



Employer Telework Case Study

Employer

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Background

The Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin (ICPRB) was created by an act of Congress in 1940 to protect, conserve, and enhance the Potomac River and its tributaries. ICPRB is an interstate agency of its jurisdictional states including Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia. ICPRB is a small organization with less than 25 employees. Presently, ICPRB has about 60% of the staff in the telework program for 1-2 days a

week. The program has been in place since December 2004.

The ICPRB staff is eligible to apply for the telework program after reaching regular employment status, which typically takes six months of employment. The applicant must demonstrate that their job allows for telework. The equipment and the ability to communicate with the office and contacts are the responsibilities of the teleworker. The remote work space must also be suitable and designated for telework during telework hours. The teleworker must be accessible, as in the office, during the telework hours. The eligible staff and their supervisor must be in agreement with the work schedule and tasks prior to obtaining telework approval. Once approved, the eligible staff can start telework immediately.

The shift to telework has been a smooth one at ICPRB. The telework program formalized the process was previously informally utilized by the staff. However, a written policy provided clear guidelines and expectations for the teleworkers. By formalizing the program, it allowed other

staff and new incoming staff to participate in the program as well.

The benefits of the program are immeasurable when it comes to employee satisfaction. They view the program as a valuable benefit. Not counting the money saved from reduced vehicle usage on telework days, the commuting time saved is seen as equally or more valuable. With the gas prices reaching new record these days, teleworking is proving to be invaluable to the employees.

There was minimal expenditure for the organization to implement the program. The responsibility to provide equipment, furniture, and work space were placed on the employees in order for them to be eligible in the program. All employees were required to have home computers, telephone, and internet access. The company's email system is accessible anywhere through the Internet allowing employees to connect with the office at anytime and from anywhere. Also, for some employees, as office computer replacement/upgrades became necessary, some of the desktop computers were converted to laptops for traveling.

The organization and the employees have found a good balance to make the telework program a success. However, until technology cost become less expensive, more secure and more reliable, accessing files remotely and implementing technical software are proving to be fiscally challenging. In the meantime, the employees have circumvented this challenge simply by organizing and planning tasks ahead of time. Tasks that only require word

processing, working on spreadsheets or reading materials that can be done anywhere are compiled for the telework days. The rest are performed at the office, particularly those tasks that require the use of technical software.

The Telework Experience

The main objectives for the telework program are to enhance the recruitment and the retention of quality employees, benefiting the environment, reducing vehicles miles traveled by employees, improving the quality of life for employees, and enhancing company operations. The ICPRB telework program has been very successful thus far. The telework program has become a part of the work environment and culture at ICPRB. The quality outcome of telework tasks and compliments that ICPRB staff receive are evidence of the success of the telework program.

The ICPRB telework program is very simple and inexpensive. The organization did not buy expensive equipment or implement a remote file-access connection so that the employees can telework. The program came into the organization as a way for the employees to reduce commuting time, money, and to improve their personal lives. The program has transformed itself into a way that the employees can concentrate on tasks uninterrupted and produce quality work. Many employees expressed that their telework hours give them time to spend on critical thinking and analysis because of less interruptions. Some even mentioned that they may even be more productive at home than at the office.

The program is voluntary so applying for the program is based on the desire of the employee. Once the employee demonstrates that their work is suitable for telework they can request to be in the program. In addition to telework, if an employee wants to implement a telework program, a clear communication with the supervisor and clear understanding of their expectations are required. Once all are in agreement and approval is obtained, the employee can then start to telework. The number of days per week for telework is based on the employee and the supervisor. The employee must also specify working hours during telework. The teleworker is then expected to be at the home office during the specified telework hours. However, the working hours are not limited to 9AM to 5PM. For example, employees can choose to work 5AM to 1PM. In order to keep track of all of the employees, all employees are required to place their schedule on the public calendar which is linked to the in-house email system that is accessible anywhere the Internet is available.

Challenges and Investment

A challenge for ICPRB is remote access of the in-house server and the data and software it holds. The cost to allow remote access is costly. However, the staff adapted to working around it by planning their work appropriately. For some, as the desktop computers had to be replaced, they were replaced with laptops for easy portability for the staff without having to transfer files to and from remote home office. So far, the ICPRB telework program has been inexpensive and unhindered.

Program Outlook

ICPRB is dedicated to making the organization flexible and innovative in creating a working environment that is not limited to the walls at the office. Within budgetary means, as new technology and ideas emerge in telecommuting, ICPRB will continue to seek and explore new ways to see how they can be incorporated into business operations in order to enhance productivity and employee morale and satisfaction

Most Helpful Resources

ICPRB received a grant through the Baltimore Metropolitan Council (BMC) and the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MW-COG) called the Telework Partnership with Employers (TPE). The grant provided the funds to hire a telework consultant who assisted with writing a telework policy, manager and staff training, implementation, and a program evaluation after a year. This grant was very valuable since ICPRB is a small organization where resources are limited. The consultant was very knowledgeable and was able to help ICPRB understand and implement an effective program.

Success Tips

Focus on tasks rather than time spent at the office. Face-time at the office does not always translate into higher employee performance. The telework program forces the organization to look at employee performance objectively and quantitatively. When this happens, walls and time present

no restriction to when and how the employees produce quality work.

Remaining flexible increases employee satisfaction. Higher employee satisfaction yields higher employee retention. Employee retention is linked to cost savings for the organization in the long run. Recruiting costs are high and time lost in training and acclimation is also a big factor. Employee satisfaction is not always linked to monetary gains but flexibility is often more important to the employees.

If there is any doubt of the success of the telework program, a pilot study is a good way to sample the program without affecting the entire organization.

“The telework program is a good tool that benefits both the employees and the employer.” – ICPRB Employee

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