

Telework Myths

Some of the most common barriers to implementing telework aren't really barriers at all. Instead, they are myths—stories based on the fear of the unknown, rather than on actual experience. Just like urban legends, these myths are passed from one person to the next, from one organization to the next, with few facts getting in the way. Some barriers are real but can be easily avoided if addressed proactively in a formal telework program.

Before you decide whether telework is right for your team, department, or organization, take a moment to read the research-based facts behind these common myths.

Myth: I won't know they're working at home.

Fact: Research on teleworking pilot programs consistently shows that after teleworking for six months, both teleworkers and their supervisors believe that teleworking has increased the teleworker's productivity. In fact, the most commonly mentioned benefits of teleworking by senior managers were increases in work efficiency, productivity, and employee morale. There are several reasons for this:

- It's easy to monitor teleworkers via log sheets, specialized software, or frequent contact.
- Productivity increases because employees have fewer distractions and interruptions, work at their personal peak times, and are less stressed due to the absence of the commute.
- Supervisors discover they are better able to monitor the work by shifting the focus from how much work the employee looks like he or she is accomplishing to how much he or she actually is accomplishing. By focusing on the work product instead of the work activity, many supervisors find they are better able to communicate clear expectations to their employees. And, when supervisors and teleworkers agree on job expectations, it often leads to increases in employee productivity and job satisfaction.

Mid-level managers and front-line supervisors reported that they felt supervising a teleworking employee involved a change in management style from management by observation of the job being done to management of the results. The managers and supervisors reported that the skill-sets needed to more effectively supervise a teleworking employee benefited their workgroups as whole.

Myth: Teleworkers must work at home five days a week.

Fact: Most teleworkers only work remotely part-time or on an ad-hoc basis. Research shows that although many employees would like to telework more often, few do so more than one day per week. In fact, AT&T found that most teleworkers only telework 1 to 4 days per month.

Myth: Our types of jobs aren't compatible to telework.

Fact: Research shows that most jobs have some set of tasks that can be done away from the main office or during non-standard work hours. Jobs are really just a collection of tasks. Some tasks must be done at a certain location or a certain time. Other tasks, especially those involving reading, thinking, planning, analyzing, programming, or making phone calls (especially to different time zones), can be done anywhere, and do not necessarily require any particular type of technology. For some, these tasks may take up 10% of their job, for others 90%. A telework arrangement can be found to accommodate teleworkers at any point along this continuum.

Myth: Teleworkers are not available when you need them.

Fact: Research does not support this myth. In fact, surveys show that 80% of non-teleworkers and managers disagreed with the statement, "Teleworkers are never around when you need them." Formal telework programs generally require that teleworkers and their supervisors work together to develop an agreement that defines how responsibilities are restructured to maintain work group integrity (if necessary), sets expectations for availability and response times, and plans how they will maintain communication with the office and what will be done to meet contingencies. And of course, if the teleworker is needed, he or she may be asked to come in to the office or join an emergency staff meeting by conference call.

Myth: Telework is not for everyone, so it's not fair.

Fact: Offering the opportunity to telework is a management option; telework is not a universal employee benefit. Supervisors may select employees who have the right tasks, abilities and circumstances to telework, but an employee's participation in a telework program should be entirely voluntary. Not having the opportunity to telework is not a grievable offense. In addition, employers may offer other flexible work options, such as flextime or compressed workweeks to those who cannot telework.

Myth: Everyone will want to telework.

Fact: Studies continue to show that most people prefer the normal workweek. Everyone does not want or need the same flexibility in the workplace. Some flexible work arrangements, such as telework, require employees to have certain job tasks, skills, and home environments. There is not one example in case studies or research literature that found an overwhelming response to jump on the telework bandwagon. It just doesn't happen. Instead, successful and sustainable telework programs grow over time as the organizational culture makes it easier to adopt a telework arrangement.

Myth: Teleworkers cause more work for supervisors.

Fact: Managing employees that work flexible schedules will require more communication of the work product and expectations. However, many managers have found that the improved communication with employees has reduced their overall workload over time. This leads to supervision that is more effective and a more productive work environment.

Myth: Teleworkers cause more work for coworkers.

Fact: Research shows that most non-teleworkers do not feel their own workload has increased because their colleagues are working at home or on an alternate work schedule. In fact, most non-teleworking employees support telework programs. To prevent unequal workload, teleworkers and their managers should discuss how they will manage their normal office duties without burdening coworkers.

When surveyed, coworkers repeatedly respond that teleworking does not impede the office routine and that the program should be expanded.

Myth: Our employees deal with confidential information so they can't telework.

Fact: Information security is a legitimate concern but telework should not create a significantly greater concern than is currently the case in the office. Telework arrangements should work within existing company policies related to security, restricted access, or other concerns. Additionally, new technology, such as Virtual Private Networks, (VPNs), make security extremely solid and inexpensive.

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