

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-551](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

With over 1 million federal employees eligible for telework in 2013, federal agencies are fully engaged in incorporating telework as a standard human capital flexibility. GAO was asked to review the benefits and costs associated with agency telework programs. This report (1) identifies the reported benefits and costs associated with federal agency telework programs and assesses the extent to which selected agencies have supporting data; and (2) identifies some of the key resources that federal agencies can use to help calculate benefits and costs associated with their telework programs.

For this review, GAO selected six agencies—DOT, EPA, FDIC, GSA, MSPB, and USDA—based on criteria that included agency size and reported cost savings from telework. GAO analyzed selected agencies' documents and interviewed agency officials to assess the extent that these agencies had supporting data. GAO also compiled and reviewed potential resources for agencies.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Director of OPM should include cost savings questions in future telework data calls and provide clarifying guidance on options for developing supporting data for benefits and costs. OPM concurred with both recommendations. OPM will include cost savings questions from previous surveys in the 2016 agency telework survey. OPM will work with the CHCO Council to develop more guidance for agencies on evaluating the benefits and costs of telework programs.

View [GAO-16-551](#). For more information, contact Yvonne D. Jones at (202) 512-6806 or jonesy@gao.gov.

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FEDERAL TELEWORK

Better Guidance Could Help Agencies Calculate Benefits and Costs

What GAO Found

Benefits associated with telework programs include continuity of operations and reduced employee absences, based on GAO's literature review and the experiences of six selected agencies. The benefits most frequently cited by the selected agencies—the Department of Transportation (DOT), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), General Services Administration (GSA), Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB), and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)—were improved recruitment/retention, increased productivity, and improved work/life balance. Ongoing costs of telework programs include training and managing the telework program and one-time costs include information technology set up. The ongoing cost most frequently cited by the selected agencies was personnel costs. However, GAO found that the selected agencies had little data to support the benefits or costs associated with their telework programs. All of the selected agencies could provide some supporting documentation for some of the benefits and only two could provide supporting documentation for some of the costs.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) collects data on telework via its annual data call and consults with the Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCO) Council about its annual telework report to Congress. However, GAO found substantial declines in agency reporting of telework cost savings to OPM. For example, in 2012, agencies reported 66 examples of telework cost savings, but a year later they reported 29 examples. Amidst this decline, OPM decided to collect less information about cost savings—a key benefit of telework. OPM asked agencies for cost savings information in 2011, 2012, and 2013 but did not in its 2014-2015 agency data request. The Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 requires an annual assessment of agencies in meeting established outcome goals. Assessments that include information on benefits, net costs savings, and costs can help decision makers in determining the overall effects of their telework programs and the progress achieved. OPM officials stated that they streamlined the annual data request to focus on the act's requirements, which do not explicitly include reporting on cost savings. However, as a result of this decision Congress will have less information to assess the value of telework.

OPM provides resources to agencies to help them with their telework programs, but may be missing other opportunities to help agencies better identify the net cost savings associated with their telework programs. The resources OPM offers include fee-for-service assistance to help implement or improve existing telework programs and training and webinars on responding to its annual data call. However, OPM guidance lacks information about how agencies can use existing data collection efforts to more readily identify benefits of their telework programs, and OPM has not provided guidance on how agencies should calculate the costs of their programs. By not taking advantage of existing data sources or having guidance on calculating costs, agencies are limited in their efforts to evaluate the net cost savings associated with their telework programs. As a result, Congress does not have the information it needs to assess the true value of telework, which could impact its ability to provide oversight of telework across the federal government.