

IT'S TIME TO TELEWORK

The advantages of working out of the office are getting lawmakers' attention.

BY JOE KOLMAN

Janie Bowen is in charge of 900 employees who have one job: collecting all the taxes in Virginia. The tax commissioner cares intensely about completing the task, but worries much less about whether her employees are working in the office or at home.

"If it gets done, I don't care where you do it," says Bowen, an ardent cheerleader of what is known as teleworking or telecommuting—the practice of working outside a traditional office. Her agency—where more than half the employees telework at least one day a week—is at the fore of a statewide effort to increase the number of teleworkers in Virginia.

Rising gas prices, clogged roadways and increased worries about climate change are just some of the reasons advocates say there should be renewed interest in telecommuting from state governments and private employers.

Many states have a law or state agency policy, says Chuck Wilsker of the national Telework Coalition, a group that pushes for telework legislation and opportunities. But some set goals with no follow through or simply "encourage" state government or private businesses to establish telework programs.

"It's one thing to have legislation," Wilsker says, "and it's another to actually have it work."

Through legislation, executive orders and agency rules, state officials are trying to boost the number of people working from home. Some set targets for the percentage of state workers who should telecommute. Some have established tax breaks for employers who implement programs. Virginia is considering small budget cuts for agencies that fail

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to meet telework goals.

"You need at least a large carrot and maybe a small hammer," says Virginia Delegate Tim Hugo, who heads an interim committee on telework. He wants to propose legislation that if an agency does not meet its telecommuting goal, then it loses a small bit of its budget, maybe 1 percent. On the other hand, if an agency meets the goal, it can keep the money it saves. He would also consider a limited tax break for private businesses. Teleworking alone can't solve traffic and environmental problems, he says, but it can be part of the answer.

CUTTING DOWN ON GRIDLOCK

Telecommuting is a relatively untapped resource as a solution to gridlock, says Washington Senator Ken Jacobsen, whose district includes part of Seattle. The senator admits he's from the typewriter and punch clock generation, but he sees advantages in teleworking and says there's broad support for it among his constituents. The average commute on almost every route in the Central Puget Sound area has increased by seven minutes from 2004 to 2006, according to a recent study by the Washington Department of Transportation.

"I can't tell you the number of people who told me if they could just work from home, they wouldn't have to get on the road every day," says Jacobsen, who wants to establish a state board to promote telecommuting. He says dedicating money to promote people working out of the office is cheaper than building new roads to combat congestion.



DELEGATE
TIM HUGO
VIRGINIA

Georgia Representative Chuck Martin is hoping a tax credit he sponsored for teleworking will put a dent in the traffic and air problems that plague the Atlanta area. But he also sees it promoting families and business.

Under the new law, a business may claim up to \$20,000 for costs such as planning and training associated with establishing or expanding a telework program. An additional credit of up to \$1,200 per new teleworker may be granted to pay for such things as computers and telecommunications.

Businesses located in areas with federally designated poor air quality may claim the entire credit for workers who telework 12 days or more a month. Any business that allows an employee to telework at least five days a month may claim up to 25 percent of the credit.

The General Assembly appropriated \$2 million in credits for the 2008 tax year. That is a lot of money, Martin concedes, but it pales in comparison to what the state spends trying to solve traffic problems.

"At the end of the day, it allows our infrastructure to serve more of the economy," Martin says. "One of the many things we can do in our state and in other states is to enable people to solve problems."

EVEN MORE BENEFITS

Advocates say environmental issues aren't the only benefits to keeping people out of the office and working at home or from their local coffee shop. They point to increased productivity, less absenteeism, reduced real estate costs, better employee retention and



SENATOR
KEN JACOBSEN
WASHINGTON



recruitment, and increased work opportunities for rural, elderly and disabled citizens.

The best news, says Wilsker, is that if an employer turns to telework for one reason—say to save on office space—the agency or company is likely to reap many of the other rewards including the perception of being a family friendly workplace.

When you do it for one reason, you get all the others as a bonus,” Wilsker says.

A person working outside an office isn’t new—think about all those traveling business people who check in from the road. And today, it’s easier than ever with advances in computer technology, phone systems that forward calls and allow teleconferencing, unlimited long distance rates and high-speed Internet. In fact, almost no one interviewed for this article was working in a conventional office at the time.



REPRESENTATIVE
CHUCK MARTIN
GEORGIA

But the idea still makes some managers uncomfortable.

“There is a mentality out there of ‘How will I know they are working if I can’t see them?’” says Kayelen Rolfe, the telework programs manager for Arizona. “We ask, ‘How do you know they are working now?’”

Just because someone is sitting in an office at a computer does not mean they are working. Telework advocates say managers should consider productivity.

Arizona has been educating folks about teleworking for a long time. It started a pilot program with AT&T in 1989. Most of the state’s telecommuting has been driven by poor air quality in Maricopa County and executive orders from governors. Last year, the state met the governor-mandated goal of having at least 20 percent of state workers in Maricopa County telecommuting. State officials estimate 175,000 fewer pounds of air pollution have been created, and workers have driven 5 million fewer miles, saving them 181,000 hours of commute time.

TRY AND TRY AGAIN

Legislators say that it takes repeated tries to overcome institutional barriers. Virginia lawmakers in 2001 directed state agencies

to develop telecommuting policies. In 2004, the legislature required that by 2010, each agency should make it a goal to have one quarter of its staff teleworking. In 2006, still seeing a need to be more active, Governor Timothy M. Kaine established the Office of Telework Promotion and Broadband Assistance. One of its main duties is to promote teleworking in the public and private sector.

The jobs of about one-quarter of Virginia state employees are conducive to telecommuting, says Karen Jackson, director of the telework office. But only about one of every five is actually doing it.

“We’re going through an evolution of how agency managers look at their workforce and how the workforce works,” Jackson says. Part of the problem is that managers always underestimate the number of jobs that fit telework. They should be asked instead to document why a particular job does not lend itself to telecommuting, Jackson says.

Hugo was incredulous to learn that the legislative staff for his telecommuting committee was not allowed to telework—until he called attention to it.

“We’ve got to keep pushing and prodding and pleading,” says Hugo, the owner of an Internet-based company with six employees, all of whom work outside of the office.

“Government needs to lead,” says former Maryland Delegate Jean Cryor who was a regular advocate for teleworking in her dozen years as a lawmaker. “It’s so preposterous that we are telling nonprofits and businesses what to do and we don’t do it ourselves.”

Bowen, the Virginia tax commissioner, tackled the challenge from the top down. At the start of the teleworking push, she and her top managers worked from home at least one day a week.

“I insisted that we had to put our money where our mouth was,” Bowen says. “If we can be out of the office one day a week and get stuff done, anybody can be.”

In fact, Bowen and her team found they were able to do more work away from the distractions of the office. That gave them confidence that their employees would be just as productive working from somewhere else.

“This is the least expensive and easiest thing to do to improve productivity and morale at the same time,” Bowen says.

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SAVING ENERGY

Getting cars off the road is an obvious benefit to teleworking. A national study commissioned last year by the Consumer Electronics Association estimated that telecommuting saves enough energy to power 1 million households for a year. The estimated 3.9 million telecommuters saved 840 million gallons of gas. The reduced carbon dioxide emissions were equivalent to removing 2 million cars from the road every year, the study found.

Although those may sound like gaudy numbers, there is much room to grow. Nine out of 10 American workers drive to work, most of them alone. The census also shows that the average American worker spends more than 100 hours a year commuting.

In Arizona, Angela Fischer works from home a couple of days a week. It saves her a 45-minute, 25-mile commute to her Phoenix office. If she's sick, she works from home instead of taking leave. If she needs to drive the kids somewhere, she's away from work

for only an hour or so instead of half a day. As coordinator for the state employees charitable campaign, she uses her telework days for solitary tasks such as phone calls and paperwork. Fischer says that she is so connected at home, it's like she's at the office.

"You can get to all your files," Fischer says. "You can get to your email."

Fisher checks her voice mail every hour so that she has time to concentrate without the phone ringing, but many phone systems can forward an office phone call to another phone.

In Virginia, Bowen needed to hire 20 customer service representatives for the tax agency. Working with state economic development folks, she advertised for teleworkers in Danville, an economically depressed area in the southern part of the state. Normally, she says, these jobs are hard to fill, especially with college-educated workers.

More than 700 people applied for the jobs and every one hired had a college degree. Turnover has been minimal.

"We're just thrilled," Bowen says, adding she has another 30 jobs to fill soon.

THERE ARE LIMITS

Not all jobs are suited for telework. The best are those that include writing, reading, analysis, computer programming, data entry and telephoning. A big component is that managers also need to gauge employees by results, not by direct supervision, Bowen says.

"If you have to see somebody to assess them," Bowen says, "then you have other issues."

Teleworking can be seen as a perk for an employee. But there is an indication that once implemented, managers see it as a normal part of work. A recent Telework Coalition survey of companies and government agencies with large-scale telework programs concluded, "teleworking is nothing special. It is just the way they work and do business." 

 **CHECK OUT** tables of state statutes, bills, and initiatives related to telework as well as additional Internet resources at www.ncsl.org/magazine.

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