

Common Myths About Telework

The statements below are Myths commonly heard in any organization where telework is being introduced. These myths are perpetuated by lack of experience or information about telework and can become barriers to the adoption of telework.

The statements titled “what experience tells us” are taken directly from the Arizona State University evaluation of the State of Arizona Telework Program, and reference what frontline government supervisors and managers, who have actual experience managing teleworking staff, say about these common myths.

I won't know they're actually working at home.

What Experience Has To Say: Supervisors discover they are better able to monitor the work by shifting the focus from how much work the employee looks like he or she is accomplishing to how much he or she actually is accomplishing. By focusing on the work product instead of the work activity, many supervisors find they are better able to communicate clear expectations to their employees. When supervisors and teleworkers agree on job expectations, it often leads to increases in employee productivity and job satisfaction. Many supervisors already use this method of management by results.

AZ State telework pilots consistently showed that, after telework for six months, both teleworkers and their supervisors believe that telework has increased the teleworker's productivity. Productivity increases because employees have fewer distractions and interruptions, work at their personal peak times, and are less stressed due to the absence of the commute.

The most commonly mentioned benefits of telework by senior managers were increased work efficiency and productivity, and increased employee morale.

Teleworkers must have a computer to work from home.

What Experience Has To Say: A computer is not required to telework. Many employees collect tasks to do at home during the week that do not require special equipment. Many employees find the opportunity to telework is so worthwhile they choose to use their personal equipment when equipment is not available from their offices.

Familiarity with telework was related to one's perception as to the suitability of job tasks for working from home. Familiarity also appeared to have some relationship to the perception that computers were necessary in order to telework; i.e., those who were more familiar with telework were more likely to disagree with the statement that computers are necessary to telework.

I won't get promoted if I telework.

What Experience Has To Say: Actually, current research suggests teleworkers are more likely to be promoted than their non-teleworking coworkers according to a study mentioned in the Advanced Management Journal, Summer '92. The reason for this may be that teleworkers tend to be selected by management because they work well independently and can be trusted to perform well remote from the office environment.

Eighty-nine percent of AZ State teleworkers disagreed that they felt out of the loop when teleworking. The employee survey found no significant difference in promotion rates between teleworkers and non-teleworkers.

Teleworkers are not available when you need them.

What Experience Has To Say: Teleworkers work with their supervisors to create an individual agreement where responsibilities are restructured to maintain work group integrity and plan how they will maintain communication with the office and what will be done to meet contingencies. If the teleworker is needed, he or she may be asked to come in to the office or join an emergency staff meeting by conference call.

Ninety-two percent of teleworkers and 80% of non-teleworkers disagreed with the statement, "Teleworkers are never around when you need them." AZ State managers disagreed in the same proportion as employees.

Telework is not for everyone, so it's not fair.

What Experience Has To Say: Offering the opportunity to work at home is a management option; telework is not a universal employee benefit. Supervisors may select employees who have right tasks, abilities and circumstances at home necessary to telework. But an employee's participation in the telework program is entirely voluntary. Not having the opportunity to telework is not a grievable offense.

Telework is not for everyone and not everyone wants it. The focus on fairness can be deceiving. We all have different needs. Rather, look at fairness as offering several flexible work options like flextime or compressed work weeks so most everyone will have the opportunity to get the flexibility they need when they need it.

Everyone will want to telework.

What Experience Has To Say: Everyone does not want or need the same flexibility in the work place. Flexibility in the workplace is not usually offered as a universal employee benefit, but at the option of management. Successful teleworkers are self-motivated and results-oriented employees who work well independently. They need minimal supervision, are currently successful in setting priorities, meet deadlines and take the initiative to communicate with team members. Beyond this, they need the right atmosphere and equipment to work from home.

Teleworkers cause more work for supervisors.

What Experience Has To Say: Managing employees on a flexible schedule will require more communication of the work product and expectations. One of the extra benefits of flexible work options is that it forces management by task and objective. Many managers have found that the increase in quality communication with employees has reduced their overall workload over time. Reduced interaction with coworkers also forces communications to be more direct and business-like.

Managers and supervisors felt that there was no difference supervising a teleworker or a non-teleworker, this was a non-issue. In all six groups supervisors and managers reported selecting teleworkers based upon their previous good performance. In the majority of cases, the telework employee had to agree upon tasks to perform while telework and this performance was monitored closely.

Teleworkers cause more work for coworkers.

What Experience Has To Say: When surveyed, coworkers repeatedly respond that telework does not impede the office routine and that the program should be expanded.

Seventy-five percent of AZ State non-teleworker and 87% of State teleworkers disagreed with the statement that, "Having employees work at home makes my job more difficult."

Sixty-six percent of AZ State non-teleworker and 72% of State teleworkers disagreed with the statement that, "Scheduling meetings around teleworkers causes difficulties in my work unit."

Our jobs aren't compatible with telework.

What Experience Has To Say: Research does not verify that complete businesses or categories of jobs are incompatible with telework. Jobs are really just a collection of tasks. Some tasks must be done at the office. Tasks which may be done away from the office are called teleworkable tasks. The amount of telework an employee may do, depends on how many teleworkable tasks they have each week and whether the equipment required to accomplish those tasks is available. Telework is an individual arrangement where responsibilities are restructured to maintain work group integrity. Those arrangements are created by confronting the concerns and working out solutions.

The researcher noted that the major difference within groups occurred between those who were currently involved and those who had never been involved. This typically occurred when a barrier was raised by a non-teleworking participant and a solution was suggested by a telework participant. For example, to the stated objection by a focus group participant that his employees did not have job tasks that were suitable for telework, another supervisor currently supervising teleworkers responded that it was possible to reorganize job tasks so that telework was an option.

The public would not support government employees working from home.

What Experience Has To Say: Contrary to popular belief, the public understands the need for flexibility in the workplace and is in favor of offering the opportunity to qualified employees.

In the AZ State pilot, almost seven out of ten of those citizens surveyed responded favorably to a plan that would allow qualified Government employees to work at home one or two days a week instead of driving to work. The main reason people are favorable to a telework plan is that it would cut down on pollution, reduce traffic and save fuel. Another frequently cited reason is that telework provides the ability to spend more time with family.