



# Telecommuting: A Guide for Employees and Supervisors Considering Telecommuting

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## INTRODUCTION



Telecommuting is a workplace option that allows work to be done at an alternate work site, such as the home, for one or more days per week. The purpose of this guide is to provide general information about telecommuting.

A generally accepted definition of telecommuting is:

***"...the partial or total substitution of telecommunications or computer technology for the daily commute to work."***

Telecommuting has many variations and is referred to by numerous terms, but in general:

- **Telecommuting** is done up to four days a week, and allows for time in the central office.
- **Telework** has come to mean working from home or an alternate location *all the time*.
- **Virtual Office** refers to work that does not necessarily take place at the same alternate site, e.g., someone with a cellular phone, laptop computer with FAX capabilities, and voice mail can work *virtually* anywhere.

### **Potential Benefits of Telecommuting**

- Increase performance
- Increase productivity
- Increase job satisfaction
- Reduce absenteeism
- Lower employee turnover

- Reduce energy consumption
- Empower employees to operate at their full potential
- Employees have more control of their work environment
- Encourage flexible working hours and potential savings in time and money
- Reduce the frequency and distance of commuting to work
- Potential savings in utilities, office rental, and parking
- Reduce demand on our transportation system
- Reduce pollution
- Save energy resources

Working at home is more attractive today than ever before and has proven to be an effective tool in attracting and retaining employees in an ever-competitive marketplace.

### **MANAGEMENT SUPPORT**

**For a telecommuting program to succeed it must have management support.** When supervisors see the potential benefits of telecommuting they are generally supportive. Telecommuting is a paradigm shift in thinking about the workplace and supervision. Some supervisors are reluctant to allow telecommuting because it is a change in the way they think, work, and act. Those supervisors who support telecommuting are rewarded by the many benefits of the program.



### **COMPUTERS**

Throughout this guide are references to computers, which are an integral part of most office environments today. Many employees have personal computers in their homes. Telecommuting takes advantage of computers, telephones, and other electronic means of rapid communication.

Although the telecommuting program encourages use of new communication and workplace technology, **a computer is not needed to telecommute** unless it is essential to the work performed. Some employees may need a telephone to meet their work requirements. Be creative in deciding what equipment is needed at home. Decide how much of that equipment the employer is willing and able to provide. Then decide how it is to be provided and who maintains it. Consider versatile programs such as sharing notebook computers on telecommuting days. Look at the organizations' purchasing practices for opportunities like buying more notebook computers with "docking stations."

### **TELECOMMUTING AGREEMENT**

The Agreement specifies the terms and conditions of telecommuting, which includes verification by the employee that the home office affords workspace that is free of safety and fire hazards. In the Agreement, the employee holds the employer harmless against any and all claims except workers' compensation claims, resulting from an employee working in the home office. The Agreement also highlights the importance of effective communication between the



employee and supervisor. Both must **understand expectations** in areas such as performance and work hours. The Agreement documents the responsibilities of the employee and supervisor, establishes work hours, and contains a home office checklist. (See end of this document.)

The Agreement is signed and agreed to by the telecommuter and the supervisor. It establishes and **communicates** the basic working conditions for the program. The Agreement is a supplemental document that relates to telecommuting and does not alter any other University policies or contracts under which the employee is already governed.

In addition to signing the Agreement, there should be thorough discussion between the employee and supervisor about how future communication should occur. There may be other needs to which the employee and supervisor should be alert. The discussion should **include short- and long-term goals** and how often the goals are reviewed, updated and evaluated.

### **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**

Most government agencies and private businesses are looking at how they can comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other laws relating to employment of persons with disabilities. In some situations, telecommuting can provide a method of accommodating employees with special needs, such as those covered by ADA. Whether or not telecommuting is a reasonable accommodation is a decision that will be made by the University on a case by case basis after evaluating all of the circumstances in a particular case.

### **Teleworking**

Telecommuting can be a reasonable option for employees and employers that is a mixture of working at home and at the office with varying amounts of time spent at either location. There are circumstances where working from home, with no **routinely** scheduled time in the office, may be a desired option. This is a particularly attractive option when the employee and office are located great distances from each other. This guide does not promote one option over the other, but focuses on telecommuting because it has the greatest potential use in most office work situations.

**Telecommuting and teleworking are work options that are here to stay. They will steadily gain in popularity.** Organizations that offer telecommuting as a work option have a competitive advantage over those that do not.

## **SELECTION**

The next step in implementing a telecommuting program is to identify job categories (not individuals) with work that can be performed at an alternate work site. Some considerations are:

- Job requirements that accommodate working away from the office for one or more days each week
- Predictable contact with other employees and "clients"

- Identifiable portions of the job which can be done outside the office
- Work that can be accomplished just as well inside or outside the office

Typical categories considered for telecommuting may include:

Accountant	Editor
Administrative Assistant	Engineer
Auditor	Financial Analyst
Contract Administrator	Programmer
Data Analyst	Researcher
Data Entry Operator	Systems Analyst



**This list is only a limited sample of categories that may be considered for telecommuting.** There are many administrative and support positions which are not listed. **As a rule of thumb, if someone can close their office door for eight hours, without the need for face-to-face contact, then consider the job for telecommuting.** If someone can "cluster" their work into eight hours not requiring face-to-face contact, they too might be a candidate for telecommuting.

### Employee Selection

**Telecommuting does not suit everyone.** Employees with the following characteristics generally make good telecommuters:

- Volunteer for the program
- Self-motivated
- Satisfactory performance evaluations
- History of dependability
- Function independent of direct supervision
- Can deal with isolation
- Well organized with good time management skills
- Have an appropriate home worksite that includes privacy and lack of distraction
- Have an adequate level of job skills and knowledge
- Prefer the home environment
- Moderately people oriented
- Proven good work habits
- Views telecommuting as an alternative to the traditional work environment

### Supervisor Selection

The supervisor must believe that telecommuting can work and be willing to develop realistic performance goals for the employee. Supervisory support and involvement is essential for a successful program. The supervisor must support telecommuting and adapt management styles to continue providing effective guidance. Telecommuting is not a reduction of

responsibility. Participation in a telecommuting program requires good communication and management skills.

### **Selection Overview**

The process of participant selection generally follows these steps:

1. **Selection.** Managers and direct supervisors of potential telecommuters select the participants.
2. **Complete Agreement.** Employees and supervisors selected to participate complete an "Agreement" and begin telecommuting.
3. **Follow-up.** Participants have periodic training to update them on telecommuting skills, and participate in periodic evaluations of the program. There should be continuous improvement with an eye toward value-added changes.

### **Not Every Job is Right for Telecommuting**

Some positions require the use of equipment, such as a personal computer or terminal, that can be moved to an alternate location with reasonable ease. Other positions require the employee to be at a specific work area or require equipment and information not easily taken to an alternate location. Some employees and some jobs are just not suited for this work alternative. Like any cooperative program, careful selection and candid communication are essential elements to success.

## **INFORMATION FOR THE TELECOMMUTER**



To be a successful telecommuter, it's necessary to work with less structure and more freedom in completing responsibilities.

**Telecommuting isn't as simple as staying at home and working. It requires careful planning and discipline.**

**Get organized.** Having good work habits from the moment telecommuting begins makes it easy to complete work away from the office.

**The Location.** Identify a safe location in the home as workspace. There is no need to devote an entire room for the office at home. Some telecommuters have successfully developed a part of an existing room, a basement room or an attic for their workstation. Locate the workstation away from distractions. Working on the couch in front of the TV doesn't work! There is more information about the home office later in the guide.



**Set a Routine.** Set a work schedule for telecommuting days and stick to it. The Agreement has an attachment for defining work hours. Begin and finish work at the same time on telecommuting days. This helps set a routine.

**Replace the Ritual of Getting Ready for Work.** Telecommuters will no longer have the traditional office rituals of morning conversations or coffee. Even the drive to work that

symbolizes the beginning of the workday is missing. Set up new rituals for telecommuting days. Some telecommuters actually leave their house, go around the block, return, and begin the workday. Others play specific music or begin working after a morning exercise session or bike ride. Each worker should find a ritual that will work for them.

**Make a Daily "Things-to-Do" List.** Develop a list of goals and assignments for telecommuting days. At the end of the day, go over the list and see how much has been accomplished. It's helpful to start the list a couple of days before telecommuting. This helps to plan for all the resources needed to support activities at home. Remember there may not be access to a FAX, copier, or even a computer at home. Plan the work accordingly.

**Have an End of the Day Ritual.** It's a good practice to have a ritual in place to mark the end of the work day. Be creative in deciding what to do.

- Turn off the computer and the lights.
- Close the door.
- Turn on the TV.
- Walk around the block.
- Pick up the children from school or day care.
- Change clothes.



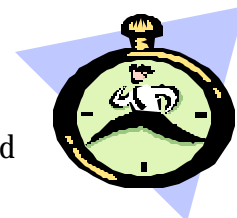
**Managing the Work.** As a telecommuter, it's necessary to manage work efficiently. It's up to the telecommuter to make sure they keep well informed and continue with a high level of performance.

**Maintain Contact with the Office.** Be sure to stay in touch with the office during telecommuting days. Try establishing a buddy system with a trusted colleague or a secretary in the office who can be called once or more a day. Frequently call the office or voice mail for messages and return phone calls. Don't fall out of touch when telecommuting. Decide early in the day how accessible to be. There may be the luxury of working for three or four hours without any interruptions.

**Voice Mail.** Voice mail is an invaluable telecommuting tool. If there is no access to voice mail in the office, consider using an answering machine while working at home. It will enable storing messages when unavailable. Decide if the office will tell callers to contact the telecommuters directly at home.

**Set up a System at Home.** Develop a system for organizing the work that will be done at home. Without the time to organize resources and materials there will be trails of paper and stacks of references everywhere!

**Stick to Deadlines.** While telecommuting, follow the same rules for deadlines as in the office. **Don't miss deadlines.** When mailing reports to the office, send them so they arrive the day they're due or earlier. When sending work electronically (by modem or FAX) it should also arrive on time.



**Keep the Supervisor Informed.** The telecommuter needs to keep supervisors informed about the status of projects, progress, and any difficulty encountered. **Supervisors are clients that need information on a timely basis.**

**Attend Gatherings.** Attend office gatherings and group meetings. Don't become invisible because of telecommuting.

**Train Family Members, Friends, and Neighbors.** As a serious telecommuter, consider the work seriously. Be careful not to create a bad image for telecommuters. Train the people at home so there are not too many interruptions.

**What Interruptions are OK?** Determine what questions, favors, and needs may cause interruptions. Develop ground rules for the family to follow about interruptions while working remotely at home. Some telecommuters have their family determine the rules to insure participation in the process. A family meeting is a prime opportunity to raise some of these issues. The rules should be understood by neighbors and friends. *Remain flexible.* Sometimes an errand may be the perfect break you need.

**Office Supplies.** Develop an understanding with family members about how office materials are used. Tell them what office supplies are for business only. The worker may want the work space to be off limits to other members in the household.

**Don't Telecommute if There are Problems at Home.** Avoid telecommuting on days when there may be friction at home such as family quarrels or problems. If there is an elderly family member, an infant, or a toddler needing care, it will be difficult to telecommute and complete any work. Wait until additional help arrives to take care of those needing help before starting to telecommute.

**Telecommuting is Not a Replacement for Child or Elder Care.** Don't assume working at home means the ability to take care of children. There is more flexibility in accommodating child care needs; however, it not a replacement for child care. When taking care of children and being a telecommuter, there are two jobs instead of one! This may preclude handling the job in a professional manner.

The same is often true when older family members can benefit from someone being home with them. The key is how much time and how many distractions occur because of this care. Elder care, when balanced with work needs, can be a powerful benefit of telecommuting.

**These are areas that can bring the most benefit to the employee and their family, and in turn benefit the employer, but also requires the most careful thought.** The needs of the workplace must be met and expectations and the ability to do the job fully understood. To succeed, there is the need for crafting a realistic and balanced accommodation. Too much compromise on the part of the employee or employer will lead to problems and failure of the Agreement.

## **A Look at the Home Office**

Most employees can create a temporary work area in their home that is adequate. However, for telecommuting to work there is a need to provide an office space with control over noise, interruptions, work equipment, and materials.

### **Criteria**

Consider these basic criteria in organizing the home office:

- An environment that is free of safety and fire hazards
- An environment that promotes good work
- Adequate work space
- Access to telephone or electrical outlets
- Security and safety of work materials
- Separation from on-going domestic activities
- Temperature, sound and light control



Many professionals whose work is task-oriented can work at home for the duration of a specific project. Those workers may continue informal practices like taking a portable computer home and preparing the work on the dining table. For the purposes of this guide, they are not telecommuters. **The practice of occasionally working at home should not be discouraged. It requires a less formal work setting in the home, and is already an established informal work practice.**

The occasional telecommuter is someone who infrequently may find it beneficial to work from home for a few days during a specific project. This can be worked out informally with the supervisor.

**A telecommuter works from a home office on a regular basis of one or more days each week. The telecommuter enters into a formal arrangement by qualifying for the program and signing an Agreement.**

When telecommuting is an established ongoing program, the home office needs to be more formal. If the employer goes to the expense of providing telephone lines and other office equipment, the home office should be upgraded by the employee to facilitate uninterrupted work.

### **Liability/Cost**

The employer is not liable for damages to the employee's property that result from participation in the telecommuting program. This is clearly stated in the Agreement. The employer is not responsible for the cost of utilities or home maintenance unless the employer specifically elects to provide this compensation.

**At the home office, the employee is covered under the workers' compensation law when performing official duties.**

To allow the employee and supervisor to be comfortable with the home office, a checklist for the supervisor and employee to use in evaluation of the home workspace is helpful. (See the checklist at the end of this document.)

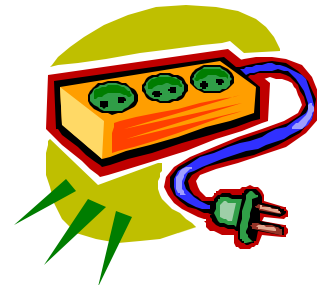


**Space Considerations - Setting Up a Territory.** A major requirement for the telecommuter is enough dedicated space in the home to support work-related activities.

A spare room can be closed off from the rest of the house, or part of a room can be reserved for job-related work. The work setting should be large enough to accommodate files, computer equipment, shelves, and if needed, lockable cupboards. Those workers living alone can work almost anywhere equipped with the necessary electrical and telephone outlets. Those sharing a household must reach some accommodation with the rest of the family. **Face-to-face business contacts are done at the official office, not in the home.** Being open about the space needed to work at home is the first step in gaining the cooperation of others in the household.

Without dedicated space for the telecommuter there may be problems integrating work with other family activities. This does not prevent the use of the work area for other family purposes during non-working hours. The telecommuter may have a piece of furniture that encloses the computer, monitor and printer, opens up for work, and folds out-of-the way at other times.

**Telephone and Electrical Outlets.** Expenses to prepare a home for telecommuting may include installation of grounded outlets, a telephone jack, or an additional telephone line. For those jobs requiring a computer, a grounded outlet is important in order to protect the employee. Newer residential construction will likely have three-prong outlets. Older homes may need these or other grounding methods added. This is an expense which the University does not normally pay for its employees.



There should be a surge protector between the electrical outlet and any computer to protect the equipment from faulty electrical fluctuations. The University's policy is that no University-owned computer equipment may be used in the home office without a surge protector, which may be provided by the employing department. A work telephone line will be necessary if the employee uses the phone to connect to another computer. This is even more important when other household members need the home phone. Installation of a separate line may be required for jobs involving a high volume of telephone calls to or from the home office.



**Telephones.** A business telephone should be installed in the telecommuter's home when necessary for successful telecommuting. The need for the phone should be determined by the supervisor in discussions with the telecommuter. The local telephone company can help with information to comply with Public Service Commission tariffs for residential and business service. This generally does not apply to occasional calls between the telecommuter and supervisor, but does apply when the

telephone is an essential element of the work product. Examples of the criteria used to establish employer provided phone needs are:

- Use of the telecommuter's personal phone is not possible due to personal needs (other family members, etc.).
- It is necessary to make long distance calls on a regular basis, making it impractical to reimburse the employee (a employer provided calling card may solve this problem on a limited basis).
- An on-line computer connection is necessary that requires constant access to the phone.

**The employer-provided telephone is for work-related use and should be protected from unauthorized use.**

Call forwarding, voice mail, a telephone answering machine, or electronic mail may be required for efficient job performance.

**Security and Safety.** In homes where a spare room can be converted for home work, a lock on the door or even a well-trained family may be adequate protection for files, materials left out on a desk, and equipment. If the work is performed in a shared space, the employee must habitually store all work items in a protected place. This might be a closet, cupboard, or table located in such a way that property is not misplaced, lost, thrown away, or harmed. All records, papers, and correspondence should be safeguarded for their return to the official work location. Computerized files should be similarly protected.



**Sound Control.** Protection of the telecommuter from household noise and the household from the telecommuter is important for a harmonious work environment. The noise of a printer should be anticipated before setting up an office in the bedroom or anywhere that its noise will disturb other family members. Unlike the situation in many open office environments, telecommuters can often insulate themselves by closing doors.

*Some noises are good.* A completely noise-free environment can be stressful. Background noise, like music, can be beneficial in maintaining productivity and reducing boredom.

*Some noises are not so good.* Noises such as a barking dog, crying children, the television, a lawn mower, or vacuum cleaner can affect your professional image when heard by others as you talk on the phone. These noises also disrupt concentration. Closing a door, or using a privacy screen or room divider may help.

**Maintaining the Work Environment**

Working in offices evolved for a reason. Going to work separates us from all but the most urgent non-work responsibilities. Establishing an office environment in the home poses a problem in adjusting the physical environment and adopting an alternative work style. The employee, household members, and neighbors must believe the telecommuter is at work. A three-year-old's demand for attention is hard to ignore. Limited double duty is a benefit of

being at home. Accepting a delivery at the door is a more efficient use of time than driving from the office to meet a delivery. The employee is substituting a new set of interruptions at the home office for those they have become accustomed to at the office. Interruptions can be managed to allow productive telecommuting.

### **The Message: At Home But Working**

Interruptions require imaginative solutions. It may be necessary to hire supplemental child care and insist that the employee is not to be disturbed while "at work". The neighbors should be reminded not to drop in. There are no hard and fast rules. It is the employee's responsibility to make whatever adjustments are necessary to **do the job on time and up to standard.**



It's important to advise family members and neighbors that the employee is working while at home and continues to have responsibilities and tasks which need to be completed. The worker has the same objectives, goals, and deadlines as in the office. The difference is that part of the work assignments are done at home.

**Supervisor Visits.** When agreed to by the telecommuter, the supervisor may inspect the telecommuting location to be sure proper maintenance of any employer-provided equipment is performed. At least 24-hours advanced notice of the inspection should be given to employees. The visits are during normal (telecommuting) work hours. In most cases no surprise visits should be allowed. While not required, a supervisor's visit can help both parties remain comfortable with the telecommuting Agreement when the visit is mutually agreed upon.

### **Equipping the Home Office**

The office at home should be equipped with furniture and lighting appropriate to the tasks performed. High productivity cannot be expected from a worker stressed by aching arms and back, strained eyes and ears, or other discomforts. Special attention must be given to employees working in home offices at computer monitors. Poor positioning of the keyboard and screen relative to the worker's body can cause extreme fatigue.

To effectively perform their assigned tasks, University employees are allowed to use University equipment at the home office, based upon the approval of their supervisor. The equipment must be protected against damage and unauthorized use. University-owned equipment is serviced and maintained by the department. Employees may use their own equipment. Maintenance of personal equipment is up to the employee.

**Lighting.** A computer user should be aware of the light levels in the work area. Too much light or light striking the screen at the wrong angle can glare, causing eye strain and fatigue. Non-glare filters over the monitor screen may diminish fatigue.



**Furniture.** Specially designed furniture or modules are available to create a workstation. The furniture depends on the permanence and size of the workspace. In a home with a dedicated room, the furniture can duplicate a conventional office, with a permanent desk, printer stand, telephone table, side chairs, etc. In a temporary installation, or

in a small apartment, all the telecommuting equipment may be portable, storable, and can be moved to a corner or closet during non-working hours.

**Desk.** The desk, table, or stand on which a computer will be placed should have the following characteristics:

- A surface (typically 26 1/2" from the floor) that places the keyboard at a comfortable height for keying (such that the telecommuter's forearms are horizontal)
- A depth (usually 24" minimum) sufficient for the computer and monitor
- A stand, the top of the microcomputer, or shelf, etc., that positions the monitor at a comfortable angle with the eyes (usually the center of the screen should be 20 degrees down from eye level)
- Surface space for working materials. Depending on the space available, this can be a full-sized desk or a storable unit that has a footprint of 2 feet by 2 feet. The unit may have arms that unfold to form a working space that meets telecommuter's space requirements. Full-size and storable computer desks are now widely available through commercial sources

**Printer Stand.** The printer can be placed on the computer desk, on a stand designed for that purpose, or on a surface with the following characteristics:

- Sturdy construction to support the weight of the printer without vibration
- Height that allows the telecommuter to adjust the paper and controls while seated at the computer

Printout paper can be fed from its original carton placed on the floor or on a shelf designed for that purpose.

**Computers.** If it is necessary for the employee to have access to a personal computer and no alternatives are available, appropriate equipment can be provided at the discretion of the supervisor for the telecommuting location. Care must be taken to be sure the computer and the data it contains are kept in a safe environment that limits access to authorized users for official business. If an employee's personal computer is used, access to employer information must be safeguarded and preferably stored on a separate medium (such as a disk). The information should be periodically transferred (backed up) to the official office. Computer disks must be placed where they will not be exposed to heat or magnetic fields.

In order to participate in the program some potential telecommuters may require the use of data terminal equipment (DTE), or personal computers, to communicate with host computers. Insofar as possible, uploading and downloading data and minimizing online time, should be practiced.

**Workspace.** Space must be provided for working materials, a telephone, external modem, or whatever peripheral equipment and supplies are required for the tasks to be performed. Manuals and other computer supplies may be stored on or near the desk.



When space increases from a storable unit to a full-size desk, the freedom to have a permanent storage space for those items increases. For example, some telecommuters might need to have a table to support a computer plotter or other specialized equipment for their jobs. Each home situation presents a unique case that can be visualized by drawing a scale floor plan of the workspace. Scaled cutouts of the furniture/storage modules, etc., can be placed on the plan. Various configurations can be tested by the telecommuter to see which meets the overall comfort and use requirements.

We have provided a fair amount of information on computer support. It is also worth repeating: Some employees do not need a computer to telecommute. **The computer is a tool that makes telecommuting more effective, just like it makes work in the office more effective.**

**Chair.** A chair in which the worker sits for long periods at a desk or computer must be of the correct height and give complete lumbar support. An adjustable ergonomic chair is desirable. This may be the most important piece of furniture in the home office. The seat should be adjustable, and 15-18 inches from the floor. The backrest should be adjustable for height and angle and should provide support at the waist. Armrests should provide support but not be in the way.

## INFORMATION FOR SUPERVISORS

**Management Skills.** The same management skills used to manage employees working in the office apply to the telecommuter.

- **Help telecommuters organize their work.** Understand the timeframe involved in completing tasks and the resources required to see projects through to completion. Use planning skills as a supervisor to be successful in distributing work among employees.
- **Work assignments.** Set up a means of communicating the expected end product as well as the due date. Discuss the expected quality and other criteria that might affect the successful completion of tasks the employees will be working on.



Communicate to employees what needs to be done, when it needs to be done, and who needs to do it. The communication may take the form of a phone call, a weekly meeting, or memo. Use whatever means of communication is most comfortable. **The time a supervisor spends communicating with the telecommuters will dictate the caliber of work produced.** Spend time communicating clearly and concisely the expectations of supervisors.

- **Timetables.** Work with your employees to develop attainable and timely goals. Telecommuters who clearly understand what the workload is will be more focused in their work if they are following a timetable. The timetable lists tasks for completion. It also notes the time that they should be finished.

- **Review work status.** Set up intermediate periods to determine the progress of the tasks the telecommuter is performing. The assessment may be at designated points during the program, upon completion of certain tasks, or on a recurring basis, such as once a week on Monday.
- **Coach and develop employees' capabilities.** There is limited time to spend with remote employees to reinforce behavior. Make the most of that time. Always reinforce positive behavior. Bring unsatisfactory performance to the employee's attention immediately. Develop employee capabilities to correct deficiencies. Use all the communication tools available to you to provide your employees with timely feedback. The feedback may be via voice mail, electronic mail, a phone call, or a face-to-face conversation.

Supervisors are generally familiar with these skills and use them while overseeing employees in the office. Refining these management skills will not only benefit off-site workers, but supervisors and telecommuters as well. **Organization leads to increased job satisfaction.**

**Management Methods.** Management of employees from a remote location isn't new. To insure successful telecommuting, be aware of the following tips and traps:

- **Close supervision is not always good supervision.** Good supervision is achieved without being close in proximity.
- **Be patient.** Some supervisors initially resist managing employees at a remote location.
- **Manage for performance and results instead of managing by observation.** A common question is "How do I know when someone is working?" The answer lies in the management method now used to measure performance. Effective supervisors do not equate presence with performance.
- **It's alright to drop out of the program.** The telecommuting arrangement must be mutually supportive.
- **Some organizational hints:**
  - Prepare an itemized list of what is expected from the employee. This list can be on a weekly, monthly, or quarterly basis. Use the flexibility of establishing objectives in a format that will be easy to administer.
  - Include the telecommuter in the process of establishing objectives. This enables the employee to make a valuable contribution concerning the accomplishment of the expectations.
  - Track the results. If you set up weekly goals, schedule a meeting each week to review the telecommuter's accomplishments. Use this as a dynamic document, capable of changing when necessary. This will enable you and the telecommuter to determine success. Employees feel they have more control over their destiny when they can track their success.
  - One method to measure individual productivity is the product produced. **A better measure is performance in reaching the organization or team goal.** A supervisor who focuses on the process will generally be rewarded by

a better product. In measuring the performance of the telecommuter, consider the quality of work in reaching organizational goals rather than just counting beans.

## ISSUES

**Technology and how to use it.** Communication technology provides efficient means to communicate with the telecommuter. Some of the current technologies that have already been mentioned are:

- Telephone
- Voice Mail
- Electronic Mail (E-mail)
- Pagers
- Facsimile Machines (Fax)
- Cellular Phones
- Video/Data Links
- Automatic Call Distribution (ACD)
- Customer Local Area Signaling Services (CLASS)
- Integrated Services Digital Networks (ISDN)



### **The non-telecommuter in a Telecommuting Environment.**

Issues for consideration are:

- **Managing the Employees Who Aren't Telecommuting.** After identifying the potential participants in a telecommuting program, work carefully with the non-telecommuters to avoid feelings of resentment. Resentment can form about "Why was that person chosen instead of me?" Be prepared to discuss the rationale of why one employee was chosen to participate instead of another employee. There may be non-telecommuting employees who have been excluded from participating in the program due to job performance. Consider a plan to help these employees raise their job performance to a level that allows them to participate in the program. It's up to the supervisor to communicate this information to employees.
- **Team Effort.** The non-telecommuters are as critical to the program's effectiveness as the telecommuters. The work group is successful due to the efforts of all members of the team.
- **Support Strategies.** The non-telecommuters should not be expected to do extra work in the office while the telecommuters are working from their home office. Establish mutual strategies to support the non-telecommuters and the telecommuters:
  - Provide guidelines for contacting the telecommuter when an issue arises in the office that requires immediate action. Don't expect the non-telecommuters to work on their own assignments and also handle problems for the telecommuters who are working at home.

- Establish guidelines for answering the telecommuter's phone while they are telecommuting. Include the secretaries and receptionists in the process of deciding what they will say in answering the phone. Refrain from advising incoming callers: "Ms. Jones is at home today." For example, use the phrase: "Ms. Jones is unavailable. I'll be happy to have her return your call as soon as she is available."
  - Establish guidelines for the telecommuters to call the office at regular intervals. Determine whether it will be the telecommuter's responsibility to call the secretary for messages, or if it will be the secretary's responsibility to call the telecommuter. Provide support staff with the home phone numbers of telecommuters. Forwarding the telecommuters' lines to voice mail is one method of handling calls. This insures that calls are answered without adding extra work for the support staff. Consider forwarding calls to the home office phone.
  - Consider keeping a log of the incoming calls answered by the support staff for the telecommuter. This will assist in determining how much extra work has been generated as a result of the telecommuting program. The log will also provide documentation showing when the call came into the office, and when it was given to the telecommuter.
- **Social Network.** It helps when non-telecommuters understand that the social interaction within the office will change with the start of telecommuting. Co-workers whom they share coffee breaks and lunch hours with may no longer be available to spend that time with them. The non-telecommuters may experience a quieter office after the program begins.
  - **Contingency Plans.** Set up a Murphy's Law strategy to guide the work group through "what if" events that may affect the group as a result of telecommuting. Encourage the telecommuters and non-telecommuters to participate in this process.
  - **What Happens if it's NOT Working?** Not everyone who tries telecommuting is successful. Some reasons why the telecommuter may need to end his/her participation in the program may be:
    - Uncontrollable distractions
    - The neighbors and the family just don't understand that an employee at home is unavailable for other activities.
    - "Cabin fever"
    - Being at home 24 hours a day becomes unacceptable
    - The employee's productivity or the quality of the employee's work has declined since participating in the telecommuting program.
    - Desire or need to be around people
    - The employee discovers the need for social interaction is a critical factor in work life.
    - Work conditions, or the work to be done, has changed.

Each supervisor should remain aware that there are many good reasons why employees may have to end their participation in telecommuting. Help employees understand their value to the organization. Bring the employee back into the office as quickly as possible. Use this as a developmental opportunity to coach the employee in an area of weakness and create an area of strength from that weakness.

**A Bright Future for Telecommuters.** A key concern for telecommuters is that they will have less visibility in the office. This may impact upward mobility in the organization. Here are some points to help the supervisor in maintaining higher visibility for telecommuters:

- **Monitor employee performance.** Look for above-average performance among the telecommuters.
- **Encourage your employees to set higher goals.** Assign more complex projects that will aid in developing your employee's skills.
- **Communicate.** Advise upper management of the telecommuter's achievements.
- **Insure visibility.** Take advantage of "opportunity assignments" and have the telecommuters participate in those assignments. When the opportunity arises for presentations, be sure to include the telecommuters.

Remember to think about telecommuters even if they are not in the office. **Out of sight should not be out of mind!**

**Supervisor's Summary.** Always keep in mind that good communication skills are the backbone of a successful telecommuting program.

- Talk to the telecommuter.
- Use effective listening skills when exchanging information with off-site workers.
- Include the telecommuter in office activities even when they are not there. For example, include telecommuters on speakerphone when you sing happy birthday to someone in the office. This will make your telecommuters feel like they're part of the day-to-day world of your organization.
- Frequent communication with your telecommuters enables you, as the supervisor, to maintain the appropriate guidance and direction your employees need and expect.
- Keep the avenue open for reciprocal communications from telecommuters. This will help the telecommuters to avoid feelings of isolation.
- Bring telecommuters back into the office frequently. As a supervisor, you can assign core days for telecommuters to be in the office. The core days are opportunities for staff meetings.



A telecommuting program is extremely flexible. Take advantage of that flexibility, and it can help achieve success in telecommuting and the benefits of increased performance, productivity and employee morale.

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# Michigan State University Telecommuting Program



## CHECKLIST FOR THE HOME OFFICE

This checklist is for use by the telecommuter in assessing the adequacy of the home office environment. The success of the telecommuting arrangement depends on a realistic assessment of the workspace, and the ability of the employee to successfully complete their work in this environment. If the workspace is not adequate, the telecommuting Agreement will not work. The telecommuter will need to assess the home office space to ensure the space is adequate, safe and hazard free. For example:

- Does the space seem adequately ventilated?
  - Is the space reasonably quiet and free of distractions?
  - Are all the stairs with four or more steps equipped with handrails?
  - Are all circuit breakers and/or fuses in the electrical panel labeled as to intended service?
  - Do circuit breakers clearly indicate if they are in open or closed position?
  - Is all electrical equipment free of recognized hazards that would cause physical harm (e.g., frayed wires, bare conductors, loose wires, flexible wires running through walls, exposed wires fixed to the ceiling)?
  - Are electrical outlets three-pronged (grounded)?
  - Is the computer equipment connected to a surge protector?
  - Are aisles, doorways, and corners free of obstructions to permit movement?
  - Are file cabinets and storage closets arranged so drawers and doors do not open into walkways?
  - Is the space crowded with furniture?
  - Are the phone lines, electrical cords, and extension wires secured under a desk or alongside the baseboard?
  - Are floor surfaces clean, dry, level, and free of worn or frayed seams?
  - Are carpets well secured to the floor, and free of frayed or worn seams?
  - Is there a fire extinguisher in the home, easily accessible from the office space?
  - Is there a working smoke detector detectable from the workspace?
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**Michigan State University  
Telecommuting Program  
TELECOMMUTING AGREEMENT**

This is an Agreement between \_\_\_\_\_ (department)

and \_\_\_\_\_ (employee)

and covers the period from \_\_\_\_\_ through \_\_\_\_\_.

**This Agreement establishes the terms and conditions of participation in a telecommuting program.**

The employee volunteers to participate in the telecommuting program and to follow the applicable guidelines and policies. The employer agrees to allow the employee to participate in a telecommuting arrangement pursuant to this Agreement.

**Duration:** This Agreement will be valid for the time period indicated above or until canceled by either party.

**Work Hours:** Work hours and location are specified as part of this Agreement.

**Employee Benefits:** The employee's benefits (pay, leave, etc.) will not be altered because of the employee's participation in the telecommuting program. Employee benefits will continue to be based on the employee's job classification and applicable University policies, contracts, and employment documents.

**Leave:** Employees must obtain supervisory approval before taking leave in accordance with established office procedures. The employee agrees to follow established procedures for requesting and obtaining approval of leave.

**Overtime:** The employee will continue to work in pay status while working at the home office. An employee working overtime, ordered and approved in advance, will be compensated in accordance with applicable law and rules. The employee understands that the supervisor will not accept work products resulting from unapproved overtime. The employee agrees that failing to obtain proper approval for overtime work may result in removal from the telecommuting program or other appropriate disciplinary action.

**Equipment:** The supervisor and the employee must agree upon the equipment to be used in telecommuting. The University is not required to provide equipment for the home office; however, with the approval of the supervisor, the telecommuter may be provided University-owned equipment necessary to perform work assignments.

**University- Owned Equipment (list - including telecommunication services):**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

**Maintenance of Equipment:** Equipment provided by the employer will be serviced and maintained by the employer except for service or damage arising out of negligence or unauthorized use. Equipment provided by the employee will be at no cost to the employer, and will be maintained by the employee.

**Cost:** The employer will not be responsible for operating costs, home maintenance, or any other incidental costs (e.g., utilities) associated with the use of the employee's residence. The employee does not forfeit the right to be reimbursed for authorized expenses incurred while conducting official business for the employer.

**Liability:** The employer will not be liable for damages to the employee's property resulting from participation in the telecommuting program. In signing this document, the employee agrees to hold the University harmless against any and all claims, excluding workers' compensation claims, arising out of the employee's participation in the telecommuting program.

**Workers' Compensation:** The employee is covered by workers' compensation if injured in the course of performing official duties at the telecommuting location.

**Verification of Home Safety:** In signing this Agreement, the employee verifies that the home office provides workspace that is free of safety and fire hazards.

**Work Assignments:** The employee will meet with the supervisor to receive assignments and to review completed work as deemed necessary by the supervisor. The employee will complete all assigned work according to established unit procedures.

**Performance Evaluation:** The evaluation of the employee's job performance will be based on established standards. Performance must remain satisfactory to

remain a telecommuter. Employees will not be allowed to telecommute while on a performance improvement plan (PIP).

**Records:** The employee will apply safeguards that are approved by the employer to protect records from unauthorized disclosure or damage. All records, papers and correspondence must be safeguarded for their return to the office.

**Termination of the Agreement:** The employer may terminate this arrangement at any time for any reason.

**Work Hours and Location:** The following are the locations and working hours and locations which are agreed to as a part of the Telecommuting Agreement:

**Official Work Location:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Telecommuting Location:**

\_\_\_\_\_

The employee agrees to work at the office or telecommuting location, and not from another unapproved site. Failure to comply with this provision may result in termination of the Agreement, and/or other appropriate disciplinary action.

<b>General Work Hours:</b>			
<b>Day</b>	<b>Hours</b>		<b>*(Location) T=Telecommuting O = Office</b>
	<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>	
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Lunch			

**Telecommuting Work Plan:** (Include a description of duties; how work output will be reviewed and monitored; and how supervision will be provided.)

We agree to abide by the terms and conditions of this Agreement.

Employee: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Supervisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_