avoid tapping program budgets to cover increased rents. Moreover, the agency has to zero-out the cost of office renovations in the same year they're incurred, so the savings from teleworking helps absorb those costs.

"Without a strong telework program you can't have hoteling, so we look at this as phase two of our telework program," says Leach. She anticipates that telework will become part of TIGTA's continuity of operations plan (COOP), and that hoteling will be expanded to more locations.

Most Helpful Resources

TIGTA initially drew some telework lessons from major IT corporations, says Leach, but networking has become the best resource as more federal agencies have adopted programs. She speaks highly of quarterly meetings hosted by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) for teleworking agencies, which gives coordinators a chance to talk with one another.

Success Tips

- ✓ Put a policy in place and then do it. Start with a formal pilot, and have a policy for it.
- ✓ Based on the pilot results, monitor everything, make your changes, and implement the program.
- ✓ Don't worry about everything.
- ✓ Communication is a big part of the program; employees need to communicate with managers and vice versa.
- ✓ Training is also very important.