

Employer Telework Case Study

Employer

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Background

National Wildlife Federation launched its telework program about five years ago. The motivation for starting the program was twofold. Telework fits the Federation's mission as a conservation organization, helping it to reduce traffic and thus giving it "a chance to walk the talk," explains human resources director Maria Litman.

The Federation's second reason: attract and retain employees by helping people achieve work-life balance. Telework enhanced the Federation's flexible work schedule program by providing employees with another option: They could work a condensed-hour day (4/10), a half-day every two weeks, or telework. People also have the option of working around a certain number of hours versus days.

The Telework Experience

About 25-30 percent of the Federation's employees telework. Participation has grown steadily over five years, but has since leveled off, primarily due to normal turnover.

The only department not suited for telework is customer service, Litman explains, because employees need to be there in order to respond to incoming calls. "We don't have the technology set up for employees to get those incoming calls at their home," she notes. Certain administrative positions are also not suited for telework, such as phone reception, mailroom, and onsite maintenance--although administrative employees in those areas can participate on

an occasional basis when the need arises, if they have made appropriate arrangements in advance with their supervisor.

While most areas within the organization are suited for telework, Litman says a few managers in otherwise eligible departments remain unsupportive of the concept. "It is a constant promotion effort with our managers," she notes.

Speaking of promotion, Litman markets the program internally through the Federation's new-employee orientation sessions. "We promote it as one of our diversity initiatives," she explains. "Work-life balance is part of diversity. We give them a brochure on the program at the orientation."

She notes, however, that it's "not a good idea for people to request it right away." They should establish a solid performance record first. Nevertheless, she says, "more and more people are coming in the door asking about it"--a trend that has increased over the last couple of years.

The Federation held a manager training program with the assistance of TeleworkVA when the program started. Managers were given the opportunity to come and hear about the new program, and their comfort level grew over time--once they found no negative impact on their ability to get things done. About 80-85 percent of management is supportive, says Litman.

While the Federation didn't address coworker issues at that time, it did conduct a survey after the program was started in which people who worked with teleworkers were polled about their attitudes. The survey revealed a minor level of envy and/or resentment on the part of some coworkers--"but not as much as we might have expected," says Litman. "It was subtle, not very pronounced. The Federation being the organization it is, people saw the bigger picture and didn't grumble too much about 'Why didn't I get to do this?'. They just basically accepted it."

Litman says the Federation makes clear in its telework promotion efforts that the program is not for

everyone. Employees have to meet specific criteria, so some self-select out because they know they wouldn't like it. "Also, there's accountability there," notes Litman, "and you have to perform your job well to be allowed to telework." Both the employee's manager and his or her department's vice president have to sign-off.

The Federation has not developed specific success metrics or productivity statistics to quantify the telework program's effects, although Litman says that's "the next thing we'd probably like to do." She says employees have "acknowledged on surveys that they get a lot more done...But a wonderful next level for the program would be to come up with those metrics. One thing we could do is show the impact on the environment."

The organization has not tried to use telework as a way to save on office space. Telework has, however, enhanced flexibility, since a number of people telecommute on an informal basis when they otherwise would have to take a sick day. Moreover, says Litman, employees "get on their computers later at night and on weekends, and without that access I can't imagine people would drive all the way into the office to put in a few extra hours." Interestingly, she notes, there might be a flip side to that work ethic: Some people might spend too much time on their computer. "But that's a management issue, and it's limited," she observes.

Challenges & Investment

Litman says telework has been budget-neutral. The organization uses Citrix software to allow people to connect from home to the Federation's network, giving them the same system as they have at the office. While the Federation incurs some cost for however many software licenses it needs, Litman says it's a fairly even trade-off against reduced travel costs.

Litman says the biggest challenge is how to keep managers supportive. "Some people--you just can't change their mind. To me, that's the biggest challenge: the folks who are not open to this opportunity." She cites management style as the main factor behind the resistance. Some managers "don't believe in (telework) and have a tendency to look for the negative instead of looking at the positive," she observes.

Another challenge: Ongoing program promotion--how to keep it fresh.

The telework program also offers opportunities,

Litman says. The Federation launched a program in March 2006 called COOL-IT to see how human actions affect global warming. "From a big picture perspective," says Litman, "how can we look at ourselves internally in light of these environmental issues? Commuting is a subset of that. So we see this as an opportunity" to tie the COOL-IT initiative in with the Federation's own internal practices.

Program Outlook

The Federation is exploring the possibility of partnering with TeleworkVA to create a distance learning module for its 120 field employees working out of nine field offices all over the U.S. Also, Litman says the organization just arranged with TeleworkVA to consider other program initiatives including potentially holding a breakfast meeting or quarterly roundtable to which teleworkers could come--and bring a friend--to talk about their experiences and successes.

Most Helpful Resources

Litman cites TeleworkVA as the most helpful resource--along with telework consultant Harriet West of Clifton Gunderson LP. TeleworkVA provides funding from the state of Virginia to support telework and pay for a consultant, training, and other resources. The Federation's first-time grant was approximately \$25,000. The Web site of the International Telework Advisory Council (now known as "ITAC, the Telework Advisory Group for WorldatWork"), and participation in the Mid-Atlantic Telecommuting Advisory Council (MATAC), have also been useful.

Success Tips

- ☑ Have support from the top. "We had, and continue to have, our CEO's support," says Litman.
- ☑ Do your homework. Look at successful programs. See what others are doing. You don't have to reinvent the wheel.
- ☑ Assemble a strong development and implementation team, which should include the human resources and information technology department. Make sure the technical infrastructure is there. People have to be able to do their job at home just like at their desk.

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