



# Employer Telework Case Study

## Employer

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## Background

SMECO is a member-owned electric cooperative serving more than 130,000 customers in four Southern Maryland counties. The Co-op, which has approximately 450 employees, has provided power to residential, commercial, and industrial customers for more than 60 years.

SMECO remains a cooperative corporation, owned by its members and operated for them on a non-profit basis. Rates are based on the cost of doing business. Surplus income, if any, is returned to the members through Capital Credits.

In 2006, a committee was formed consisting of IT, Customer Service, HR, and Security as well as union representatives. The committee surveyed other cooperatives in an attempt to research other programs and best practices. SMECO found only one COOP in the Midwest that has implemented a telework program establishing themselves as a telework pioneer on the East Coast. The committee drafted telework procedures, remote office space procedures and requirements, technology needs and guidelines around the acceptable use of the Internet. In some cases existing policies and procedures were modified to accommodate the telework program. Pre teleworking, SMECO had policies and procedure in place with regard to the use of the Internet, work procedures and equipment. The new procedures addressed uses from a home office location.

The goals of the program are primarily focused on employee satisfaction and quality of life ideals. Other goals include increased productivity and office-space savings. On July 13th a telework orientation was conducted and a six month pilot was begun on August 29, 2006 consisting of customer service representatives.

## The Telework Experience

Interested employees must go through a “good fit test” prior to participating. Factors include having the correct job-tasks, good performance, sufficient workspace in their remote location and access to high-speed Internet. Managers and employees attend an orientation program.

In the first stage of the program, service representatives began by teleworking two days per week. After the telework structure and model proved successful, employees were allowed to telework three days per week. Future plans call for employees to telework up to four days per week. Teleworkers are required to spend one day in the office to maintain workgroup cohesion and other functions. Staff meetings, training and maintenance of equipment are conducted on the days in the office.

There has been no feedback from SMECO customers about any reductions in service quality. To the contrary, through qualitative feedback it has been determined that there has been a slight improvement in customer service from customer service representatives who telework. The theory is that teleworkers have fewer distractions when working remotely. For teleworking employees, relief from worsening congestion and the increasing costs of commuting have provided increased employee morale and satisfaction.

## Challenges & Investment

The most significant challenge for SMECO was the security of customer information being accessed by teleworkers. This concern was resolved using virtual PC's that interact with the company's mainframe through a Virtual Private Network, (VPN). Teleworkers have computers completely dedicated for SMECO work with no other software allowed to be loaded onto them. In addition, security steps have been taken so that even if a laptop was stolen no personal or customer information would be able to be accessed.

## Program Outlook

The next phase of SMECO's telework program is to utilize a hoteling program, (defined as undedicated office spaces that employees sign up for on the day(s) that they will be in the office. This model will allow SMECO to gain office space savings from the program.

There are ongoing efforts to increase SMECO's participation in the telework program through the use of technology. In order to participate in the program, employees must have access to high-speed Internet. Some areas within the region however do not have high-speed Internet access. SMECO is testing the feasibility of new technologies such as air-cards to increase the number of viable participants who do not have high-speed capabilities.

The SMECO committee is also looking at expanding the number of job-types that can participate in the program. While not all job-types fit, employees whose job-tasks include a high level of telephone and computer based activities will be capable of participating. As an example, there are 180 administrative type jobs within SMECO that could be considered for the telework program. Supervisors are not allowed to participate in the program.

## Helpful Resources

The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments' Commuter Connections program provided telework guidelines and gave a presentation to the board and senior staff. They helped pave the way for board members and upper management to see the benefits of the program.

## Success Tips

- ✓ Develop guidelines and identify the benefits of telework for your organization to obtain the support of senior staff.
- ✓ Involve all relevant areas of your organization in the development of the program from the beginning. For SMECO this included the Union as well.
- ✓ Identify the most significant concerns, such as information security and remote access, and address them as part of your program plan.