



Employer Telework Case Study

Employer

Fairfax County Government, Fairfax Virginia

Contact

Catherine Chianese
Assistant to the Fairfax County Executive
703 324-2531

“The most essential components of a successful telework program include: Having an active advocate from at the top of the organization, the second is keeping the message alive and promoting participation and the third is making teleworkers feel that they are important contributors to the organization and in helping resolve issues in the region.”

- Catherine Chianese

Background

Fairfax County is governed under the Urban County Executive form of government, one of several forms of county government authorized in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

The powers of government are vested in an elected Board of Supervisors consisting of nine members elected by district, plus a Chairman elected at large. The law requires that districts be of approximately equal population and that each Supervisor (other than the Chairman) be a resident and qualified voter of his or her district, and be elected only by voters living in that district. All voters in the County may vote for the Chairman. The Board elects the Vice Chairman annually from among its members at its first meeting in January.

Board members are elected for four-year terms. There is no legal limit to the number of terms a member can serve. The next Board election will take place in November 2007, with Board members taking office in January 2008.

The Board establishes County government policy, passes resolutions and ordinances (within the limits of its authority established by the Virginia General Assembly), approves the budget, sets tax rates, approves land use plans, and makes appointments. These actions are taken in open meetings which citizens are encouraged to attend. All decisions are made in public, but the Board may go into Closed Session to discuss issues exempt from the Virginia Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), such as legal or personnel-related issues.

Fairfax County implemented a pilot telework program in 1995. As a result of a successful pilot which lasted approximately one year, the County decided to implement the program County-wide to all departments. In 2002 the then and current chairman of the Fairfax County board of supervisors, Gerry Connolly, was also the chairman of MW-COG. As the chairman of MW-COG he made telework his primary initiative for MW-COG and established a 20% participation goal for all of the jurisdictions of MW-COG. He asked that all jurisdictions meet a goal of having 20% of eligible employees participating in the telework program by the end of 2005. In Fairfax, board of supervisors chair Gerry Connolly directed the county executive to enhance the county's existing telework program to meet the regional goal. It was recognized that the acceptance and success of a telework program depended on advocacy from the top levels of the organization. The chair of the MW- COG was a strong supporter of telework and was instrumental in the program being launched. The same person, board of supervisors chairman Gerry Connolly, continues to support the County's telework effort and to advocate within county government and regionally. AT the end of 2005, Fairfax County was the only jurisdiction meeting the 20% goal for telework with 1,000 employees teleworking. The number of teleworkers in Fairfax County continues to grow with the current number of teleworkers at 1,175. The County of Fairfax currently has approximately 12,000 employees. The goal continues to have a minimum of 20 percent of eligible County employees teleworking.

The Telework Experience

The motivations of implementing and promoting telework have been enhanced as business and community needs have continued to changed and grow from the initial launch of the program in 1995 to today. As current business and community needs have changed, the structure and goals of the telework program have been enhanced. This has helped increase the overall number of telework participants. Current benefits being sought from Fairfax County's telework program include:

1. Promoting a friendly work environment in the County
2. Addressing increasing congestion and length of commutes
3. Air-quality, global warming and meeting national air-quality standards
4. Continuity of operations and ensuring critical employees are not only equipped to work remotely but have the tactical skills.

Employees considering telework must consider three categories of suitability:

1. Does telework fit me as an individual? (E.g. can I work independently?)
2. Does telework fit enough of my job-tasks to allow me to work remotely for at least one day per week?
3. Does telework fit my collaboration and communication efforts with the rest of my workgroup?

After the prospective teleworkers go through the application process they are required to get their supervisor's approval and a review from the technology department. Teleworkers must sign a work agreement as well. The County encourages employees to telework at least one day per week.

Early on in the program a telework logo and brand, FAIRFAX TELEWORKS, was developed to create the perception of the telework program as a “real” and sustainable part of the way the County of Fairfax does business. Continuing to promote telework is an important component of the overall program. Some examples of these efforts and events have included:

1. Incorporating the branding and telework logo on all materials to promote telework as a sustainable, ongoing County program. Participants are given materials to take with them to reinforce the branding.
2. Information is collected from employees who sign up for telework as to what benefits they are personally attempting to get from telework.
3. The event themes are fun, increasing attendance. (E.g. an event titled “No Place Like Home” based on the Wizard of Oz.)
4. The successes of specific agencies are communicated.
5. Awards are given, (e.g. longest telework program, longest commute of a teleworker, most new signups)
6. Awards are presented by senior executives such as the Chairman of the Board of Supervisors and the County Executive
7. A “Telebuddy to Telework” program in which existing teleworkers would help inform co-workers of their experiences.

Ongoing efforts such as written materials and articles in the employee newsletter are intended to keep the telework program fresh in the minds of the employees and reinforce the ideas that telework is part of the County’s culture and work options.

As the Telework program was rolled-out organization-wide, training was important. Managers were trained to not only obtain the skills to evaluate an employee’s ability to telework, incentivize their employees to telework and manage teleworkers, but also to be able to evaluate their own capabilities of teleworking as a manager. Teleworkers were trained on how to communicate with co-workers and customers. Over time, training has become decentralized. Currently, many departments have their own customized version of telework training that is based on a training program originally developed for the overall organization. For example the Police Department has unique requirements compared to those of the Planning department. The core of the, training, however, remains the same and is consistent throughout the County. The Department of Information Technology provides technical training for teleworkers though they are informed that they must have a basic minimum of understanding of technology to be able to telework.

Challenges & Investment

After the telework program was launched resources to support the telework program needed to be allocated. There are always other programs for resources to be allocated to. Providing the technology support required to meet the wide range of County jobs and technology needs was initially a challenge as well as keeping the help-desk up to date. Finally, ensuring the HIPPA laws and all other County requirements were being met was a challenge. The county continues to invest annually in technology to support its telework program and provide the staff support necessary to sign-up new teleworkers.

Program Outlook

The County of Fairfax will continue to advocate telework, market it in publications and hold special events to increase participation. The current emphasis of the program is on Continuity of Operations and making sure that employees have the tools they need to work from remote sites.

Success Tips

Rather than provide a list of job-titles that can or can't participate in the program it is simpler to open the program to everyone and have them determine if they meet the three critical requirements (does telework fit the individual, the work to be done, and the work-group). This allowed job-types that may have been disallowed to include some participants. Administrative jobs are one of the jobs that don't seem to fit the traditional description for telework. However, some administrative jobs have job-tasks that allow them to participant.