

Sonoma County's Mobile Work Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For the last four decades telecommuting has been evolving and developing. With the proliferation of technology into our daily lives, it is becoming expected of top employers to leverage telecommuting more and more. Organizations are now faced with the question of how best to use the wide variety of technology available in order to best serve themselves and their employees' needs. This dilemma has become even more pressing as employers are competing for a growing tech-savvy work force that desires the flexibility that these technologies bring.

This case study looks at Sonoma County Human Services Department's Mobile Work Program. The approaches developed by the Economic Assistance and Adult and Aging Divisions expanded the capabilities of the department and introduced numerous work efficiencies. The Adult and Aging Division was

able to use space-sharing techniques and some additional technology to reduce the growing space needs of an expanding workforce. The Economic Assistance Division created a work unit that leveraged technology to bring the services of the department out into the community. Both of these implementations of mobile work show how an organization can use telecommuting principles to benefit both the worker and the organization.

The Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department can benefit from Sonoma County's example by identifying work processes that can make use of technological tools to improve service delivery to clients. With a modest investment in resources, an effective mobile work program can be developed that will benefit both the department and its workforce.

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Introduction

Employees desire flexibility in their lives. It is coming to the point where employees are almost insisting on flexibility. Nationally, research shows that 80% of employees say they would like to telework, at least part of the time, and other research finds that 45% say they would even be willing to give up some salary in exchange for more flexibility at work (Global Workplace Analytics, 2013). Employers are striving to become “an employer of choice” to attract and retain the talent they need to get the job done. In order to do this they must appeal to a population insistent upon a sociable, flexible, purposeful, and technologically savvy work environment.

Why Tele-Commuting?

Telecommuting/teleworking/mobile work is not new or untested. For the last four decades companies and government agencies have been utilizing it in various forms. There is no longer a need to research whether it will work. The business case for it is clear and has been proven by leading organizations (See

Figure 1). The question is, “How is an organization going to leverage telecommuting to best fit its business needs?”

Technology

The reality of today, thanks to technology, is employees are already mobile. This has changed the dynamics of the modern workforce. With the penetration of smartphones and other technology in the modern household and business environment, it is becoming expected for organizations to develop their own use of technology. The technologies that are available for employers today that can facilitate the ability to have a successful telecommuting program are:

- Laptops
- Smart Phones
- VPN Solutions
- WEB Collaboration Portals
- Remote e-mail solutions
- Virtual Desktop Platforms
- High-speed internet connections in employees' homes

FIGURE 1
Telework Growth Multi-Year

	2005 to 2012	2006 to 2012	2007 to 2012	2008 to 2012	2009 to 2012	2010 to 2012	2011 to 2012
For Profit Companies	70.4%	46.1%	33.3%	15.8%	12.4%	9.5%	4.8%
Non Profit Organizations	87.6%	36.2%	31.1%	18.8%	8.9%	6.0%	1.4%
Local Government	62.3%	47.4%	35.5%	15.3%	5.9%	4.8%	-2.7%
State Government	122.1%	60.4%	42.6%	25.2%	18.4%	8.7%	3.8%
Fed Government	421.0%	-2.4%	7.1%	-0.1%	2.7%	-5.6%	-0.6%
Total Telework Growth	79.7%	42.3%	32.0%	15.6%	11.6%	8.1%	3.8%

(Global Workplace Analytics, 2013)

- Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) Phones
- Encryption solutions.
- Video Conferencing

Management

Lack of management support is the most often cited obstacle to telework programs (Lister & Hanish, 2011). It is fundamentally a problem of trust. Managers fear that if left unmonitored, workers will not work as hard. Few will admit the problem, instead citing the need for coverage, team dynamics, or communications issues. The reality is, case study after case study have shown that people who telework even part-time are more productive than their in-office peers. Some reasons that contribute to this productivity are:

- Fewer interruptions
- Effective time management
- Feeling trusted
- Flexible hours
- Increased commitment
- More hours worked

One of the biggest problems with teleworkers is working too many hours.

Job Satisfaction

A 2013 Gallup survey found that 70% of US workers are not engaged in their work. Many companies have identified telecommuting as a viable method of combating this. By being allowed to telework, workers feel they are part of a trusting organization and are more motivated to get work accomplished. In Sonoma County's Mobile Work Evaluation Report, participating workers all reported a higher degree of job satisfaction, although supervisors reported a slight negative impact due to a lack of and/or missing socialization.

Sonoma County Human Services

Starting around 2012, Sonoma County Human Services Department began to experience rapid growth patterns in the number of workers needed to provide services to the county. According to Stephen

Schoengarth, Sonoma County Human Service's Public Assistance Systems Specialist, the department grew from 640 employees in February 2012 to 837 in January 2015 with a remaining 82 vacancies to be filled and more growth on the horizon (personal communication, April 9, 2015). The department, therefore, needed to find office space for the growing employee population. With office space being at a premium in Sonoma County, renting more office space was not an attractive solution. The agency director asked his executive team to look for other options. Mobile Work emerged as a promising possibility. This case study examines how Sonoma County's Adult and Aging Services and the Economic Assistance Divisions approached the Mobile Work initiative.

Adult and Aging Services Division

The Adult and Aging Services Division implemented a telework solution that included a number of factors: scheduled days in the office and field, setting up hoteling cubicles, implementing communication standards, and a standard set of technology for the workers. Mobile Work was set up as a new business practice to facilitate the increasing workload of the department. In other words, the decision on whether a person could participate in the program was based on what was needed by the department, not the employee's desire. The program began with ten workers (four in Adult Protective Services and six in In-Home Supportive Services), and by June 2015 it will be up to 28 workers in the Mobile Work program. In addition to official program participants, over 100 managers, supervisors and field workers have been provided with mobile work equipment (laptops and iPhones). These workers could start some form of mobile work with little to no effort.

A work schedule program had to be setup for the Mobile Work workers to facilitate the use of a cubicle by more than one worker. This involved setting up some different scheduling systems. The department is using Microsoft Outlook's resource scheduling and scheduling through its conference room reservation system. Each of the new hoteling workspaces

was set up with a common set of equipment for the worker to use, including a Cisco VoIP phone and a sit-stand work desk to satisfy the ergonomic needs of different workers.

When a worker is selected for the Mobile Work program, he or she is given a Mobility Kit that contains a standard set of equipment. Each worker is given a laptop that is configured with all the software needed to work remotely. Software loaded includes Cisco VPN Client to connect back to the office and Instant Messaging Client Jabber for communicating with office staff. Workers may be given a portable scanner to scan documents into their Onbase document management system. Workers are also given a portable printer to print documents as needed.

A number of different management control measures were put into place to manage the mobile workers. They included:

- scheduled days that a worker is in the office.
- staff meetings that require workers to come into the office, even if it is one of their normal mobile workdays.
- checking in by phone or instant messaging. They started by using Office Communicator but have transitioned to Jabber. Mobile workers are required to check in two or more times a day.

Economic Assistance Division

The Economic Assistance Division implemented Mobile Work in a slightly different manner. Its solution involved creating a new work unit that has a primary function of working out in the community. This approach was developed not out of the need to conserve space, but a need to serve the community.

When developing a work management policy, the Economic Assistance Division decided to credit workers for two client applications for every one taken at the mobile worksite. In this case, the worker was not only helping the applicant with the application, he or she was also conducting the interview simultaneously. While Economic Assistance doesn't have a formal quota system for taking applications, it

was a way to compare a mobile worker's relative work volume to his or her office-bound peers.

The work model is as follows:

1. The unit supervisor contacts or is contacted by a community organization that has members that need economic assistance.
2. A work plan is developed to send a worker to the community organization's location to take applications and conduct interviews. Some of the community organizations pre-screen potential applicants and schedule appointments for the workers.
3. When the pool of potential applicants diminishes, the work plan is adjusted including the possibility of discontinuing onsite presence or going to an on-call basis.

Workers are selected to participate in the Economic Assistance work unit based on their desire to provide assistance to the community, not the desire to work outside the office.

The equipment package provided to the mobile worker is the same as in Adult and Aging: a laptop, phone, portable scanner, and portable printer. Notable differences in the programs are:

- Economic Assistance requires the worker to come into the office at the beginning and end of each day.
- Equipment is returned to the office each day.
- Workers are at community locations.

While the mobile work program started as an outreach service to the community, it has developed into an entirely new capability for the Economic Assistance Division.

Common Elements

Common elements for both Economic Assistance and Adult and Aging Divisions are:

- No union issues developed out of the new programs. Both units talked to the unions involved and they were receptive to this new work development for their members.

- It only took 1-2 days training to prepare the mobile workers. Since they were using equipment similar to what they already had, this was a minor adjustment. The most notable adjustment was developing the organizational skills to manage the new dynamics of mobile location and the office.
- The same support staff was available to both units. This gave them a common source to address issues.
- No additional insurance was needed to implement this program. The department was able to utilize current policies and procedures to cover the mobile workers.

Conclusion

Sonoma County's implementation of the Mobile Work program satisfied a growing business problem of needing space while expanding its ability to serve the community. With both approaches, Sonoma County leveraged the technology it already had on hand and only had to add a few elements to develop a full mobile capability. While technology plays an important role in developing a mobile workforce program, Sonoma County has managed to also develop a number of management practices that overcame most of the management resistance to mobile work. The Mobile Work initiative will continue to evolve over time. Technology will continue to evolve and influence the way work is accomplished. Sonoma County Adult and Aging and Economic Assistance Divisions have positioned themselves well to meet both the needs of their evolving workforce and the ever-increasing needs of their community.

Recommendation

Mobile Work is a validated way to conduct an organization's work. It can be used by the Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) as an effective tool to provide services to the community. A key task for EHSD in developing a successful mobile work program is getting

manager buy-in for the program. If this can be accomplished, the department will be well situated to develop an effective program. The department is already utilizing most of the technology needed for a mobile work program (e.g., laptop computers, Smart Phones and VPN Tokens). With a modest investment (estimated at less than \$100,000) and a motivated team, EHSD could implement a program in a relatively short period of time (6-9mo). Key questions EHSD should consider when developing a Mobile Work program include:

- What job functions would be appropriate for mobile work?
- What locations could be used as hoteling or mobile site offices?
- Where and how the community may need mobile services?
- What policies and procedures need to be developed to address employee and management concerns about mobile work?
- What kind of training plan will be needed for mobile staff and their supervisors?

By looking at the elements of Sonoma County's Mobile Work program, Contra Costa County will be able to select the components it will need for its own program. This should put Contra Costa County well on the path to becoming one of the "employers of choice" in the area.

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