

Kitsap Telework Pilot Project

Interviews with Information Technology Managers

During the course of the Telework Pilot Project, it became apparent that telework can be divided into two distinct types and these types have very different technology requirements, and require different technology infrastructure.

Most teleworkers fall into the first type; people who telework once a week or less. Most of these teleworkers can take home enough work to stay busy without a great deal of IT infrastructure support. They may have electronic access to their office files, but more likely take work home on a laptop or flash drive. Often, they view their “telework day” as a chance to concentrate on their most difficult work. Special project work, such as report writing, is often saved for the telework day.

The other type of teleworker is the one that teleworks several days a week or virtually all of the time. They require a higher level of technology support to be productive. To them, telework is just the way they work and they require the same access to data that they would have back in the office. Most also require additional telephone support, particularly if they work with clients from their home office.

As organizations contemplate moving from “limited” telework to having more employees teleworking more frequently, the scaling-up of technology is a major concern. Organizations that take telework seriously, take technology seriously.

Technology is a key component of ensuring that telework works for all involved. For the employer, it is essential for high levels of productivity and the safeguarding of sensitive data, which is becoming increasingly regulated by federal and state authorities. For the employee that teleworks regularly, technology is often what makes doing their job from home or another remote location possible. Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to the question: “what technology do I need for my telework program.”

To better understand this situation, interviews were conducted with six technology managers from both the public and private sectors. Some were new to telework and just beginning to address these issues; others have had telework programs in place for some time. Interviews revealed that every organization is unique and in some instances, so is every function that teleworks. There is no one solution that fits all. To make the appropriate decisions, organizations must have someone in place who understands the technology options. If not, they may benefit from consulting an outside technology expert.

City of Poulsbo – Poulsbo, WA

Lesson Learned: Think carefully about how telework will impact the security of your data.

The City of Poulsbo with just under 100 employees is dipping their toe in the telework pond with a small pilot project involving 3 employees, including the City's IT Manager, Tim Treacher.

Like many other municipalities, City of Poulsbo employees are often engaged in work that requires face-to-face interaction with citizens, making it challenging to find qualified candidates to participate in the telework pilot project. The recent closure of the Hood Canal Bridge became a catalyst for the project as the City's Planning Director lives across the bridge in Jefferson County. By implementing video conferencing using low cost Skype, the Planning Director was able to continue to attend City Council and staff meetings, without having to leave home.

According to Tim Treacher, supporting the telework pilot project was fairly straightforward, as participants were not accessing the City's network directly from home. Eliminating the need to implement a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to securely access City data meant that the additional drain on the IT staff to setup and support the pilot project was minimal.

Going forward, the City of Poulsbo recognizes that ensuring secure access to City data will be a major hurdle to address if the City undertakes a major initiative to implement telework on a broader scale.

The Rainier Group – Bellevue, WA

Lesson Learned: Work out the kinks in your telework program with your most technically savvy staff first.

The Rainier Group, a financial consulting and modeling firm with 20 employees, is preparing for a telework pilot project during which 5 employees will telework regularly from home.

Because telework is integral to The Rainier Group's long-term growth plans, the firm is working hard to put a formal program and the infrastructure in place to scale over time. Five analysts have been selected for the pilot project following an evaluation process to determine their suitability for telework. The evaluation took into account the kind of work performed, whether their personality was suited to telework, and the extent to which they were technically savvy.

According to Glen White, Principal of The Rainier Group, telework would not be on the table if the firm could not get the technology piece right. The Rainier Group's Analysts handle a significant amount of sensitive, proprietary data, making it essential for strong data security controls to be in place. While the teleworkers will be using their own home equipment, The Rainier Group sent a member of the IT staff to the home to install a carefully selected Virtual Private Network (VPN) client on the computer to ensure that it is properly installed.

The only thing holding the firm up from implementing the pilot program? Construction taking place in the firm's building has prevented them from increasing their bandwidth so that they can support the movement of data across the VPN. As soon as the building construction ends and the bandwidth in place, The Rainier Group's telework program will take off.

Perkins Coie – Seattle, WA

Lesson Learned: Don't short change the process of setting up your telework program. Think through how technology can support the business drivers behind telework.

Perkins Coie, an international law firm of 1800 employees, is interested in telework on several fronts—as a benefit to employees, as a way to evaluate hoteling* and reduce office space requirements, and as a way to minimize the company's overall carbon footprint.

The firm is kicking off a three-month pilot program involving 30 administrators from the firm's Seattle headquarters who will telework from home part-time. During the pilot project, the firm plans to test assumptions about telework and gather the data needed to determine if the program will continue and what will be needed to fully support it going forward.

According to the firm's Technology Liaison, Shirley Lindberg, the IT department has been actively involved in identifying the ways that technology can support the business objectives of the telework program. One of the biggest challenges the firm is likely to face will come from the fact that not all teleworkers will be required to use company-issued equipment. If the employee had already been issued a laptop because they traveled, then they would use this laptop when working from home. If not, they will use their own home computer and a web-based Virtual Private Network application to tunnel into the firm's central systems.

Through the pilot project the firm will get a better sense of whether or not telework will work for the company on many fronts, including culturally and from a productivity perspective.

* *"Hoteling" is the practice of reducing office space by having desks or offices that can be reserved (the way you reserve a hotel room) by employees on their office day.*

Kitsap Credit Union – Bremerton, WA

Lesson Learned: One of the biggest challenges of expanding the telework program would be the cost associated with providing technical support to remote workers.

Kitsap Credit Union's telework program has been up and running for several years. Ten people now work from home on a full-time basis and over 50 employees, including members of the senior management and IT staff, are equipped to telework on an ad hoc, as needed basis. The telework program has enabled Kitsap Credit Union to maintain key employees, reduce office space requirements and provide critical staff with the ability to work even if they can't get into the office.

According to IT Manager Jay Bell, technology is essential to the smooth operation of the telework program at Kitsap Credit Union. Teleworkers are provided with company-owned equipment and access their desktop through a Citrix environment, enabling the IT staff to track and monitor activity for security and compliance purposes.

One of the biggest challenges Kitsap Credit Union's IT staff faces is trying to ensure that software is up to date and network vulnerabilities have been addressed, particularly important because teleworkers sometimes operate outside of the Citrix environment. Dealing with home network or ISP issues adds an extra burden to the IT staff's already full plate, and means that they are often dealing with a group of individual computers versus a unified, cohesive network.

Harrington Health – Bothell, WA

Lesson Learned: When it comes to software, you get what you pay for!

What started out as an employee incentive and then a cost saving initiative almost a decade ago has become a way of doing business at Harrington Health. Today, nearly 20% of the employees at Harrington Health's Bothell, WA office telework from home on a full-time basis.

Having the right technology in place has been critical to the success of Harrington Health's telework program. The company's teleworkers are production staff, such as claims processors or medical reviewers. They have all been issued a fully loaded desktop computer with all of the software needed to meet the company's privacy and compliance requirements. Teleworkers are not allowed to install any unauthorized software on their company-issued computer.

According to Operations Manager Lisa Pritchard and System Program Analyst Dave Lowry, the one application that makes the Harrington Health telework program hum is a Virtual Private Network. Initially the company installed a web-based VPN that proved to be unstable and thus unsuitable for the kind of work involved in processing claims. Once a decision was made to invest in and implement a Cisco VPN, network performance issues disappeared and the infrastructure supporting telework has remained stable.

Harrington Health is now thinking through the possibility of extending telework to other functions within the company—particularly now that they have the ability to send someone home with a phone that is connected to the phone system in the Bothell office.

South Kitsap School District – Port Orchard

Lesson Learned: Your technology infrastructure should be tailored to the specific needs of the people engaged in telework.

Implementing a telework program can be a challenge for a school district where so many functions require a physical presence at the administrative offices or on a school campus. At the South Kitsap School District, three of the district's 1200 employees have teleworked from home for about three years. All three teleworkers are members of the IT department, including Derry Lyons the Director of Information Technology Services.

Because of the type of the work that they do, the SKSD has two different architectures in place to support telework. Derry has a District-issued laptop and VPNs into the network directly. His two data specialists use VPN on their home computers to work from their office desktops. This arrangement provides faster response time.

The SKSD continues to evaluate the best technology to support telework now and into the future. As the district's Personnel department thinks about how telework might be expanded to meet specific circumstances or labor requirements, Derry and his team will need to identify the most cost effective and efficient way to address their unique technology needs.