

Monterey County Department of Social Services Mobile Computing Service Model: Possibilities for Better Service Delivery in Contra Costa County

RENATA PIERCE, MBA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services (CCCEHSD) is interested in deploying staff for telecommuting and mobile work. The county's goals are to reduce facility costs, increase staff productivity, and provide increased community outreach. Monterey County Department of Social Services (MCDSS) started exploring mobile work and hotel desk-sharing in an effort to maximize

resources in 2014. MCDSS projected outcomes for the mobile work program would be increased efficiency, augmented workplace flexibility, expanded delivery of services and decreased environmental impact. This report recommends CCCEHSD have all staff telecommute with restrictions focused on work productivity and with a planned contract in place with specific guidelines.

Renata Pierce, MBA, Division Manager,
Contra Costa County

Monterey County Department of Social Services Mobile Computing Service Model: Possibilities for Better Service Delivery in Contra Costa County

RENATA PIERCE, MBA

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine if Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services (CCCEHSD) would benefit from allowing staff to telecommute. Original research focused on how to reduce the county's carbon footprint, maintain a high level of employee morale, and determine how productivity may be affected by staff not being in the office. The focus changed in the middle of writing this paper due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, focus shifted from whether staff should be allowed to telecommute to how the county can support staff already working from home, including asking the questions: do we continue to keep staff working from home; what would that look like; how do we measure remote work productivity; and how do we eventually bring staff back into the office.

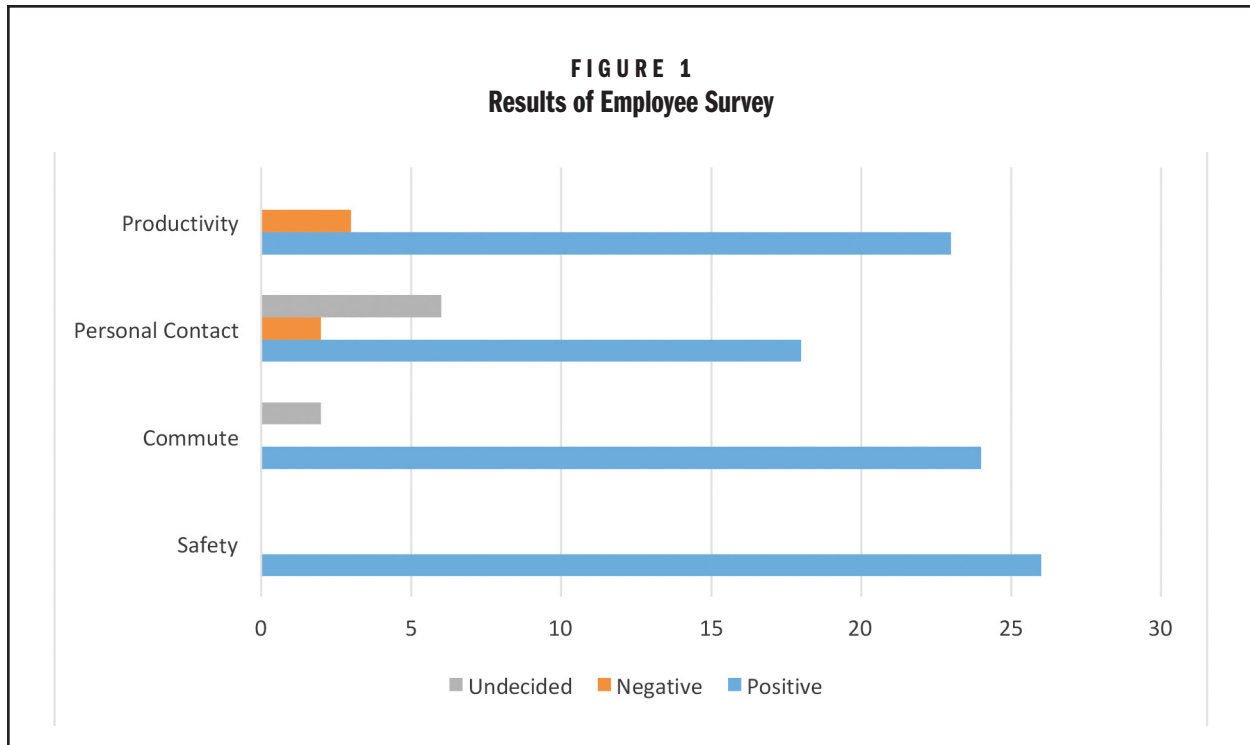
Employee Perspective

Fifty CCCEHSD employees were polled regarding their experiences working from home since March of 2020. Twenty-six of the fifty employees responded. Employees were asked to give both positive and negative perspectives. The positive aspect of remote working that received the most comments was concern over health and safety; employees felt they were safer at home than at work. Eliminating the fear of accidents on the commute to work and reducing potential risk of illness were among the most relevant topics discussed by respondents to the

poll (Keklikian, 1990). Overwhelmingly, employees felt separation from coworkers and technical issues with online meeting and production tools were the most negative aspects of telecommuting. Socialization and contact with people is such an important aspect of productivity and an overall work environment. The loss of socializing time is potentially detrimental to the mental health of a worker and to their job satisfaction (Marcus, 1995).

Positive qualities of telecommuting identified by respondents included the following:

- Saves fuel costs and vehicle maintenance costs. One employee who lives in Manteca stated she saved \$475 in fuel and oil change for just one month, not including future maintenance costs.
- Allows for additional time with family. An employee stated that she felt she had two to three extra hours in her day because she was not commuting in Highway 4 traffic.
- Allows for a flexible schedule.
- Spreads less illness (including COVID-19, influenza, etc.).
- Provides jobs for those who cannot commute. One employee stated that she does not drive and relies on public transportation or coworkers to drive her to work.
- Allows single parents to work from home. Employees cited saved child care costs, which helped them cope when schools and daycares closed due to the virus.



Negative qualities of telecommuting identified by respondents included the following:

- Increases potential distractions (pets, kids, neighbors, home phone, etc.).
- Raises potential for lower productivity. Employees explained that they do not have paper resources readily available, have to rely on Office 365, TEAMS, or email, and must wait longer for responses to questions.
- Slows productivity due to slower internet speeds and potential down time.
- Reduces human interactions.
- Adds tension in the home.
- Increases frustration and pent-up energy from being at home.

Environmental Impact

Some Contra Costa County staff have noted that telecommuting during the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a positive environmental impact in various areas. One of the most significant environmental benefits has been fewer vehicles on the roads, which contributes to decreased emissions and fuel consumption. Although data has not been specifically

gathered, one can assume that the reduction in emissions and fuel consumption due to lower vehicle usage would be felt across all industries that supported the high pre-pandemic number of automobiles on the road. A decline in vehicle usage would also theoretically reduce the manufacturing and consumption of materials for vehicle maintenance, due to decreased vehicle wear and tear. Manufacturing, mining, oil exploration, and simple maintenance of roads all contribute to climate change; slowing the increase in the number of workers needing to leave home for work could, over time, have a positive environmental impact by reducing greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere. An additional observation from staff has been the return of many animals to areas from which they normally hide because of noise and pollution. A possible negative environmental impact, however, may be the increased technical waste that will be in landfills, as equipment will need to be upgraded with new equipment that can handle the high technological demands of telecommuting (Mokhtarian, Handy, & Salomon, 1995).

Positive environmental impacts of telecommuting can be summarized as follows:

- Less vehicles on the road = less pollutants in the air.
- Less people in the parks and beaches = lower impact on the plant and animal life.

Negative environmental impacts of telecommuting can be summarized as follows:

- Increased technical waste.
- Increased landfill pollution.

Fiscal Impact

Significant fiscal impacts can be quantified when looking at telecommuting. The most apparent fiscal impact appears to be the reduction in office space, utility costs, and office supplies. According to the authors of *Managing Human Resources*, telecommuting may also reduce wasted time, as employees are not gathering around talking and instead have time to be more productive (Belcourt, Bohlander, & Snell, 2014).

Negative fiscal impacts may include the increased cost of computer equipment and cell phones, plus the need to purchase additional computer software that will allow employees to work remotely in a secure environment. Additionally, a prolonged move toward telecommuting will likely kill multiple business models that depend on the many goods workers in the field need to do their jobs and to get to and from the office. New businesses and services will likely develop to fill the void, but the impact in the beginning as new markets and services evolve will be negative for a significant portion of the population.

Positive fiscal impacts of telecommuting are as follows:

- Reduces cost for utilities, consumables, office space.
- Reduces employee absenteeism.
- Improves work life balance for employees, leading to happier and more productive staff.

Negative fiscal impacts of telecommuting are as follows:

- Decreases levels of personal contact, ability to interact directly with coworkers, and ability to read body language.
- Adds cost for mobile computing devices.

- Creates need to monitor productivity and to compare to in-office productivity levels.
- Challenges self-regulation skills for some employees.
- Generates additional training needs beyond the norm.

Performance Monitoring

Monitoring productivity is vital for funding purposes. Monitoring performance is currently achieved in CCCEHSD with various reports pulled from several systems. In addition to these reports, performance can be assessed by supervisors observing staff at their desks working. Supervisors that are task-minded have a hard time monitoring telecommuting staff because they cannot see the staff at their desks. Remote supervision is a skill that supervisors will need to learn, as micro-managing and looking over an employee's shoulder will become a thing of the past. Employees will also have to learn to self-regulate their attention and productivity. Performance monitoring appears to be a challenge, as some supervisors have the perception that staff are not working as hard while telecommuting. Clear production goals will need to be developed and innovative tools for benchmarking performance will have to be deployed. The question lies with the perception of how productive staff were while in the office, measured against how productive they are working remotely. The use of current reports can continue to be used to monitor the workload, paired with a long-term study of productivity. According to a recent Monterey County Mobile Computing project evaluation, "the implementation of mobile computing has improved worker efficiency; the compliance rate of IHSS reassessments improved from 97.36% to 99.89%" (Rockwood, 2016).

Well-defined expectations and deadlines need to be set for remote work performance. One possibility could be a predetermined number of important tasks that need to be completed either daily or weekly. Deciding upon these expectations would require careful study, as individuals have different capabilities, and there would need to be minimum

and maximum benchmarks with incentives for greater performance. Staff should be provided clear guidelines of what work productivity should look like. Goals must be shared and agreed upon by the staff. Staff can then be held accountable for meeting the goals and communicating any problems to their supervisor. Supervisors should be meeting with staff weekly or at an interval that meets the requirements of the particular department or unit. Supervisors should also provide time for non-work interactions with staff, as a way to fill the social gap created by no longer having routine, in-office interaction with coworkers. According to Sean Ludwig, contributor for *U.S. Chamber of Commerce* (2020), “Creating time and space for workers to talk about news, hobbies, and other topics—just as they would have done in the office—helps them relieve stress and feel better connected.”

Continued productivity can be accomplished by creating a normal environment for employees telecommuting. Employees should be encouraged to establish a dedicated workspace. The workspace should include all equipment needed to work remotely with ease. Project management apps such as Asana can be used to track productivity. Additional apps for meetings should be installed on workers’ computers.

Recommendations

In an effort to reduce costs, increase employee morale and increase productivity, I recommend a modified mobile work program for Contra Costa County. Not all CCCEHSD employees can remain 100% telecommuters due to federal and state mandates. However, by engaging in a rotation schedule with flexible hours and shifts, all CCCEHSD employees can be allowed to do mobile work. In addition to allowing staff to work from home, allowing expanded work hours will allow for additional outreach to the community. This outreach would be achieved by allowing later working hours for staff to

make appointments with clients who are unable to be reached during conventional business hours.

Additional educational resources need to be provided to staff who are telecommuting. These resources should be quick “how-to” refresher videos that staff can quickly watch on specific topics. Supervisors would also benefit from compassion training and communications training that support them in effectively supervising off-site staff.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my appreciation to the Monterey County Department of Social Services In-Home Supportive Services and Public Authority Program Manager, Emily Nicholl, LCSW and to her social workers, for taking the time to meet with me and for providing invaluable information and insight into the efforts needed to support mobile work.

References

- Belcourt, M., Bohlander, G., & Snell, S. (2014). *Managing Human Resources*. Ohio: South-Western.
- Keklikian, A. S. (1990). Exploring Telework as a Long-Range Planning Strategy for Canada’s National Capital Region.
- Lugwig, Sean. (2020, March 19). *6 Ways to Keep Your Team Productive While Working From Home*. Retrieved from US Chamber of Commerce: <https://www.uschamber.com/co/run/human-resources/encouraging-productivity-for-remote-workers>
- Marcus, J. (1995). *The Environmental and Social Impacts of Telecommuting and Teleactivities*. University of California, Santa Cruz, California. Retrieved July 29, 2020, from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.22.6955&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Mokhtarian, P. (1993, April). *Telecommuting: What’s the Payoff?*

Mokhtarian, P. L., Handy, S. L., & Salomon, I. (1995). Methodological issues in the estimation of the travel, energy, and air quality impacts of telecommuting. *Science Direct*, 29(4), 253–336. Retrieved July 29, 2020, from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S096585649400029A>

Rockwood, C. (2016). *Mobile Computing Project Evaluation*. Project evaluation, Monterey County Department of Social Services, Aging and Adult Services, Monterey. Retrieved July 29, 2020.