

## Teleworking At The Census Bureau

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### Abstract

In October 2003, the Census Bureau implemented a telework program that allows employees to work up to two days per pay period from home or a telecenter. This program had the potential to increase both job satisfaction and employee productivity. After the one year mark, the Census Bureau began to gauge the overall effect of the Telework Program on employee performance, productivity, and morale in addition to identifying problems with its implementation. This evaluation examined survey data collected from teleworking and non-teleworking managers and employees. Surveys were administered near the start of the program and after nearly one year of its onset to gather pre-implementation and post-implementation measures. The overall effect of the Telework Program was indicated by assessing changes in these measures. Also included in the evaluation were data collected from focus groups with teleworking and non-teleworking managers and employees.

**Keywords:** Telework, Telecommuting, Flexible Work Schedule

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In 2000, Congress passed legislation that directed agencies to provide teleworking opportunities to 100 percent of their eligible employees (Office of Personnel Management (OPM), 2004, P.L. 106-346, Title III, SEC 359, 2000). There were several goals that Congress and the Executive Branch aimed to accomplish with this directive. These included reducing pollution and energy consumption by lessening the number of vehicles on the road, improving the quality of work life for federal employees, improving recruitment and retention numbers for the federal workforce, and developing an option for government operations to function during an emergency (Barr, 2004; OPM, 2004).

In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau's Labor Management Partnership Council chartered the Telecommuting

Workgroup to implement a six-month telecommuting pilot program within three selected divisions at the Census Bureau. The intent of the pilot program was to identify and correct implementation problems in addition to identifying any fatal flaws prior to a Census Bureau-wide implementation. The evaluation of this program indicated that teleworking had no harmful effects on productivity or performance (Guarino *et al.*, 2002). Most teleworkers could not telework as often as they were permitted, due to the inability to work behind the firewall<sup>2</sup>. Supervisors at the Census Bureau found that many of their pre-pilot concerns about teleworking were not realized during the pilot program. In general, teleworkers were very supportive of teleworking and reported experiencing many benefits, such as higher morale and improvements in satisfaction with their job, professional relationships at work, personal life quality, and commuting factors.

The summer of 2003 marked the Census Bureau-wide implementation of the Telework Program for Headquarters employees.

The purpose of this evaluation is to provide data on the amount of interest in the 2003 Telework Program by Census Bureau employees; to measure the effect of telework on factors such as employee morale, productivity, and performance, as well as job and life satisfaction; and to present major themes voiced in focus group discussions (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003a).

### 2. Methods

We used both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data.

Web-based survey instruments were used to collect quantitative data. Because we surveyed all employees, including teleworkers, non-teleworkers, and supervisors of teleworkers, the data are not subject to sampling error. Thus, results are presented that are practically rather than statistically significant. The determination of results that

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<sup>1</sup> This report is released to inform interested parties of research and to encourage discussion. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.

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<sup>2</sup> The Merriam-Webster On-line Dictionary (2004) defines a firewall as, " a computer or computer software that prevents unauthorized access to private data (as on a company's local area network or intranet) by outside computer users (as of the Internet)."

were practically significant was influenced by prior work with members of the Census Bureau Operating Committee and the Labor Management Partnership Council.

Qualitative data were gathered through focus groups. The focus groups' main objective was to capture important qualitative data that could not be measured by a survey or were unanticipated by evaluators. We recruited employees to participate in the focus groups in a random fashion; however, participation was ultimately voluntary and self-selected. Each group contained five to thirteen participants and was moderated by an impartial leader who facilitated discussion.

The evaluation project was conducted in three phases: Pre-Telework (July through November, 2003); Telework Implementation (February, 2004); Post-Telework (July through September, 2004).

The purpose of the Pre-Telework Phase was to collect quantitative information about the perception of the program and initial concerns from potential teleworkers, employees who did not intend to telework, and supervisors of teleworkers at the start of the Telework Program through the use of web-based surveys. We administered a web-based survey to all Headquarters employees following an email message announcing the program and information sessions referred to as Telework Town Hall Meetings. Nonrespondents were sent email reminders. This survey collected quantitative measures from employees on their work performance, productivity, job and life satisfaction, communications with coworkers and supervisors, interaction with others on the job, commuting factors, and opinions about telework at the start of the Telework Program. Following the pre-telework employee survey, we administered a short web-based survey with a similar design strategy to all supervisors who managed employees who were approved to telework. The survey requested information regarding teleworkers' current performance and productivity as well as supervisors' initial feelings about the Telework Program. Supervisors with more than one teleworker on their staff completed one survey for each approved teleworker.

The purpose of the Telework Implementation Phase was to collect qualitative information through focus groups. These focus groups enabled employees to discuss and bring forth issues that could not be completely covered by the web-based surveys. Focus groups consisted of various groups of teleworkers, supervisors, and non-teleworking coworkers.

The purpose of the Post-Telework Phase was to collect qualitative and quantitative information from employees and supervisors on unanticipated issues that arose after implementation as well as to determine changes in any key measures from the Pre-Telework Phase. We administered a post-telework employee web-based survey, similar in implementation to previous surveys, to all employees near the end of the implementation year with email reminders for nonrespondents. Following the post-telework employee survey, we administered a short web-based survey (using the same methodology as previous surveys) to all supervisors of approved teleworkers with email reminders for nonrespondents. Focus groups were also conducted during the Post-Telework Phase. These focus groups included employees, supervisors of teleworkers, and managers as well as coworkers of teleworkers to determine the effect of telework on employee relations and workload control.

This evaluation compared key measures collected at the start of the program implementation (that is, Pre-Telework Phase) and repeat measures about one year into the implementation of the Telework Program (that is, Post-Telework Phase).

### **3. Design and Implementation of the Telework Program**

The universe eligible to apply to participate in the Telework Program was the group of employees at U.S. Census Bureau Headquarters (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003b). Contractors working at Headquarters were excluded from this universe.

The Human Resources Division (HRD) conducted training/information sessions and administered the program. Employees who wished to participate in the Telework Program were encouraged by the HRD to discuss their interests with their supervisors.

The deadline for submitting applications to HRD was October 20, 2003. Employees were also required to complete two on-line training courses no later than September 15, 2003. Employees who failed to submit an application by October 20 or complete mandatory training by September 15 were ineligible to participate in the Telework Program during the first year of implementation. Any new employees who began working at the Census Bureau after September 15 (that is, missing the training deadline) also were ineligible to apply during the first year of telework.

According to the Telework Program policy, employees were permitted to telework no more than two days in any pay period. Employees could telework from home, the

Bowie Computer Center, or one of 15 approved General Services Administration (GSA) telecenters. When teleworking from home, teleworkers were required to use their own personal computers for their telework duties and were not permitted to use government-furnished computer equipment. When at the Bowie Computer Center or a GSA telecenter, teleworkers used government-furnished computer equipment.

Teleworkers were required to pay for an additional phone line in their home if they did not want to use their current line. The Census Bureau issued calling cards to teleworkers who needed to make long distance calls while teleworking.

Due to the sensitive nature of the data on internal Census Bureau networks, teleworkers did not have access to any servers or data that were contained within the Census Bureau firewall while working from a remote site (except the Bowie Computing Center). Additionally, teleworkers were not permitted to work with Title 13<sup>3</sup> data from their remote location.

The Telework Program evaluation period ran from October 1, 2003 to September 30, 2004. Although telework continues at the Census Bureau, the evaluation period was defined as the first year of its implementation.

#### 4. Limitations

The reader is urged to consider the following limitations when reviewing the evaluation results.

##### 4.1 Differences in the implementation of the Telework Program

Although the Telework Program was implemented by a central team, each area or division could establish its own guidelines (for example, determining how to schedule telework days). Focus group results suggested that there were differences in the Telework Program implementation across Headquarters (Kay, 2004). This variation among the participating areas could have affected teleworkers' experiences and thus, the results of this evaluation.

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<sup>3</sup> Title 13 is a federal law that gives the Census Bureau authority to conduct censuses and surveys. It also specifies protections for data collected from individuals and businesses (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

##### 4.2 Representativeness

Survey respondents were a self-selected sample. Therefore, these results only apply to those who voluntarily participated out of all employees.

##### 4.3 Repeated measurements

Supervisors of teleworkers were asked to assess the performance and productivity of each teleworker on their staff near the start and end of the Telework Program one-year evaluation period. When second-line supervisors received a survey request, some passed the survey invitation along to the teleworkers' immediate supervisors. This disabled tracking respondents. Pre- and post-telework comparisons of teleworker performance could be confounded, because we cannot be sure that the same supervisor completed both surveys.

##### 4.4 Pre-telework supervisor survey results involved presence of telework

Due to scheduling challenges with regard to the timing of the Telework Program rollout and the evaluation surveys, the pre-telework supervisor survey was actually implemented just after telework implementation began. Thus, comparisons between the pre- and post-telework supervisor survey data may not be clean in the sense that some teleworkers may have already started teleworking at the time their supervisors responded to the pre-telework supervisor survey.

#### 5. Results

The pre- and post-telework employee surveys of teleworkers and non-teleworkers had response rates of approximately 74 percent and 73 percent, respectively. The survey respondents were reasonably representative of the Headquarters workforce in that 42 percent of pre-telework survey respondents and 43 percent of post-telework survey respondents were approved teleworkers compared to the actual percentage of approved teleworkers at Headquarters (37 percent).

The pre- and post-telework supervisor surveys had response rates of approximately 78 percent and 85 percent<sup>4</sup>, respectively.

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<sup>4</sup> Supervisors received one survey for each approved teleworker. For the pre- and post-supervisor surveys, responses were received for 78 and 85 percent of teleworkers, respectively.

**5.1 Application and approval rates were high**

Out of 4,161 employees at the Census Bureau employed at Headquarters in August of 2003, 1,579 employees (38 percent) applied to the Telework Program based on actual HRD application documents. Of these, 1,534 (97 percent) were approved to telework which was 37 percent of the Headquarters workforce. Note that not all employees approved to telework actually participated in the program (See section 5.3).

Those who were not approved to telework and who responded to the post-telework employee survey claimed that the most common reason for denial to the program was that their work was not suited for telework. The second most common reason for denial was office coverage. When asked, the majority stated that the reasons they were given for not being approved were unreasonable.

**5.2 Approved teleworkers differed from non-teleworkers on work and demographic characteristics**

The table below contains pre-telework employee survey data and HRD administrative data. It compares respondent characteristics of those who were approved to telework versus all others (that is, non-teleworkers).

**Table 1: Characteristics of telework applicants who were approved and non-teleworkers**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Approved Teleworkers</b>	<b>Non-teleworkers</b>
Supervisory duties	27 %	23 %
Female	63 %	57 %
Average grade	11.9	10.7
Average age	43	45
Average time at Commerce	13 years	15 years
Average time at Federal Government	15 years	17 years
Average round trip daily commute time	85 minutes	72 minutes
Average weekly commute cost	\$26.26	\$23.24

Source: pre-telework employee survey and HRD administrative data

Of the employees who had administrative or secretarial duties, 20 percent were approved teleworkers compared to 45 percent of those without these duties. Approximately 33 percent of employees with customer service or support duties were approved teleworkers compared to 43 percent of employees without those duties.

**5.3 Majority of those employees approved to telework participated a few times or not at all**

Fifteen percent of those approved to telework who responded to the post-telework survey reported teleworking about two days per pay period, which is the maximum frequency allowed by the Telework Program rules. Approximately 14 percent reported teleworking about two days per month and eight percent reported teleworking about one day a month. About 33 percent reported that they had teleworked a few times (up to seven times) and 30 percent reported not teleworking at all.

The post-telework employee survey asked those who reported teleworking less than two days per pay period the reason why they participated less than what was permitted by the Telework Program policy. Respondents were instructed to choose up to two reasons. The most commonly reported reasons for lack of teleworking were inability to do priority work from remote location, need to be in the office for meetings, and not permitted to telework two days per pay period. In addition, focus groups revealed that some employees signed up for the Telework Program but did not actually plan to telework. Instead, they applied to ensure that the option was available in the event they ever wanted to telework during the first year given that participation was contingent upon meeting application and training deadlines (Kay, 2004).

**5.4 The majority of participants teleworked from home**

Based on the results of the post-telework employee survey, 95 percent of teleworkers worked from home, while two percent worked from the Bowie Computer Center and three percent worked from a GSA telecenter.

**5.5 The majority of teleworkers reported that their productivity increased due to telework while other performance factors stayed the same**

Approximately 99 percent of the teleworkers felt that their productivity had increased or stayed the same (56 and 43 percent, respectively), since they began participating in the Telework Program. The majority of

teleworkers thought that their telework days were the most productive. About 73 percent of teleworkers felt they accomplished more work on telework days than when they were in the office. From focus group sessions, teleworkers pointed to the absence of interruptions such as telephone calls and personal visits to their desks as a reason why productivity was higher when teleworking (Kay, 2004). Another factor that may explain higher productivity while teleworking came out in the February focus groups. Teleworkers expressed a sentiment that the opportunity to telework was contingent on teleworker productivity (that is, for the Telework Program to continue, teleworkers must be productive). This view was not voiced in the July focus groups (Kay, 2004).

The post-telework employee survey asked teleworkers to report improvements, no change, or decreases in each of five aspects of their productivity and performance as a result of telework. The table below presents the results for these five aspects.

**Table 2: Teleworkers report how telework affected aspects of their jobs (results are shown in percentage of teleworkers responding within category)**

<b>Production/ Performance Factor</b>	<b>Improved</b>	<b>Stayed the Same</b>	<b>Declined</b>
Volume of work produced	53	47	0
Quality of work produced	40	60	0
Work performance	39	61	0
Ability to work independently	34	66	0
Meeting deadlines	30	70	0

Source: post-telework employee survey

**5.6 Supervisors reported that their satisfaction with their teleworkers’ performance generally remained the same over the telework evaluation period**

In both the pre- and post-telework supervisor surveys, supervisors of teleworkers were asked to report their level of satisfaction with four components of performance for each of their teleworkers: ability to work independently, work quality, ability to complete work in a timely manner, and employee/supervisor communication. The levels were ‘very satisfied,’

‘somewhat satisfied,’ ‘somewhat dissatisfied,’ and ‘very dissatisfied.’

The level of satisfaction before and near the end of the telework evaluation period were compared within each of the four categories in an attempt to determine the impact of telework on employee performance. With regard to the four performance categories, the table below shows changes to the level of supervisor satisfaction before versus after the implementation of the Telework Program.

**Table 3: Supervisors’ satisfaction with performance of teleworkers during the one-year evaluation period (results are shown in percentage of supervisor reports within category)**

<b>Employee Performance Category</b>	<b>Supervisors’ Satisfaction Level Before versus After Telework</b>		
	<b>Stayed the Same</b>	<b>Changed between ‘very satisfied’ and ‘somewhat satisfied’</b>	<b>Other Changes</b>
Ability to work independently	84	12	4
Work quality	82	16	2
Ability to complete work in timely manner	80	16	4
Employee/ Supervisor communication	78	17	5

Source: pre- and post-supervisor surveys

Approximately 80 percent of the time the supervisors’ satisfaction level stayed the same for each performance category. The most numerous changes were between the ‘very satisfied’ and ‘somewhat satisfied’ levels. For the categories of work quality and timeliness, the majority of supervisors showed an increase in satisfaction (that is, reported ‘somewhat satisfied’ at pre-supervisor survey and ‘very satisfied’ at post-supervisor survey). For the categories of employee/supervisor communication and ability to work independently, the majority of supervisors showed a decrease in satisfaction (that is, reported ‘very satisfied’ at pre-supervisor survey and ‘somewhat satisfied’ at post-supervisor survey).

**5.7 A small proportion of employees reported that critical work was delayed or negatively affected by telework**

Based on results of the post-telework employee survey, approximately nine percent of supervisors of approved teleworkers reported that there was a time when critical work was delayed or negatively affected because their employees were teleworking<sup>5</sup>.

Of all employees who responded to the survey, one percent stated that there was a time when critical work was delayed or negatively affected because their supervisor was teleworking. Approximately seven percent of employees reported that there was a time when critical work was delayed or negatively affected because their coworkers were teleworking.

**5.8 Employees and supervisors experienced changes in workload as a result of the Telework Program**

Approximately one in three responding employees (30 percent) felt that their responsibilities increased when their coworkers teleworked. However, the percentage of non-teleworkers that felt their responsibilities increased when their coworkers teleworked dropped seven percentage points after nearly one year of telework (41 percent expected an increase prior to telework versus 34 percent realized an increase after). Furthermore, focus group findings showed that most non-teleworking coworkers did not have any hard feelings toward those who telework (Kay, 2004). Teleworkers also reported in focus groups that they would sometimes contact coworkers and ask them to email materials needed to complete tasks while teleworking. Teleworkers reported that their coworkers were willing to accommodate them and often the teleworker would return the favor.

In terms of handling urgent work, the majority of employees (59 percent) felt that supervisors typically ask employees who are in the office to handle urgent issues, instead of contacting a teleworker. A little over a third of all employees (37 percent) felt that telework made coordinating team schedules more difficult.

Supervisors felt less impact on their workloads due to teleworking employees than they had expected. The percent of supervisors of approved teleworkers who felt

that their responsibilities increased due to supervising teleworking employees dropped 37 percentage points during the Telework Program evaluation period (from an expectation of 52 percent to an actual of 15 percent).

**5.9 Communication volume and skills generally stayed the same or improved during the Telework Program evaluation period**

For employees in the general workforce, as well as approved teleworkers, no substantial changes were reported before versus near the end of the telework evaluation period in satisfaction regarding communication with supervisors, coworkers, or customers.

However, twenty-eight percent of all employees felt that communicating with their coworkers was more difficult with the Telework Program compared to before it. Focus group findings from February pointed out that some coworkers were reluctant to get in touch with teleworkers on their telework days. However, in July this reluctance was no longer present (Kay, 2004).

**5.10 Teleworkers reported increased job satisfaction**

Three out of four teleworkers (75 percent) felt that the Telework Program improved their job satisfaction. Similarly, about 80 percent of teleworkers felt that telework increased their flexibility in dealing with personal life commitments. In fact, over half of teleworkers (54 percent) reported using less leave because of their participation in the Telework Program. Information from focus groups supported these findings (Kay, 2004). For example, one focus group participant spoke about the advantage of being home to handle a service call while teleworking. In other instances, teleworkers scheduled leave on their telework days for medical appointments. The absence of a commute to and from work can decrease the amount of leave needed on days with these appointments.

For all responding employees, as well as approved teleworkers, there was no change in satisfaction as measured at the start and end of the one-year telework evaluation period with regard to the following: job duties, work environment, recognition from supervisors and coworkers, working relationship with supervisors and coworkers, career advancement opportunities, and the Census Bureau as a place of employment.

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<sup>5</sup>Supervisors were asked about critical work being delayed or negatively affected regardless of whether their teleworkers actually teleworked during the first year of the Telework Program.

**5.11 Teleworkers realized many benefits; yet biggest disadvantages were the inability to access network/servers and Title 13 data**

In the post-telework employee survey, those who participated in the Telework Program were asked what they perceived to be the biggest advantages of telework. Respondents were instructed to choose up to three advantages. The reduction in commuting cost and stress was the biggest advantage of teleworking reported by teleworkers in the post-telework employee survey, as well as the number one reason for applying to the Telework Program, as reported in the pre-telework survey. In fact, approximately 74 percent of teleworkers strongly agreed and 23 percent somewhat agreed that participating in the Telework Program reduced the stress associated with commuting to and from work. The second biggest advantage of telework, as reported by teleworkers in the post-telework employee survey, was increased productivity. Other advantages reported by teleworkers were improved quality of work, less pollution/road congestion, and increased flexibility in one's personal life.

In the post-telework employee survey, teleworkers were also asked to select the biggest disadvantages to telework; they were instructed to select up to three factors. The most common disadvantages selected were the inability to access network/servers and Title 13 data (73 and 38 percent, respectively) and the loss of face-to-face interaction (22 percent). In the pre-telework survey, 31 percent of respondents who did not plan to apply to the Telework Program (or did not know) stated that the use of confidential data and limited off-site network access were reasons not to apply (with an additional 30 percent stating that their work would not allow for it).

Overall, 80 percent of teleworkers strongly agreed that the benefits of teleworking outweigh the inconveniences.

**5.12 Supervisors of approved teleworkers perceived both positive and negative effects of telework**

Approximately one year after the start of the Telework Program, the post-telework employee survey asked supervisors of approved teleworkers what they perceived to be the most positive and negative effects of the Telework Program. Respondents were instructed to choose up to three positive effects and up to three negative effects. Supervisors of approved teleworkers reported that the greatest positive effects of telework were increase in employee morale, reduction in traffic and pollution, and increase in productivity. The largest negative effects of telework reported were problems with

office coverage, employee participation limited by job suitability, and a feeling of 'out of sight, out of control.'

**5.13 Employees reported improvements in morale within the Census Bureau as a whole**

The majority of employees perceived improved morale at the Census Bureau as a result of telework. Of employees responding to the post-telework employee survey, 63 percent thought that telework improved morale at the Census Bureau, while 32 percent thought morale had not been affected by telework. In fact, 82 percent of employees either 'somewhat agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the following statement: "In general, the opportunity to telework has increased employee morale."

**5.14 Employees reported the ability to telework was a consideration in changing or seeking to change jobs**

Of all responding employees, over half (56 percent) reported that having the option to telework is 'very important' or 'somewhat important' in considering a different job position at the Census Bureau (22 and 34 percent, respectively).

Thirty-seven percent of employees felt jobs at the Census Bureau should be classified by how suited the duties are to telework.

**5.15 Collectively, employees and supervisors showed support for the Telework Program**

When asked to rate their level of support for the Telework Program after nearly one year of implementation, 58 percent of employees checked 'very supportive' and 32 percent checked 'somewhat supportive,' while just seven percent and three percent checked 'not very supportive' and 'not at all supportive,' respectively.

An overwhelming majority (91 percent) of teleworkers thought that non-teleworking coworkers are supportive of their teleworking.

While 81 percent of all employees felt that their supervisor was supportive of the Telework Program, 37 percent of all employees did not feel that upper management was supportive of the Telework Program.

**6. Conclusions**

Employees were generally excited about the opportunity to telework, as evidenced by the fact that 37 percent of

the eligible Census Bureau Headquarters workforce applied and were approved to telework.

Despite the ample number of approved teleworkers, the majority reported teleworking very infrequently, if at all. In fact, almost one in three approved teleworkers had not started teleworking after almost one year of being authorized to do so. Feedback from these teleworkers suggested that they did not expect to telework frequently; instead, they applied to ensure that they would not miss the opportunity since participation in the first year was restricted to those who were trained by September 15, 2003 and approved by October 20, 2003. Infrequent teleworkers most commonly cited the inability to do priority work from a remote location as the main reason for their lack of teleworking.

Irrespective of the low participation rate, teleworkers were strong advocates of teleworking. Most reported feeling more productive, less stressed, and in general, more satisfied with their jobs as a result of having the option to telework. Furthermore, employees felt that telework had increased employee morale. The vast majority of the general workforce reported being supportive of the Telework Program.

Most supervisors observed no changes in their employees' work performance due to telework.

There were some reports of problems associated with handling critical work and urgent issues. Approximately nine percent of supervisors of approved teleworkers reported that critical work was negatively impacted by telework. In addition, the majority of employees felt that supervisors typically ask employees who are in the office to handle urgent issues, instead of contacting a teleworker. This may be due in part to a feeling that communication with coworkers is more difficult with the Telework Program compared to before it, as reported by over a quarter of all employees. Although one in three employees and one in seven supervisors of teleworkers reported workload increases as a result of telework, focus group results suggested that these shifts were minor tasks and caused no ill feelings between employees (Kay, 2004).

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