



# Rebooting the Work Force

## *Telework Options Now, Just Work Later*

**Available technology and a more mobile culture are changing the way Americans work. Studies have found that those who work from home are actually more productive than those working in an office.**

By Wayne Hall

The U.S. Government Accountability Office, or GAO, recently signed off on a Patent Office plan to reimburse employees for home broadband expenses related to work. Under the plan, employees will be permitted to telecommute up to four days per week from an agreed upon work site, according to the column at CNET.com, “Telecommuting patently obvious gains.”

The agency believes this program will improve work force recruitment and retention, reduce traffic congestion and pollution and save money. Up to 3,300 employees could participate in this program by 2011. And so long as employee productivity doesn’t suffer, the GAO believes the program will be beneficial.

Since the Patent Office is assigned the job of recording innovation, I suppose it only makes sense.

By law the federal government must offer the option of remote work to eligible employees. Unfortunately, only 35 percent of federal managers believe their agencies support telecommuting, according to survey results released Jan. 22 by the Federal Managers Association and the Telework Exchange.

The managers aren’t the only ones in the dark. MONEY Magazine and Salary.com last year asked 26,000 workers just how satisfied they were at their jobs. According to the CNN article, “Most Satisfied Employees Work Longer,” only 16 percent of respondents said they could telecommute any time they pleased, 28 percent could do so with their manager’s approval and 55 percent were not allowed to telecommute at all.



Most people will agree that telecommuting doesn't make sense for every employee. But for qualified people and the businesses they support, the math is straightforward. The most stressed workers were also least able to telecommute, with only a third saying it was an option for them. And not only do satisfied workers have more work-from-home options than other respondents, as it turns out, they do more work.

## Mobile Culture

It's been said that we are changed by the tools we create. If so, remote, mobile or tele-work—call it what you will—is, like the interstate highway system, not just an engineering achievement.

Most technologies, particularly communications technologies, are adopted in unforeseen ways, which to be fair to the managers expected to cope with this work shift, also makes mobile work a fertile ground for academics. Professionals ranging from anthropologists to philosophers to demographers are studying workplace (re)arrangements.

Nonprofit institutions like the Pew Internet and American Life project are collecting data and reporting often on what they find. With its Digital Media and Learning initiative, the MacArthur Foundation is devoting a great deal of its resources to understanding how digital, scattered communication affects how we learn and interact.

On a slightly less ambitious scale, Web Worker Daily, which says it is “rebooting the work force,” advises young professionals on how to navigate the perils of off-site work with articles on such subjects as subscribing to important calendars (mobile workers often publish calendars to which others subscribe using automated software to ease collaboration), protecting expensive electronics (how to sheath that smart phone) and organizing digital information in a world where information can be overwhelming.

Communications technologies are pulling workers away from the office just as in decades past highways delivered employees to the office.

## Why Should Government Care?

Working remotely has been a discussion topic on and off since the early last decade, but some important trends make a more viable option than at any time in the past.

Communications and information technology is no longer being developed and deployed within organizations. Your employees are bringing leading edge technologies to work with them everyday, whether or not managers are aware of the trend. It's a process Gartner Group, a consulting firm, has referred to as “consumer-led IT.” Proscribing certain technologies can still be done, but such tactics can come at a high cost and wasted effort. Legitimate security and workplace policy issues aside, the point shouldn't be what employees do, but what they get accomplished.

A distributed work force offers a hedge against business disruption. Less obviously, we've all been in the office with the sick co-worker, wishing that she had just stayed home. Such “presenteeism” affects workplace productivity as well.

Fortunately, “Web services” are moving well beyond e-mail and Internet access. The private sector is migrating business processes to the Web, which enables a wide variety of on-demand services like sales force automation, customer relationship management, billing and order entry.

One byproduct of all those smart phones and compact laptop computers is the encroaching reality of “pervasive computing.” You may have heard the related terms of ambient or ubiquitous computing. Knowledge workers are hardly in danger of getting lost. Ping them often enough and they might beg you to come back to the office just to get some peace.

Given the growing market for outsourced work, more and more state government workers are likely to have a private sector business name on the signature line of their paychecks.

Lastly, the looming retirement of about half of all state governments' civil service may force a re-evaluation of just how state business gets done.

If like me, you have active children or teenagers, you understand how completely at ease they are with technology. So when boomers finally call it quits, it might just be a case of addition by subtraction. Briefed on the state's network security and business policies, the new employees won't give a thought to “telework.” It'll just be work, and suggesting differently will be kind of odd to them.

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