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The ABCs of Teleworking Best Practices for Telework Policies

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Benefits of Telework

Telework is becoming a more common work practice because of the benefits it provides to employers and employees. Telework helps employers with employee recruitment and retention. Employees who can telework instead of relocating may allow employers to even hire employees they would otherwise not be able to hire. Telework can give employees a better work-life balance by offering more flexibility, and avoiding stresses like rush hour traffic. A better work-life balance improves employee morale, and happier employees tend to be more productive.

Telework Policies

An effective telework policy should meet the needs of a business and its employees. There is no one-size-fits-all telework policy. Some employers may want to make telework mandatory for all its employees, while other employers may want to offer telework as an option only for employees who meet certain performance standards. There are, however, general guidelines and best practices for an effective telework policy. The extent to which these guidelines and best practices are incorporated into a telework policy will depend on the needs of a business and its employees.

Before developing a telework policy, employers are encouraged to plan by considering everything teleworking employees will need to successfully fulfill their job responsibilities and how what they need will be provided. What a teleworking employee needs depends on the position or work function of the employee. A telework policy may generally apply to all employees; however, the equipment and level of support provided to employees may vary between job functions.

A telework policy should identify positions and jobs that are eligible for telework, and any performance standards employees must meet to be eligible for teleworking. A telework policy should also identify when an employee may telework and identify if a position is eligible for telework full-time or part-time, which offers a hybrid of working from home and working in the office. Also take into consideration that not all individuals may function well in a telework environment either due to the work conducted or personal preference or abilities. Having a telework agreement for eligible employees that outlines teleworking requirements and performance expectations supports a telework policy.

A telework policy outlines the general rules of an employer's telework program. A telework agreement is a written agreement between an employer and employee that acknowledges an employer's telework policy and outlines the specific requirements of teleworking for an employee. Examples of a telework policy and telework agreement are provided in the Additional Resources for Telework Best Practices section. The first link in the Additional Resources section is to the Maryland Department of Budget and Management's telework policy. The second link is to the Maryland Department of Transportation's Guide to Telework for Employers, which includes a sample telework agreement. Communication is key in any telework agreement.

Allowing employees to telework does not mean an employee will never be required to come to the office. An employee may be required to report to the work site to attend training, discuss performance evaluations, retrieve office supplies or equipment, participate in meetings, or fulfill their work responsibilities in other ways. A telework policy should indicate that a telework program is at the discretion of the employer, and it should be made clear to employees that they may be called into the office when it suits the needs of the employer.

A telework policy, like any policy, benefits from a periodic evaluation. Routinely evaluating telework policies (quarterly, semiannually, or annually) will help ensure the telework policy is meeting the needs of employers and employees. Employers are encouraged to solicit input from employees when evaluating their telework policy because employees may be able to offer solutions to issues of which employers may not be aware.

Appropriate Support

Whether working in your main office site or telecommuting, productivity and work quality depend on employees being appropriately supported and having the tools they need to effectively do their job. Proper Informational Technology (IT) support, training, and equipment are vital to a successful telework program. The level and type of support a teleworking employee may need often depends on their work responsibilities.

IT Support

Teleworking employees need the right IT tools and support to successfully telework and complete their work responsibilities. This includes access to IT hardware and software programs, and secure reliable remote access to organizational IT networks. Employers may allow employees to use their own technology devices, provide the necessary technology devices to employees, or may pay a stipend for technology devices. There are pros and cons to each of these ways of ensuring employees have the necessary IT tools for teleworking. Employers should identify the way that works best for their business' telework program, and clearly convey expectations regarding IT tools and devices to teleworking employees.

To ensure data security and the protection of Personal Identifying Information (PII), employers should consider providing work-only laptops to employees who routinely handle sensitive information. IT staff or consultants should be involved in the development of the IT security component of a telework policy.

Providing teleworking employees access to IT support will help prevent downtime that reduces productivity. If an employer has internal IT staff, then teleworking employees should be provided contact information, either a phone number or email, for IT staff who can resolve IT related emergencies or answer questions. Employers who use third party consultants for IT support should have a policy governing the use of IT support to ensure teleworking employees are appropriately supported and to control IT costs.

Training

Employers need to determine how teleworking employees will receive training required for their work. Will training be provided remotely or will teleworking employees need to participate in onsite training? Training expectations should be clearly communicated to teleworking employees.

The types of training teleworking employees receive may include training on: new or existing business practices; how to use equipment or software; and how to telework and teleworking policies. Managers may also need training on how to supervise and evaluate teleworking employees. If there are specific policies for teleworkers, such as communication policies, then all employees affected by those policies should receive training on them.

Equipment

Technology related equipment, such as computers, printers, and scanners, are not the only types of equipment teleworking employees may need to successfully perform their work functions. While not having access to the proper software or equipment for conference calls will hinder a teleworker's productivity, not having access to more mundane equipment and office supplies may also reduce productivity.

If a teleworking employee needs a specific form to perform their work, then how will it be provided? Will employees be able to generate the form? Simple office supplies, like pens and legal pads, can also affect productivity. Will teleworking employees be provided office supplies, or will they be reimbursed for purchasing their own office supplies?

A useful exercise for employers may be to list all the necessary tools and equipment for a teleworking position and then identify how those tools and equipment will be provided. Doing so will ensure that teleworking employees have what they need to do their job and could help to control inventory costs for employers.

Better Communication

Effective communication between all levels of an organization is vital to its success. Teleworking employees, who do not have the benefit of the office "pop-in" to get information, have questions answered, or check on the status of their work need better practices and policies for effective communication.

How, and how often, teleworking employees are expected to communicate should be considered when identifying the appropriate level of support for their position. Teleworking employees should be provided access to the necessary communication technologies and provided training on how to use those technologies if necessary.

Establishing guidelines for expected response times, shared documents and calendars, and the preferred method of communication for various situations facilitates effective communication for teleworking employees. Using a shared calendar that identifies when an employee is teleworking that includes a contact number for a teleworking employee will help foster better communication throughout an organization.

Employers are encouraged to adopt communications practices that engage teleworking employees daily. Having daily check-ins offers the opportunity for supervisors to clarify expectations about assigned work and for teleworking employees to ask questions they may have about their work. In addition, teleworking employees should be encouraged to communicate as they see fit. Having a virtual open-door policy that provides a means for teleworking employees to communicate with their supervisor and colleagues allows for information to be transferred and questions to be answered expediently. Employers are encouraged to identify the means of communication that works best for their operations and business practices, whether it is a phone call, direct message, email, text, or other means of communication.

Communication may also benefit from having a team schedule rather than individual schedules. If several employees working on the same project are teleworking, then establishing a common work time during the day for them will facilitate better communication.

There is no substitute for in-person communication to promote employee morale, develop teamwork, and to prevent teleworkers from feeling isolated. Employers may consider having monthly in-person meetings, lunches, or other social events to foster teamwork that will benefit communication.

Clear Expectations

A successful telework policy provides clear expectations for employers, managers, supervisors, and employees on what work is to be done; how work is to be done and delivered; performance standards; availability; and responsiveness.

Managers, supervisors, and employees should have the same understanding of work assignments, including: what work is assigned to employees, how work is assigned, and how employees deliver their work products. A common understanding and expectation of communication and system tools used to assign and deliver work and projects will benefit the assignment and completion of work.

Performance standards used to evaluate an employee's performance should be the same for teleworking and onsite employees who do the same work. Ensuring the performance of telework and onsite employees is assessed with the same performance standards will help to address concerns employers may have about declining productivity for teleworkers and concerns teleworking employees may have about telework affecting their ability for advancement. Knowing that the same standards will be used to evaluate all employees will also help with overall morale.

Clear expectations should be established for work schedules, including: when a teleworking employee should be available for contact; when tasks or projects are to be completed; and the timeframe for responding to incoming calls and emails. Teleworkers should also understand any effect teleworking may have on overtime and leave. Employers should consider routine (daily/weekly/monthly) work plans where teleworking employees document their work schedule, work tasks, and progress to ensure both the employer and employee shows work progress and productivity.

Employers should also encourage teleworkers to designate an "office" space. A dedicated and organized area helps teleworkers concentrate on their work, minimize distractions, and ensure that phone calls and videoconferences are effective. Although a home office space may not be as elaborate as work office space, having a dedicated workspace will help employees focus by associating the space with professional activity and separating home and work.

Having a written telework agreement signed by an employee or her or his supervisor is an effective way to outline work expectations for teleworking employees and their supervisors.

Additional Resources for Telework Best Practices

- 1) <https://dbm.maryland.gov/employees/Documents/telework/Telework%20Policy%20Post%20Pandemic%20April%2014%202021.pdf>
- 2) Commuter Choice Maryland – A Guide to Telework for Employers
<https://mdot.maryland.gov/OPCP/MDOT%20Telework%20Toolkit.pdf>
- 3) <https://www.paychex.com/articles/human-resources/making-the-case-for-telecommuting>
- 4) <https://www.gsa.gov/governmentwide-initiatives/telework/resources-for-managing-teleworkers>
- 5) <https://telework.gov/training-resources/telework-training/telework-and-performance-management-webcast-trainings/>
- 6) <https://www.telework.gov/training-resources/federal-resources/newsletters-articles/>