



Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Regulatory
Affairs and Federal Management,
Committee on Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

For Release on Delivery
Expected at 3:00 p.m. ET
Wednesday, November 18, 2020

FEDERAL TELEWORK

Key Practices That Can Help Ensure the Success of Telework Programs

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GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-238T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Regulatory Affairs and Federal Management, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Telework offers benefits to federal agencies as well as to the federal workforce. These include improving recruitment and retention of employees, reducing the need for costly office space, and an opportunity to better balance work and family demands. In addition, telework is a tool that agencies can use to help accomplish their missions during periods of disruption, including during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Congress has encouraged federal agencies to expand staff participation in telework, most recently by passing the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 (the act). The act established requirements for executive agencies' telework policies and programs, among other things.

This statement provides key practices to help ensure the success of telework programs. The statement is based on GAO's body of work on federal telework issued from July 2003 through February 2017.

GAO has recently initiated two reviews related to federal telework. One is examining the extent to which agencies have used telework during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the successes and challenges agencies experienced. The second is reviewing agencies' telework information technology infrastructure.

View [GAO-21-238T](#). For more information, contact Michelle B. Rosenberg at (202) 512-6806 or rosenbergm@gao.gov.

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What GAO Found

The Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 (the act) defines telework as a work flexibility arrangement under which an employee performs the duties and responsibilities of their position and other authorized activities from an approved worksite other than the location from which the employee would otherwise work. GAO previously identified key practices in telework-related literature and guidelines that federal agencies should implement in ensuring successful telework programs. These key practices may be grouped under seven categories.

- **Program planning.** Consistent with a key practice GAO identified, agencies are required to have a telework managing officer. Other key practices related to planning for a telework program include establishing measurable telework program goals, and providing funding to meet the needs of the telework program.
- **Telework policies.** Agencies can help ensure their workforces are telework ready by establishing telework policies and guidance. To ensure that teleworkers are approved on an equitable basis, agencies should establish eligibility criteria, such as suitability of tasks and employee performance. Agencies should also have telework agreements for use between teleworkers and their managers.
- **Performance management.** Agencies should ensure that the same performance standards are used to evaluate both teleworkers and nonteleworkers. Agencies should also establish guidelines to minimize adverse impacts that telework can have on nonteleworkers.
- **Managerial support.** For telework programs to be successful agencies need support from top management. They also need to address managerial resistance to telework.
- **Training and publicizing.** Telework training helps agencies ensure a common understanding of the program. The act requires agencies to provide telework training to employees eligible to telework and to managers of teleworkers. Keeping the workforce informed about the program also helps.
- **Technology.** Agencies need to make sure teleworkers have the right technology to successfully perform their duties. To that end, agencies should assess teleworker and organization technology needs, provide technical support to teleworkers, and address access and security issues.
- **Program evaluation.** Agencies should develop program evaluation tools and use such tools from the very inception of the program to identify problems or issues. Agencies can then use this information to make any needed adjustments to their programs.

GAO has previously reported instances where selected agencies faced challenges implementing telework programs that aligned with key practices. For example, three of four selected agencies did not require review or document their review of ongoing telework agreements. These reviews are important to provide assurance that the agreements reflect and support their current business needs. GAO also previously reported that managers at three of four selected agencies were not required to complete telework training before approving staff's telework agreements. The training is important to ensure managers fully understood agency telework policy and goals before approving or denying requests to telework.

Chairman Lankford, Ranking Member Sinema, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss our previous work on key practices related to federal telework programs. Telework offers benefits to federal agencies as well as to the federal workforce. These include reducing traffic congestion and pollution, improving recruitment and retention of employees, and reducing the need for costly office space. Employees also can realize benefits from teleworking, including reduced commuting time; lowered costs in areas such as transportation, parking, and food; and an opportunity to better balance work and family demands.

Telework is also a tool that agencies can use to help accomplish their missions during periods of disruption, such as during severe weather events and major emergencies including the current Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. During this crisis agencies have been encouraged by the Office of Management and Budget to maximize the use of telework, which has allowed federal employees to work remotely in order to sustain agency operations and serve the American people.¹

Congress has encouraged federal agencies to expand staff participation in telework, most recently in 2010 by passing the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 (the act). The act defines telework as a work flexibility arrangement under which an employee performs the duties and responsibilities of such employee's position and other authorized activities from an approved worksite other than the location from which the employee would otherwise work.²

The act requires executive agencies to establish telework policies, incorporate those policies into their respective continuity of operations plans, and provide interactive telework training to employees eligible to telework and managers of teleworkers.³ The act also assigns the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) leadership responsibilities including: (1) providing policy and policy guidance for telework in specified areas; (2)

¹Office of Management and Budget, *Federal Agency Operational Alignment to Slow the Spread of Coronavirus COVID-19*, OMB Memorandum M-20-16 (Washington, D.C.: 2020).

²Pub. L. No. 111-292, 124 Stat. 3165 (Dec. 9, 2010), codified primarily at chapter 65 of title 5, United States Code.

³5 U.S.C. §§ 6502-6503.

assisting each agency in establishing appropriate qualitative and quantitative measures and teleworking goals; (3) identifying best practices and recommendations for the federal government; and (4) reviewing the outcomes associated with an increase in telework.⁴

My statement today discusses key practices for helping to ensure successful telework programs. This statement is based on our body of work on federal telework issued primarily between July 2003 and February 2017.⁵ This work included identifying key practices in telework-related literature and guidelines that federal agencies should implement in developing telework programs.⁶ More detailed information on our objectives, scope, and methodology for that work can be found in the issued reports. In addition, we reviewed the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 to highlight the intersection of aspects of the act and the key practices related to telework we previously identified.

We have recently initiated two reviews related to federal agencies' use of telework.⁷ One is examining the extent to which agencies have used telework during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the successes and challenges agencies experienced with telework throughout the pandemic, including lessons learned. The second is reviewing agencies' telework information technology infrastructure and assessing agencies' initial experiences implementing telework solutions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We conducted the work on which this statement is based in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe the evidence obtained provides

⁴5 U.S.C. § 6504(b); § 4 of the act.

⁵GAO, *Federal Telework: Additional Controls Could Strengthen Telework Program Compliance and Data Reporting*, [GAO-17-247](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 17, 2017); *Federal Telework: Better Guidance Could Help Agencies Calculate Benefits and Costs*, [GAO-16-551](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 2016); and *Human Capital: Further Guidance, Assistance, and Coordination Can Improve Federal Telework Efforts*, [GAO-03-679](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 18, 2003).

⁶[GAO-03-679](#).

⁷These reviews are being conducted as part of our work in response to GAO's oversight responsibilities under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), Pub. L. No. 116-136, § 19010, 134 Stat. 281, at 579-81 (2020).

a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Key Practices That Can Help Ensure the Success of Federal Agencies' Telework Programs

The key practices for developing telework programs that we previously identified can be grouped into seven categories: (1) program planning; (2) telework policies; (3) performance management; (4) managerial support; (5) training and publicizing; (6) technology; and (7) program evaluation. (See appendix I for a complete list of the key practices we identified). Regular attention to the key practices, several of which are required by the act, can help to foster program growth and remove barriers to telework participation.

Program Planning

The act required agencies to designate a telework managing officer (TMO).⁸ Establishing such a leadership position is consistent with the key practices we identified. According to OPM guidance, the TMO is to develop telework policy, serve as a resource for teleworkers and their managers, and advise the chief human capital officer on the agency's telework matters.⁹ OPM guidance stresses that the TMO position encompasses more than administrative responsibilities.

The TMO is the single agency official accountable for that agency's telework program and its compliance with the act. Agencies may also designate other officials to implement the day-to-day operations of the telework program.

Other key practices we identified related to program planning include: establishing a cross-functional project team, establishing measurable telework program goals, developing an implementation plan for the telework program, developing a business case for implementing a telework program, providing funding to meet the needs of the telework program, and establishing a pilot program when initiating telework efforts.

⁸Prior to the 2010 act, Congress required certain agencies to designate telework coordinators to be responsible for overseeing the implementation of telework programs and serve as a point of contact on such programs for the Committees on Appropriations. See, for example, Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-199, § 627, 118 Stat. 3, 99 (2004).

⁹Office of Personnel Management, *Guide to Telework in the Federal Government* (Washington, D.C.: April 2011).

Telework Policies

Agencies should establish telework policies and guidance to ensure that their workforces are telework ready.¹⁰ Another key practice to facilitate telework is to establish telework agreements for use between teleworkers and managers; agencies are now required to have such agreements. The act requires agencies to ensure an employee enters into a written agreement with an agency manager that outlines the agreed upon specific work arrangement between the manager and the teleworking employee before the employee participates in telework.¹¹ Our previous telework-related literature search found that telework agreements should establish job duties and expectations, performance standards, and measurable outcomes and deliverables.

However, we reported in 2017 that three of four selected case study agencies either did not require review or document their review of ongoing telework agreements.¹² Without regularly required review of telework agreements, agencies would not have assurances that the agreements reflect and support their current business needs. Given the likelihood of changes in work responsibilities and employee schedules over time, telework agreements not subject to a periodic and documented review may contain outdated information.

In turn, management at these agencies may end up using inaccurate data when making decisions that require telework data, such as for space planning, technology investments, or calculating the costs and benefits of telework. Further, agencies that do not have a documented periodic review lack an important internal control to better help ensure the accuracy of reporting and to reasonably assure that policy guidelines are being maintained.

Other key practices related to telework policies include establishing eligibility criteria to ensure that teleworkers are approved on an equitable basis using criteria such as suitability of tasks and employee performance; establishing policies or requirements to facilitate

¹⁰The act required agencies to establish a policy under which eligible employees may be authorized to telework within 180 days after enactment. 5 U.S.C. § 6502(a)(1)(A).

¹¹5 U.S.C. § 6502(b).

¹²We recommended that these agencies should require documentation of regular or periodic reviews of all telework agreements in agency telework policies. Two of the three agencies have implemented this recommendation. According to the remaining agency, it is developing a tracking system that will ensure a regular review of telework agreements and anticipates it will fully implement this recommendation in fiscal year 2021. [GAO-17-247](#).

communication among teleworkers, managers, and coworkers; and developing guidelines on workplace health and safety issues to ensure that teleworkers have safe and adequate places to work off-site.

Performance Management

Our past review of telework-related literature found that agencies should take steps to ensure that the same performance standards are used to evaluate both teleworkers and nonteleworkers. In addition, agencies need to establish guidelines to minimize adverse impacts that telework can have on nonteleworkers before employees begin to work at alternate worksites. Following these practices can help eliminate any perceived unfairness and reduce potential sources of tension between teleworkers and nonteleworkers.

The act calls for agencies to establish performance-related internal controls by making performance a criterion for continued program participation. The act states that telework policies should ensure that telework does not diminish employee performance or agency operations.¹³ It also requires agencies to ensure that teleworkers and nonteleworkers are treated the same for the purposes of performance appraisals, among other management activities.¹⁴

Managerial Support

Our previous review of telework-related literature found that, to establish an effective telework program, it is critical to obtain support from top management and to address managerial resistance to telework. Managers may resist telework in part because the change requires them to shift from managing by observation to managing by results. Managers' acceptance of telework is highly dependent on top management's commitment to those changes.

In 2017, we reported on focus groups we held with teleworkers and supervisors at four selected case study agencies.¹⁵ At those focus groups, we heard examples of how supervisors or managers discouraged telework, such as by not allowing employees to call into staff meetings or limiting the number of telework days allowed.¹⁶

¹³ U.S.C. § 6502(b)(1).

¹⁴ U.S.C. § 6503(a)(3).

¹⁵ [GAO-17-247](#).

¹⁶ [GAO-17-247](#).

Focus group participants also reported that some managers may not have supported telework because they believed it contributed to poorer performance as compared to the performance of in-office employees. Addressing managerial resistance to telework could help increase agency telework participation rates and improve agencies' ability to meet telework participation goals. As part of our ongoing work on the use of telework during the COVID-19 pandemic, we plan to obtain federal managers' perspectives related to telework, including how, if at all, they have changed during the pandemic.

Training and Publicizing

Telework involves different ways of working, as well as supervising employees. A key practice we identified from telework-related literature is that both employees and supervisors should receive training to ensure a common understanding of the program. Telework training should include two key components: it should (1) address policy issues and include general information, such as policy updates and an orientation to telework; and (2) focus on telework program activities, including such topics as information technology applications, performance management, and time management.¹⁷ Further, telework-related literature suggests that it is important to inform the workforce about the telework program.

The act requires agencies to provide an interactive telework training program to employees eligible to telework and to managers of teleworkers.¹⁸ The act further requires that employees successfully complete the training before entering into a telework agreement.¹⁹ OPM guidance also recommends managers complete telework training prior to approving telework agreements. However, in 2017 we reported that although our case study agencies required managers and supervisors to complete telework training, one of the four agencies required the training before signing telework agreements.²⁰

As a result, managers who had not completed training before approving staff's telework agreements may have been approving or denying requests to telework before they fully understood agency telework policy. Without sufficient knowledge of agency telework policies, managers and

¹⁷[GAO-03-679](#).

¹⁸5 U.S.C. § 6503(a)(1).

¹⁹5 U.S.C. § 6503(a)(2).

²⁰[GAO-17-247](#).

supervisors may not be executing their duties in a manner that helps their agencies achieve their telework program goals.

Technology

Our prior review of telework-related literature found that agencies should assess teleworker and organization technology needs; develop guidelines about whether the organization or employee will provide necessary technology, equipment, and supplies for telework; provide technical support for teleworkers; address access and security issues related to telework; and establish standards for equipment in the telework environment.

Agencies must also have an appropriate information technology infrastructure in place that allows large numbers of employees to telework simultaneously. Therefore, agencies should assess the extent to which their telework infrastructure is adequate to support increased telework, especially during peak periods, including whether technical support was sufficient, and address any access and security issues they identify.

Program Evaluation

Telework-related literature we previously reviewed recommends that agencies develop program evaluation tools and use such tools from the very inception of the program to identify problems or issues with the program and to develop an action plan to guide any necessary changes for telework or for the organization. The literature also emphasized the need for tracking systems that can help to accurately ascertain the status of telework implementation in the agencies and, subsequently, the federal government. Such a tracking system should include a formal head count of regular and episodic teleworkers, as well as nonteleworkers.

The act requires OPM to report annually on an assessment of the progress each agency has made in meeting agency participation rate goals, and other agency goals relating to telework, such as the impact of telework on energy use, performance, and productivity.²¹ To assist in meeting this requirement, OPM collects data on telework via an annual data call to all executive branch agencies.

Assessments that include information on benefits, net cost savings, and costs can help decision makers determine the overall effects of their telework programs and the progress achieved. Providing information on

²¹5 U.S.C. § 6506(b)(2)(F).

the benefits and costs of telework programs will provide Congress information it needs to assess the value of telework.

However, in 2016, we reported that six selected agencies had little data to support the benefits or costs associated with their telework programs.²² All of the six selected agencies could provide some supporting documentation for some of the benefits and two could provide supporting documentation for some of the costs. We recommended that OPM include cost savings questions in future telework data calls, which the agency did beginning with its fiscal year 2016 telework data call to agencies.

According to OPM, since its 2017 telework data call, agencies have improved in their ability to track cost savings but not all agencies reported information on cost savings. OPM stated in its fiscal year 2018 Telework Report to Congress that cost savings are a key policy goal of federal telework programs, but as demonstrated by agency responses, agencies have challenges evaluating and improving the assessment of these cost savings. OPM concluded, in particular, that agencies may have difficulty isolating costs and benefits attributable specifically to telework.

In conclusion, these telework key practices, several of which are required by statute, provide a roadmap for federal agencies to successfully implement their telework programs. Agencies we reviewed previously faced challenges related to implementing telework programs that align with the key practices and the requirements of the act. These provide valuable learning opportunities for federal agencies as they look to expand and modify their telework programs.

Improving the mechanics of telework programs can yield benefits to agencies, including by enhancing their ability to maintain operations in emergencies, and provide valuable opportunities for work/life balance for employees. An ongoing commitment to regularly evaluate telework programs can better prepare agencies to use telework as a tool to continue to fulfill their individual missions.

Chairman Lankford, Ranking Member Sinema, and Members of the Subcommittee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have at this time.

²²[GAO-16-551](#).

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff have any questions about this testimony, please contact Michelle B. Rosenberg at (202) 512-6806 or RosenbergM@gao.gov.

Individuals making key contributions to this testimony include Clifton G. Douglas, Jr. (Assistant Director), Keith O'Brien (Analyst-in-Charge), Crystal Bernard, Ulyana Panchishin, Karin Fangman, Steven Putansu, and Robert Gebhart. Key contributors for the earlier work that supports this testimony are listed in each product.

Appendix I: Key Telework Practices for Implementation of Successful Federal Telework Programs

Categories	Key Practices
Program planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Designate a telework coordinator. Establish a cross-functional project team, including, for example, information technology (IT), union representatives, and other stakeholders. Establish measurable telework program goals. Develop an implementation plan for the telework program. Develop a business case for implementing a telework program. Provide funding to meet the needs of the telework program. Establish a pilot program.
Telework policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish an agencywide telework policy. Establish eligibility criteria to ensure that teleworkers are approved on an equitable basis using criteria such as suitability of tasks and employee performance. Establish policies or requirements to facilitate communication among teleworkers, managers, and coworkers. Develop a telework agreement for use between teleworkers and their managers. Develop guidelines on workplace health and safety issues to ensure that teleworkers have safe and adequate places to work off-site.
Performance management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure that the same performance standards, derived from a modern, effective, credible, and validated performance system, are used to evaluate both teleworkers and nonteleworkers. Establish guidelines to minimize adverse impact on nonteleworkers before employees begin to work at alternate worksites.
Managerial support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obtain support from top management for a telework program. Address managerial resistance to telework.
Training and publicizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Train all involved, including, at a minimum, managers and teleworkers. Inform workforce about the telework program.
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct assessment of teleworker and organization technology needs. Develop guidelines about whether organization or employee will provide necessary technology, equipment, and supplies for telework. Provide technical support for teleworkers. Address access and security issues related to telework. Establish standards for equipment in the telework environment.
Program evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish processes, procedures, and/or a tracking system to collect data to evaluate the telework program. Identify problems and/or issues with the telework program and make appropriate adjustments.

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