

Mobile Work: The Evolution of the Twenty-First Century Workplace

KATHLEEN A. ALVES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The where and how we do our work has been transformed dramatically over the past 45 years. Changes have in part been driven by dwindling resources, such as oil, efforts to decrease greenhouse gases, and the focus of companies on cutting costs. These factors have shaped telecommuting as a method to address these issues. Over the years the substitution of computer-based technology for physical travel has led to a number of alternative work forms beyond home-based telecommuting. These include satellite centers, neighborhood work centers and mobile work. The constant development and improvement of information and communication technologies enables us to work virtually anywhere.

This case study looks at Alameda County Social Service Agency's (ACSSA) Mobile Work Program, an aspect of Telework. ACSSA's willingness to utilize current technologies has improved service delivery and increased employee job morale. The implementation of Mobile Work and the utilization of document imaging and retrieval processes related to records management align the agency with current business practices.

Sonoma County Human Services Department (SCHSD) can benefit from the use of appropriate technological tools and methods that provide efficient service delivery to clients. Recommendations for SCHSD to evaluate current workplace practices in balance with organizational, personnel and budgetary considerations are reviewed.

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Introduction

Go to a coffee shop or library in Alameda County and there, unbeknownst to you, may be an Alameda County Social Services Agency (ACSSA) employee working diligently to provide services to the community. Sitting next to you with laptop, cell phone, scanner and printer may be an In-Home Support Services worker from Adult and Aging Services, an Appeals Officer, or a Team Decision-Making Facilitator from Children and Family Services. These are just a few of the 153 employee positions that are a part of the Mobile Work Program for ACSSA. The ways in which work is done have changed significantly. Employees are no longer strictly confined to a desk and cubicle to be productive.

In the past 45 years, technological advances have improved our communication tools, from answering machines, faxes, voicemail, Internet, wireless connectivity to cell phones, etc. It is difficult to imagine our work without these tools today in the Digital Age. Though it may seem obvious, technology has reshaped not only the processes of work, but also our expectations as to the amount of work to be completed and the time necessary to complete the task. Data analysis, data gathering methods, and the tools used to evaluate public services twenty years ago seem almost archaic today. It is essential that we utilize current technology to its fullest potential in order to best assist in meeting workplace expectations, achieve mandated outcomes and provide efficient and accessible public service delivery. Equally important in the successful utilization of technology is the development of training and processes

to support employees to efficiently and successfully complete their work. To better understand how the utilization of mobile technologies can help improve service delivery and employee job satisfaction. In this case study ACSSA's Mobile Work Program is described as an instructive example of Telework.

Background of Tele-Commuting

Modern day telecommuting was in part driven by an effort to counter the effects of the OPEC oil embargo of the late 1970s. In 1989, the President's Council on Management Improvement commissioned a government-wide telework pilot project for federal agencies. The Clean Air Act of 1990 and its 1996 amendments led to the establishment of the National Telework Initiative aimed at reducing carbon dioxide and ground-level ozone levels by 25% and mandated all businesses employing more than 100 people to reduce employee commute time by 25% through methods such as car-pooling, public transportation incentives, condensed work weeks, or telecommuting.¹ The most recent legislation to continue the movement towards telework is the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, which was signed into law by President Obama. The Telework Enhancement Act requires federal agencies to establish telecommuting policies and training in which employees may be authorized to telework.²

¹ Nayab, N. (May 26, 2011). History of Telecommuting. Retrieved from <http://www.brighthub.com/office/home/articles/82023.aspx>

² Brunelli, Lauren Miles, About.com Guide. Telework Enhancement Act of 2010. Law is aimed at increasing telecommuting by federal employees. Retrieved from http://workathomemoms.about.com/od/telecommuting/a/Telework_Improvements_Act.htm

Along with the motivation to save fossil fuels, companies in the 1980s began to increasingly focus on cutting costs and pointed to telecommuting as a means to reduce the expense of maintaining office space. Over the years the substitution of computer-based technology for physical travel has led to a number of alternative work forms beyond home-based telecommuting. These include satellite centers, neighborhood work centers and mobile work. Together, these forms constitute “teleworking.” What they have in common is a transition from in-person supervision to remote managing, from face-to-face communication to telecommunications-mediated communication, from on-site working to off-site or multiple-site working, and, in the case of groups, from side-by-side collaboration to virtual teamwork.

Telework Defined

Home-based telecommuting refers to employees who work at home on a regular basis, though not necessarily every day. A person can be a telecommuter if the individual’s link to the office is as simple as a telephone; however, telecommuters often use other communication media, such as electronic mail, personal computer links to office servers, and fax machines.

In **satellite offices**, employees work both outside the home and away from the conventional workplace in locations convenient to the employees and/or customers. A satellite office houses only employees from a single organization.

A **neighborhood work center** is essentially identical to a satellite office, but also includes the housing of more than one company’s employees. Several organizations may share the lease of an office building and maintain separate office areas within the building for employees of each organization.

Mobile workers are on the road or in the field using communications technology to work from home, from a car, or other field location and; communicating with the office as necessary from each location. This is in contrast to telecommuters who work from one designated location outside the main

office and communicate with the office using electronic communication.³

Alameda County Social Service's Model For Mobile Work

Within the current budgetary climate and community needs, Alameda County Social Service Agency (ACSSA) set out creating and implementing Mobile Work. In 2008 a consultant firm was engaged to assist in the development of the Mobile Work Program (MWP). ACSSA defines its Mobile Work Program as employees who are provided the technological tools necessary to have a mobile office a laptop, portable scanner/printer, portable files suitcase, Internet Card and smartphone capable of texting and emailing. Training, guidelines, policies and procedures are provided to the employee.

In addition, ACSSA currently has 65 “hoteling” spaces throughout the county allowing employees to come into an office as necessary to complete tasks. A hoteling area is a bullpen area that offers an empty desk space that has technological connectivity. The employee can access the county network and temporarily sit when completing tasks at the office. Mobile Work employees do not have an individual workstation.

ACSSA engaged the labor union in dialogue and input related to the development of the Mobile Work Program. This engagement was an integral piece of partnering to help identify potential labor issues in the Mobile Work Program.

Prior to its implementation of Mobile Work, ACSSA had identified the needs related to document imaging. In 2004, ACSSA began identifying methods and technology to utilize for document imaging and automated retrieval processes. They currently employ 24 full-time document scanners and indexers and two full-time supervisors.⁴

³ Kurkland, Nancy B, and Bailey, Diane E. (Autumn 1999). *Telework: The Advantages and Challenges of Working Here, There, Anywhere, and Anytime*. Retrieved from http://www.stanford.edu/group/wto/cgi-bin/docs/Kurland_Bailey_99.pdf

⁴ Panelo, Noel. (2007). *Document Imaging and Automated Retrieval System: Harnessing the Power of Technology to Manage and Protect Client and Other Vital Records*. Retrieved from http://cssr.berkeley.edu/bassc/cases/2007/Noel_Panelo.pdf

Mobile Work is a cost-avoidance program and not necessarily a cost-savings strategy. The savings come from in ACSSA improving its use of open space rather than renting new buildings for additional staff. ACSSA analyzed the cost of maintaining current workstations for approximately 170 employees compared to the proposed Mobile Work Program. According to the analysis, the translation of cost savings for 10,000 square feet of space would be approximately \$3,000 per employee in one-time costs for purchasing equipment, installation of phone lines, etc. for a total \$5,000 per participant per year. ACSSA was able to save approximately one million dollars on building costs. The agency will recapture 13 spaces in seven buildings. Recapturing space means reassigning space that has been vacated by staff that have become mobile workers. A small percentage of the recaptured spaces was converted into hoteling spaces, with the remaining space being reallocated to other staff use.

ACSSA created a Mobile Work Program (MWP) to increase productivity, employee job satisfaction and morale by delivering greater levels of flexibility

and mobility to ACSSA employees. The MWP reduces overall operating costs by investing more in employees than in bricks and mortar. Cost savings are accomplished by maximizing efficient use of physical space by recapturing under-utilized office space and adjusting the planning model relative to employee work and space patterns. The MWP engages in current business practices and assists ACSSA to be competitive in attracting and retaining talented and skilled employees.

The criterion for those participating in the MWP is that the position is field-based with employees working outside of the office due to job functions at least 30% of the time. Participation is voluntary. The requirements for work performance, workplace safety, and policies and procedures are the same for those participating in Mobile Work as on-site employees. MWP employee's files are accessed electronically. Employees do not carry paper files; they will fill out reports and scan documents received in the field and send them into the office electronically to be processed. The Central/Primary Worksite for the employee is the officially assigned worksite where their supervisor is located.

TABLE 1
ACSSA Positions as Mobile Work Program Participants

23	Workforce and Benefits Administration MediCal Outreach workers
50	Adult & Aging: In-Home Support Services (IHSS) Social Workers
10	Child Welfare Supervisors: Court Officers
6	Child Welfare Services Supervisors: Team Decision Making Facilitators
13	Appeals Officers
4	Quality Assurance Technicians
1	Departmental Personnel Officer in the Human Resources Division
11	TACT Staff Development Specialists
5	Social Workers in the SSI Advocacy Program: Workforce and Benefits Administration
30	Child Welfare Workers

Conclusion and Considerations

ACSSA's implementation of Mobile Work allows for continued service delivery to the public amidst challenging fiscal times. A willingness to engage creatively in utilizing current technologies has allowed for improved service delivery in the field while providing the necessary tools for employees to successfully complete their work. At this time the primary focus related to telework by ACSSA is the Mobile Work Program. ACSSA's utilization of document-imaging and retrieval processes is an essential part of bringing records management into the 21st Century and for providing a technologically mobile workforce within the agency. Labor Union engagement is a critical piece of collaboration as the MWP has a number of workforce issues that are best clarified at the beginning of planning in order to aid in a successful transition related to program implementation and labor-related issues.

The Mobile Work Program will continue to be a work in progress. Technologies will continue to advance and shape the ways that work is accomplished. Alameda County's MWP has utilized the current workplace practices and technologies to position themselves well to meet the needs of a technologically driven society that has come to expect expedient service delivery.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Telework

Though ACSSA's current telework emphasis is on Mobile Work, each of the various forms of

telework; home-based telecommuting, satellite offices, neighborhood work centers and mobile work have particular advantages and disadvantages. Flexibility in employee work scheduling affords enhanced customer service and greater accountability. Improved work-life balance increases employee morale, which in turn generally leads to enhanced customer service.

Through the use of telework in its various forms, organizations recognize the expanded ability to use technology to communicate and respond to customers/clients in a timely manner. Sick leave usage

T A B L E 2
Organizational Advantages and Challenges of Teleworking*

	Advantages	Challenges	
Home-Based Telecommuting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater productivity • Lower absenteeism • Better morale • Greater openness • Fewer interruptions at office • Reduced overhead • Wider talent pool • Lower turnover • Regulation compliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance monitoring • Performance measurement • Managerial control • Mentoring • Jealous colleagues • Synergy • Informal interaction • Organization culture • Virtual culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization loyalty • Interpersonal skills • Availability • Schedule maintenance • Work coordination • Internal customers • Communication • Guidelines (e.g. expenses) • Technology
Satellite Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater productivity • Better morale • Wider talent pool • Lower turnover • Customer proximity • Regulation compliance • Corporate culture intact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance monitoring • Performance measurement • Managerial control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jealous colleagues • Virtual culture • Internal customers
Neighborhood Work Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater productivity • Better morale • Wider talent pool • Lower turnover • Customer proximity • Regulation compliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance monitoring • Performance measurement • Managerial control • Jealous colleagues • Synergy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal interaction • Organizational culture • Virtual culture • Organization loyalty • Schedule maintenance • Work coordination • Internal customers
Mobile Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater productivity • Lower absenteeism • Customer proximity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance monitoring • Performance measurement • Managerial control • Synergy • Informal interaction • Organization culture • Virtual culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization loyalty • Availability • Schedule maintenance • Work coordination • Communication • Guidelines (e.g. expenses) • Technology

* U.S. General Services Administration. (October 2011). *Customer Satisfaction Case Study: The Links Between Telework and Customer Satisfaction*. Retrieved from <http://www.gsa.gov/graphics/admin/CustomerSatisfactionCaseStudyFINAL.pdf>

declines since telework allows employees the flexibility to schedule medical appointments on telework days and then return to finish the work day rather than having to schedule the whole day as out of the office. Organizations have the potential to realize real estate savings due to reduced space and energy needs. Telework and reduced commuter travel can also help the agency meet greenhouse gas emissions reductions.

Tables 2 and 3 list considerations based on ACSSA's information as to Mobile Work and feedback from studies that focus on the advantages and challenges

related to various forms of teleworking for both organizations (Table 2) Individuals (Table 3).

Recommendations For Implementation In Sonoma County

Technology is a powerful tool. It can be used to more efficiently provide services to clients and to help shape the way an organization functions. It is essential for Sonoma County Human Services Department (SCHSD) to assess how to best utilize the various forms of telework and mobile technologies to meet the increasing demands on employee

TABLE 3
Individual Advantages and Challenges of Teleworking*

	Advantages	Challenges	
Home-Based Telecommuting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less time commuting • Cost savings • Less stress • No need for relocation • More autonomy • Schedule flexibility • Comfortable work environment • Fewer distractions • Absence of office politics • Work/family balance • Workplace fairness • More job satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social isolation • Professional Isolation • Organization culture • Reduced office influence • Work/family balance • Informal interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducive home environment • Focusing on work • Longer hours • Access to resources • Technical savvy
Satellite Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less time commuting • Cost savings • Less stress • No need for relocation • Work/family balance • More job satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional isolation • Reduced office influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to resources
Neighborhood Work Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less time commuting • Cost savings • Less stress • No need for relocation • More autonomy • Absence of office politics • Work/family balance • More job satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social isolation • Professional isolation • Organization culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced office influence • Access to resources
Mobile Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More autonomy • Schedule flexibility • Absence of office politics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social isolation • Professional isolation • Organization culture • Reduced office influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longer hours • Access to resources • Technical savvy

* U.S. General Services Administration. (October 2011). *Customer Satisfaction Case Study: The Links Between Telework and Customer Satisfaction*. Retrieved from <http://www.gsa.gov/graphics/admin/CustomerSatisfactionCaseStudyFINAL.pdf>

time and compliance requirements, all amidst ongoing financial constraints. There are a number of areas to consider in developing a successful and effective telework program. Each method should be weighing the various organizational, personnel and budgetary considerations.

A tiered approach would consist of first assessing the current methods of document imaging and automated retrieval processes as this is a critical part of bringing records management in line with more current business practices. This approach would also position SCHSD to develop a successful telework program. Other first steps would include assessing the current technological tools being utilized within job functions and provide the right tools for each employee to do his or her job. For example, laptop usage for field positions would aid employees in meeting compliance mandates and reduce trips back to the office to input notes. This ultimately improves service delivery and compliance measures, increases employee job satisfaction, and benefits the agency with potential cost savings and more efficient work processes. Another important consideration is the utilization of technologies that facilitate communication and responsiveness with clients and colleagues.

Further recommendations include;

- Identifying job classes where telecommuting would be appropriate and develop criteria, policies and procedures;
- Engaging in a dialogue with labor unions early in the planning process to address potential labor issues and aid in successful program development;
- Identifying other county buildings or organizations that would match well with SCHSD in the development of satellite offices or work centers, thereby promoting the reduction of green house gases and improved service delivery;

- Evaluating the agency's potential growth areas to identify current and future office space needs; and,
- Beginning development of a Mobile Work Program to manage cost increases due to projected needs.

It is important to the successful development of a Telework Program to have management support and encouragement of teleworking. There is a concern among managers that employees will be more easily distracted working in a less formal environment and less focused due to multi-tasking. This challenge is coupled with a concern arising from the inability of managers to physically see their employees doing work. These concerns need to be discussed and seen as part of the process in changing workplace practices. An important aspect of planning that can address some of these management concerns is to establish clear performance expectations, goals and a range of employee flexibility. Developing a thorough assessment of SCHSD's organizational needs and identifying the best technological tools to effectively deliver services will strategically position the agency to meet future demands that will most certainly be defined by future technological developments.

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