

Mistrust 'number one barrier' to telework

But case studies and research show telework can actually increase productivity

BY SHANNON KLIE

When Asif Rehman, a married father of two young children, first started to work from home two years ago, he did it so he could juggle the demands of work and family.

"It was a good way to get work-life balance to allow me to do the things I have to do professionally but also give me time for my family as well," said Rehman, who is the director of solutions marketing for communications technology company Mitel.

But over time, Rehman found working from his home in Ottawa two days a week helped him get more work done.

"It's easier to be distracted at work," he said. "There are so many things that make me more productive at home."

Mitel was an early adopter of telecommuting and about 40 per cent of its staff teleworkers, said Rehman. But not all Canadian employers are as willing to allow employees to work from home, with 42 of 100 employers surveyed by Mitel in 2007 saying they are worried employees who telework won't be as productive.

"That question of mistrust is probably the number one barrier to telework," said Bob Fortier, president of the Canadian Telework Association.

If managers are really having an issue trusting employees to work when they're at home, then there's a problem with the manager-employee relationship, not telework, said Rehman.

"If you don't trust your employees, whether they're in the office or not you still don't trust your employees," he said.

There are managers who don't believe people can do good and honest work unless they're constantly being observed and monitored, while others don't have the time to learn about telework and how to do it right, said Fortier.

When it comes to telework, there are going to be growing pains as employers figure out how to do it properly and efficiently, he said.

"It's new, we're learning. We have to be patient. In a way, we're looking at two worlds colliding — the industrial revolution colliding with the technology revolution," he said.

Some organizations are willing to try telework on a small scale and if all goes well, they expand the program, said Fortier.

That's exactly what the City of Calgary did from May to October last year when it allowed 100 employees in 10 departments to telework. The employees were chosen carefully for the pilot project to ensure the quality of work wouldn't be affected, said Aundrea Sebjanic, acting wellness business partner with the City.

"Telework was a privilege," said Sebjanic. "It was given to those who had demonstrated positive performance."

Afterward, 95 per cent of supervisors said they felt the productivity of telecommuters was maintained or improved over the six-month pilot program. Employees were also happy with the program, with 95 per cent of teleworkers reporting an improvement in work-life balance and 80 per cent of supervisors and non-teleworking colleagues reporting their stress levels remained the same or even decreased during the pilot.

The city also measured the environmental impact of telecommuting. During the pilot project there were 3,656 fewer commuting trips and employees saved more than 80,000 kilometres in vehicle travel, 18,000 kilograms in carbon dioxide emissions and 7,000 litres of fuel.

Based on the success of the pilot, the City of Calgary wants to roll out a formal, permanent teleworking program and is awaiting budget approval for an implementation and communication plan, said Sebjanic. It hopes to launch the program in early 2009.

Part of the communication plan is to ensure supervisors know how to

manage employees who are working out of the office, said Sebjanic. Some of the guidelines will include how to set performance objectives and metrics, how to stay in touch and agreements to protect sensitive information.

The most important tip for managers is for them to monitor employee performance in the same way as they would if the employee was in the office, said Sebjanic.

"It's just a different location. It's trying to get around that mindset that they're still working, they're just working from home," she said.

As a director at Mitel, Rehman has employees who report to him but, thanks to the technology that helps him stay in touch with his staff and keep track of what they're doing, he doesn't find being away from the office a hindrance to those relationships.

"I can be as much in touch with them in the office as I am from home," he said. And being in the office three days a week gives him the face time he needs with his team.

The positive experiences at the City of Calgary and Mitel aren't unique. An analysis of 46 studies of telecommuting involving 12,833 employees found telecommuting gives

workers more control over their environment, which helps with performance and overall job satisfaction.

"The Good, the Bad, and the Unknown About Telecommuting: Meta-Analysis of Psychological Mediators and Individual Consequences," published in the December 2007 issue of the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, also found telecommuting resulted in less motivation to leave the company, less stress, improved work-life balance and higher performance ratings by supervisors.

The explosive growth of telework in the 1990s, which saw the number of teleworkers increase from 600,000 in 1991 to 1.4 million in 2000, has cooled, according to Statistics Canada. In 2005, the number of Canadian teleworkers dipped slightly to 1.3 million.

However, the prevalence of telework will continue to grow worldwide and companies that don't offer this arrangement are going to miss out on attracting employees — especially the younger ones, said Fortier.

"They will expect both flexibility and the ability to work from anywhere," he said. "When they're in the job market, if you're a company that tells them, 'Sorry, we don't practice that flexibility here,' they'll go elsewhere, right to your competitor."

■ THE RIGHT STUFF

Ensure staff suited to telework

Not all employees are cut out for telework. Bob Fortier, president of the Canadian Telework Association, describes what makes an employee a good telework candidate:

- successful teleworkers tend to be independent and don't need constant supervision or feedback;
- they don't have a high need for continual social interaction or to be with "the gang" at the office;
- they tend to be proven performers in their jobs (poor performers are poor risks);
- they are apt to be self-motivated, well-organized and disciplined in their approach to work;
- they share mutual trust with their managers;
- except for occasional or emergency situations, they don't mix telework with child-care or elder-care responsibilities; and
- they have a good understanding of their own job requirements.