

A Briefing  
from GBC's  
Research Staff  
May 2011

“

...where regulations are in the way, we'll see what we can do to change them. Where new technology can help, we'll find a secure, cost-effective way to install it. Where training is needed to help managers and workers embrace this approach, we'll adopt the best practices from the private sector. ”

- President Obama

## Managing a Mobile Workforce: Growth of Telework

At the highest levels, the U.S. government has made clear its support for expanding telework among federal employees. Congress passed the Telework Enhancement Act in 2010<sup>1</sup>, the most significant effort thus far to make telework a viable option for federal workers as a way to cut costs, boost morale, and manage a more mobile workforce.

Last March, President Obama emphasized his administration's support for telework at the White House Forum on Workplace Flexibility, explaining "We're committed to practicing what we preach and serving as a model for the policies that we're encouraging...where regulations are in the way, we'll see what we can do to change them. Where new technology can help, we'll find a secure, cost-effective way to install it. Where training is needed to help managers and workers embrace this approach, we'll adopt the best practices from the private sector."<sup>2</sup>

### The Basics of Federal Telework

**Definition:** The Telework Enhancement Act defines "telework" as "a work flexibility arrangement under which an employee performs [the] duties and responsibilities of such employee's position...from an approved worksite other than the location from which the employee would otherwise work." This includes both routine telework as a part of a regular schedule and ad-hoc, situational telework that managers must approve. The Act also clarifies the distinction between "remote" work arrangements, which are included the telework definition, and "mobile" work such as frequent travel, which is not "telework."<sup>3</sup>

**Requirements:** In accordance with the Telework Enhancement Act, federal agencies must establish the following by June 7, 2011:

- Establish a policy under which eligible employees of the agency may be authorized to telework;
- Determine the eligibility for all employees of the agency to participate in telework;
- Notify all employees of the agency of their eligibility to telework.<sup>4</sup>

The act further specifies that agencies must:

- Ensure that an interactive telework training program is provided to eligible employees and their managers;
- Require teleworking employees to sign written agreements outlining the specifics of the arrangement;
- Designate a Telework Managing Officer responsible for policy development and implementation of agency telework programs;
- Incorporate telework into Continuity of Operations plans;
- Submit annual reports addressing the agency's telework programs.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Telework Enhancement Act of 2010

<sup>2</sup> The White House, Remarks by the President at the Workplace Flexibility Forum (March 2010)

<sup>3</sup> OPM, Guide to Telework in the Federal Government (April 2011)

<sup>4</sup> OPM, Guide to Telework

<sup>5</sup> Telework Enhancement Act of 2010

<sup>6</sup> OPM, Guide to Telework

“

...more than 60 percent of teleworkers are non-supervisors.

”

- Office of Personnel Management

### About the Government Business Council

Government Executive Media Group's research intelligence division, the Government Business Council (GBC) is dedicated to advancing the business of government through analysis, insight and analytical independence. As an extension of Government Executive's 40 years of exemplary editorial standards and a commitment to the highest ethical values, the GBC studies influential decision-makers from across the federal government to produce intelligence-based research and analysis. Questions or comments? Contact Bryan Klopack, Director of Research, at [bklopack@govexec.com](mailto:bklopack@govexec.com).

### About LifeSize

LifeSize is a pioneer and world leader in high definition video collaboration. Designed to make video conferencing truly universal, our full range of open standards-based systems offer enterprise-class, IT-friendly technologies that enable genuine human interaction over any distance. Founded in 2003 and acquired by Logitech in 2009, LifeSize, with its commitment to relentless innovation, continues to extend the highest-quality video conferencing capabilities to anyone, anywhere. For more information, visit [www.lifesize.com](http://www.lifesize.com)

## Modest Increase in Telework Adoption across Government

In February 2011, OPM released an annual report to Congress on the status of telework in the federal government. The report, based on data compiled from federal agencies for calendar year 2009 and a comprehensive employee survey, indicates that total numbers of teleworking employees increased to 113,946 employees from 102,900 the previous year, representing just over ten percent of telework-eligible employees. OPM Director John Berry said the report's findings indicate "steady progress in telework participation," as well as the "need to ramp up our implementation rate."

### Managers Set the Tone

According to OPM's Employee Viewpoint Survey, some federal employees who do not telework have chosen not to do so and cite barriers that prevent them from teleworking. To many, the nature of their work requires an on-site presence. Management resistance and organizational culture are also consistently among the most frequently referenced barriers to the adoption of telework.<sup>7</sup> Managers and senior leadership are also more likely than junior staff to perceive fewer limitations to teleworking and choose not to participate. In fact, more than 60 percent of teleworkers are non-supervisors and just nine percent are managers or executives.

Fewer than forty percent of federal employees call out information technology security and funding issues as an impediment to teleworking.

According to OPM, "non-participation of supervisors may send a non-verbal message of disapproval or even suggest that promotion decisions depend upon physical presence in the workplace."<sup>8</sup> OPM guidance, therefore, encourages managers to lead by example and to commit to telework.

### Building the Business Case

To measure and demonstrate the benefits of strategic telework arrangements, OPM recommends that agencies identify key indicators for success that are aligned with agency missions, goals, and culture. Of the 42 percent of agencies that currently track the benefits of telework, many reported higher worker productivity, recruitment, and retention.<sup>9</sup> The Telework Exchange, a public-private partnership dedicated to demonstrating the tangible value of telework, makes a strong business case for telework: "If all eligible [federal employees] teleworked two days a week for a year, they would avoid driving 5.5 billion miles and save \$3.8 billion in commuting costs. Teleworking two days a week is an equivalent to \$3,439 annual raise."<sup>10</sup>

OPM guidance also emphasizes the importance of effective training for federal executives, who must realize the best practices of managing teleworking employees and evaluating workers on performance rather than presence. Changing perceptions towards telework at the top of organizations would create cultures in agencies that are amenable to telework.

### Greater Efforts to Eliminate Barriers Are Needed

The federal government's next step should be to focus on eliminating these specific barriers to telework, in addition to addressing management concerns. Congress has already indicated that they are willing to further support telework implementation. In February of 2011, Representative Rob Wittman introduced the Telework Tax Incentive Act, which would provide tax breaks of up to \$1000 to offset the expenses incurred by employees who frequently telework.<sup>11</sup> To ensure that the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 is implemented, OPM and participating agencies must continue to address both the cost and cultural limitations to remote work.

<sup>7</sup> OPM, *Status of Telework in the Federal Government* (February 2011)

<sup>8</sup> OPM, *Status of Telework*

<sup>9</sup> OPM, *Status of Telework*

<sup>10</sup> *The Telework Exchange, Filling the Tank with Telework* (March 2011)

<sup>11</sup> *Nextgov Wired Workplace*

---

This Editorial Issue Brief is the first in a series of background reports produced by Government Executive Media Group's research division, the Government Business Council.

*Lucy Zhu and Lucie Coneys contributed to this report, with Erin Dian Dumbacher, editor.*