

Telework Progress Report to Congress: Technology as an Enabler and Barrier

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A recent Office of Personnel Management (OPM) report to Congress on finding of a survey of agency telework programs shows that 21% of federal employees now telework under The Telework Enhancement Act of 2010. However, we are still in the early stages of telework and there will be challenges ahead. The study had some interesting findings on IT as an enabler and barrier to telework. We predict that the bulk of future telework challenges will come, not as much from hardware or software, but from “wetware”—the wet stuff between the ears!

The [2012 Status of Telework in the Federal Government](#) reports findings of a baseline survey for evaluation of Federal telework programs. This year’s survey is a benchmark from which to measure the progress of federal telework under The Telework Enhancement Act going forward.

After years of telework hype and then disillusionment, it took the mandate of a law to finally make telework happen, and progress has been slow but steady. It has now been year and a half since [The Telework Enhancement Act of 2010](#) was signed into law and about a year since agencies were required to notify eligible employees that they could telework (up to 20% every two weeks) and begin to enable them to do so. In the next two years, look for telework momentum to pick up steam as even more federal employees begin to telework.

Besides the law, technology-related forces have converged to create a growth spurt for this market in 2012, including the consumer ubiquity of smart mobile device use that enable working remotely, unified communications architectures, and cloud communications services that keep employees productive, well-connected and collaborating with their colleagues.

The report points out that the concept of telework is going through a paradigm shift of benefiting primarily individual employees to being a strategic organizational change *program* for agencies. In this environment of “Do-More-With-Less and do it more efficiently” telework becomes even more strategic because it does offer efficiency gains. It can improve employee performance and job satisfaction, as well as help attract or keep good talent. At the same time, it also reduces agency costs (in telecommunications services, real-estate, and energy) and provides agency continuity of operations and mitigates potential disruptions to workplace productivity, for example, from severe weather.

The OPM report was a census of those teleworking as of September 2011. Although this period of reporting was just a few months after the deadline for meeting Act requirements, a quarter of all employees deemed eligible to participate were reported as teleworking. The numbers are thought to be low because some agencies were not yet set up to capture and report the statistics.

The Data Call Survey of Agencies

This year, the Call, which is the name of the longitudinal benchmark survey of agencies, included questions about technology to enable telework. Survey responses indicated that while technology is a major enabler, they likewise recognized that when technology is inadequately addressed in a telework program, it can be a significant barrier.

The survey found that the majority of agencies provide equipment (such as computers) to telework participants, or share the cost of equipment with participants (46 agencies). However, 61% of agencies ask teleworkers to pay the entire cost of technology services, such as Internet connectivity, that support telework. A smaller percentage of agencies share the cost and only 8% of agencies pay for the services. The austere budget environment will hamper telework in agencies that require that employees use only agency-issued equipment.

Because telework is part of agency continuity of operations plans, it is important to test the IT capacity for supporting telework and most agencies do test this. But only 8% of agencies conduct tests on a regular basis. Most agencies believe that their IT systems have adequate capacity for handling increased usage due to telework emergencies, despite the fact that most are not testing regularly. Vendors advising agencies on telework policies and technical capabilities should provide counsel to test regularly and at known peaks to ensure that their clients aren’t being lulled into a false sense of security, should something bigger than Snowmageddon or a derecho hit.

We anticipate that as telework takes off other IT-related challenges or potential barriers may surface, including technology disparities, security and privacy, unanticipated infrastructure requirements (such as storage shortages). However, in the end, our prognosis is that human factors, such as difficulty adjusting to new management and work styles and tools and cultural resistance to change will have the biggest drag effect on telework.