

Mobile Work

LUENNA H. KIM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purposes of the case study are to analyze the success of the mobile work project at the Alameda County Social Services Agency and to assess its effectiveness as a potential future program for the San Francisco Human Services Agency.

The study was conducted by interviewing key leaders within the Alameda County Social Services Agency (ACSSA) Mobile Work Program Planning Team. Managers from the Support Services, Human Resources, Staff Development and Information Technology divisions provided critical insight into the success of the program. In addition, financial data, staffing information and training materials were reviewed to determine which aspects of the program could be replicated in San Francisco.

An analysis of the data reveals that the program was successful in ACSSA in large part because of its strong support by staff and the provision of adequate financial resources by its executive leadership. In addition, the geographic distribution of its clients and office locations contributed to the program's effectiveness.

The study concludes that, with strong support from executive leadership, a modified program could be effectively implemented in the City and County of San Francisco.

**Luenna Kim, Employee/Labor Relations Manager,
San Francisco Human Services Agency**

Mobile Work

LUENNA H. KIM

tel·e·com·mute, verb [TEL-i-kuh-MYOOT]:

*Periodic work out of the principal office, one or more days per week, either at home, a client's site, or in a telework center; the partial or total substitution of information technologies for the commute to work . . .*¹

Employees have been working in locations outside of their principal office environments since the post-World War II era; however, it was not until the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries oil embargo in October 1973 that Americans were faced with the realization that fossil fuels were not limitless and they began actively seeking alternative methods of conducting business that would avoid incurring the expense of commuting on a daily basis.² During the same year came the phrases “telecommuting” and “teleworking”, coined by Jack Nilles, co-founder and president of JALA, a management consultant firm, during the development and implementation the first documented pilot telecommuting project.³

Information technologists, in response to the demand for telecommuting, developed ways to connect remotely to the workplace. Even though the energy crisis ended in March 1974, technologists continued their focus on the widespread use of personal computers, thus shifting the mainstream belief away from computers as large complex machines to word processing tools that increased productivity in the workplace.⁴ The concept gained widespread respect-

ability in the late 1980s as an increasing number of professionals began telecommuting.

Then, with the passage of the Clean Air Act Amendment of 1990,⁵ which required companies with over 100 employees to encourage car pools, public transportation, shortened workweeks, and telecommuting, many companies began actively implementing telecommuting as a way to comply with the congressional mandate.⁶ Most recently, on December 9, 2010, President Obama signed the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 into law that required executive agencies to establish a policy under which eligible agency employees may be authorized to telework; eligibility criteria for employees needed to be determined; and all employees needed to be notified of their eligibility.⁷

Since the early 2000s, with the advancement and use of remote technology devices, such as wireless access cards, smart phones and laptops, employees now have the ability, and perhaps the expectation, to work in coffee shops, airplanes, ballparks, cars, and subways. Because people are now working anywhere they can find an internet connection, telecommuters are more commonly referring to themselves as mobile professionals, e-workers, virtual workers, technomads, web commuters, road warriors, location-independent professionals, and portable professionals, rather than “mere” telecommuters.

The trend toward working in myriad locations has been steadily rising in recent years. For instance, in 2006, approximately eight percent of Americans

¹ <http://www.jala.com>

² Reymers, Kurt (1996). Telecommuting: Attempts and the Re-Integration of Work and Family. Retrieved from <http://sociology.morrisville.edu/infospace/telecomm.html>.

³ <http://www.jala.com>

⁴ Reymers, Kurt (1996). Telecommuting: Attempts and the Re-Integration of Work and Family. Retrieved from <http://sociology.morrisville.edu/>

infospace/telecomm.html, citing Huws, U. (1991) Telework: Projections, Futures. pp. 23-24.

⁵ Clean Air Act of 1970, Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990 and 1996.

⁶ Reymers, Kurt (1996) Telecommuting: Attempts and the Re-Integration of Work and Family. Retrieved from <http://sociology.morrisville.edu/infospace/telecomm.html>.

⁷ <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-111hr1722enr/pdf/BILLS-111hr1722enr.pdf>

TABLE 1
Locations Where Work Was Conducted*

Location	2006 (n=140)	2008 (n=130)
Home	76%	87%
Customer/client's place of business	28%	41%
In the car	38%	37%
Café or restaurant	31%	23%
Hotel or motel	26%	26%
Park or other outdoor location	19%	14%
On airplane, train or subway	13%	21%
Airport, train depot or subway platform	16%	23%
Library	16%	10%
Employer's satellite location	3%	7%
Telework center (not their employer's)	5%	8%
None of the above	12%	4%
While on vacation	18%	23%

Percentages are based on weighted data, while sample sizes shown ("n") reflect the actual number of respondents.

*The Dieringer Research Group, Inc. (2009) Telework Trendlines 2009. Retrieved from http://www.workingfromanywhere.org/news/Trendlines_2009.pdf.

TABLE 2
Telecommuting Examples

Location	Date(s)	Employees	Description
Hennepin County (MN)	2006–2007	1,286 to 2,011	Increased number of employees who telecommute by 56% ^a
Federal Government	2009	102,000	Federal employees who telework ^b
Maricopa County (AZ)	2011	4,328	More than 20 percent of the workforce telework ^c
Fairfax County (VA)	2011	1,000	More than 20 percent of the eligible workforce telework ^d

^a <http://hennepin.us/portal/site/HennepinUS/menuitem.b1ab75471750e40fa01dfb47ccf06498/?vgnextoid=b346da9f041c4210VgnVCM10000049114689RCRD>

^b http://www.telework.gov/Reports_and_Studies/Annual_Reports/2009teleworkreport.pdf

^c <http://www.teleworkarizona.com/mainfiles/visitor/voverview.htm>

^d <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/telework/>

telecommuted at least one day per month. In 2008, that number increased to eleven percent.⁸ According to the 2009 Dieringer study, that number represents approximately 17.2 million Americans. Interestingly, according to the same data, while occasional “ad hoc” telecommuting is on the rise, employees who work remotely “almost every day” has decreased.⁹ (See Table 1.)

Although telecommuting had its advent in the private industry, state and local governments have implemented similar programs since the 1990s. With gas prices currently soaring over \$4.00 per gallon, an increasing awareness of the necessity to reduce one’s carbon footprint, a growing recognition of the need for employees to balance their work and personal lives, the advancement of remote technology, and the escalating cost of real estate, the benefits of telecommuting become more imperative. (See Table 2.)

Alameda County Social Services Agency

Alameda County Social Services Agency is an example of a governmental organization that has implemented a successful telecommuting program, called “Mobile Work.”

In 2008, the Alameda County Social Services Agency, based on a directive by its Board of Supervisors to reduce the number of leased facilities, began working with a consulting firm to analyze the feasibility of a mobile work program. The study found that Alameda County had a large group of employees who spent 30% to 50% of their time in the field, thus leaving many 90-foot work spaces (cubicles) empty. In addition, the study discovered that further cost savings could be realized by consolidating underutilized facilities. This economy occurred in part because of space savings achieved from a large-scale document-imaging project that had started in 2005. In addition, 200+ employees who had been laid off earlier that year and thus had their work spaces eliminated were being re-hired. Therefore, in an effort to find a creative, cost-saving solution, the agency designed and implemented the mobile work project.

⁸ *Ibid*, citing the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimates.

⁹ *Ibid*

The purpose of the mobile work program was to offer “a work option to help [Alameda County Social Services Agency] maximize the efficient use of resources, both people and space . . . [to] help the organization be more competitive in attracting and retaining talented and skilled employees . . . to improve employee effectiveness and reduce operating costs.”

The goals of the program were “to deliver greater levels of flexibility and mobility to [Alameda County Social Services Agency] employees [through] the use of new technologies and processes, to optimize productivity and employee satisfaction, to invest more in employees than in bricks and mortar, [and] to recapture under-utilized office space by adjusting the planning model in light of employee work and space use patterns.”

Implementation Process

See Figure 1, next page.

Program Components

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The agency provided each participant with a mobile toolkit (laptop, portable scanner/printer, a wireless internet card, a cell phone, and a portable file case). Employees were able to access their files and computer systems (such as CalWIN) through a combination of the web-based virtual private network (VPN) and Citrix systems. After receiving feedback about the unreliability of the wireless connection, the agency moved to the mobile VPN service provided by Net Motion, a service that provided a more stable wireless connection. In addition, in Phase II, because a concern was raised that using an open, raised laptop screen created a barrier between the client and the social worker, the agency began researching the feasibility of providing tablets rather than laptops so that the social workers are better able to interview their clients.

To address issues regarding the security of the data, the agency installed full data encryption software (Checkpoint) and prohibited the use of thumb drives and any other portable devices that were not

FIGURE 1
Implementation Process

2008–2010	<p>Retained the services of a consultant</p> <p>Created a mobile work program committee, which was composed of representatives from support services (facilities management), human resources, staff development, and information technology. A member of the Agency’s executive management team sponsored the committee.</p> <p>Recruited pre-pilot volunteers</p> <p>Conducted training, amended/developed policies and procedures, and communicated to all ACSSA employees about the status of the program</p> <p>Established hoteling bullpens and offices at 5 different locations</p>
May 24, 2010	<p>Launched Phase I—56 participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 22 Eligibility Technicians in the Medi-Cal Outreach Program located within the Economic Benefits Program 18 Social Workers in the In-Home Supportive Services Program 10 Child Welfare Supervisors (Court Officers) 6 Child Welfare Supervisors (Team Decision-Making Facilitators)
August 2010	<p>Obtained evaluation data from program participants</p>
March 2011	<p>(Proposed) Launch Phase II—114 participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 13 Appeals Officers and 4 Quality Assurance Technicians 33 Child Welfare Workers 5 Social Workers in the SSI Advocacy Program in the Employment Services Department 57 Social Workers in the In Home Supportive Services Program 1 Eligibility Technician in the Medi-Cal Outreach Program located within the Economic Benefits Program 1 Departmental Personnel Officer in the Human Resources Division

installed by the IT division. For instance, a participant is only able to print from the portable printer that is provided to them. The system will not allow them to print from their home or work printer, thereby protecting the flow of data to and from the laptop.

HUMAN RESOURCES

Prior to the implementation of the project, members of the human resources team met and conferred with the impacted unions. The main areas of discussion centered on work schedules, overtime, and applicability of business process. Because of the strong interest in the implementation of the mobile work program, the meetings with the employees and their unions were collaborative. At the conclusion of the meetings, the parties agreed to the following:

- Staff would maintain normal work schedules;
- Staff would not incur overtime by checking email or voicemail after established work hours;
- Staff would report to the work location once every two weeks, or more often if needed;
- Staff would receive an ergonomic chair for their homes.

During the first phase, the number of volunteers equaled the number of mobile work program positions. However, as the program entered its second phase, the number of volunteers outnumbered the number of available positions. In response to concerns regarding ergonomic issues, the agency permitted the participants to bring their Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and/or workers’ compensation equipment to their homes. They also purchased and delivered ergonomic chairs to the homes of the

participants, depending on their individual requests and needs. Finally, the agency designed numerous ergonomic and ADA compliant hoteling stations throughout the agency for use when the participants came to the office. This focus on providing an ergonomic workspace has resulted in no new workers' compensation claims since the rollout of Phase I.

FINANCE/ACCOUNTING

The Agency created a mobile work program cost model that compared the cost of maintaining current workstations for approximately 170 employees to the proposed mobile work approach. According to their analysis, the agency will save approximately 10,000 square feet in space; \$3,000 per employee in one-time costs for purchasing equipment, installing telephone lines, etc.; and \$5,000 per participant per year. The agency will recapture 149 spaces in seven buildings at the completion of Phase II.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The staff development managers designed and implemented a comprehensive multi-day training program that covered a wide range of topics such as:

- The purpose of the mobile work program;
- Policies and procedures (guidelines, work rules, liability and responsibility);
- Definition of work schedules;
- Timekeeping;
- Installation and usage of the equipment;
- Use of personal vehicles; and,
- Ergonomic and other safety measures, including workers' compensation.

Between the first and second phases, the training team discovered that some participants required more detailed instruction on the use of technology. In response, they modified the training to provide sessions to smaller groups of people over several days.

EVALUATION/FEEDBACK

In August 2010, the agency solicited feedback from the participants and clients. The comments were positive.

"It saves me a lot of commute time and money" –Employee

"It helps me to concentrate more and process cases faster" –Employee

"A hard and confusing process was made much easier for us" –Client

"We were able to get approved instantly" –Client

APPLICATION TO SAN FRANCISCO HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY

Alameda County Social Services Agency has built a framework from which the San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA) may build a telecommuting program. In addition, with the already-existing advanced systems put in place by the HSA IT division and the ongoing roll out of document imaging throughout several units, HSA has the structure to implement a similar program.

Several important issues must be addressed, however, before proceeding, such as the purpose of a telecommuting program, the feasibility of cost savings given the close proximity of City buildings, redesign of business processes, designation of work schedules, productivity and accountability standards, the establishment of home offices, and safety issues. In addition, San Francisco County HSA, with its myriad schedules, attendance procedures, labor unions, and programmatic differences, presents an added challenge to the implementation of a new and innovative program.

For a mobile work program to be implemented effectively in San Francisco, HSA must clearly identify its goals (e.g. staff morale, budgetary savings); realistically calculate program costs, including IT and ergonomic equipment; provide additional training time; and obtain "buy-in" at every level of the organization.

In summary, the mobile work program would require a great deal of planning, commitment and allocation of advance resources prior to implementation; however, the potential for cost savings, increased morale, and extended service to clients make the project worth investigating through the implementation of a pilot in one or more agency programs.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my appreciation to Don Edwards, Dina Brockman, Michelle Keys and Huong Tran for their hospitality and time. I would especially like to thank Dina Brockman for spending hours of her valuable time answering my many questions and for coordinating my interviews. Special thanks to John Murray, Jonathan Gill and Lisa Molinar for their constant but gentle reminders about deadlines. Additionally, I am grateful to Trent Rhorer, Phil Arnold and Robert Thomas for giving me the opportunity to attend the BASSC Executive Development Training Program. Their encouragement and support was truly valued.