

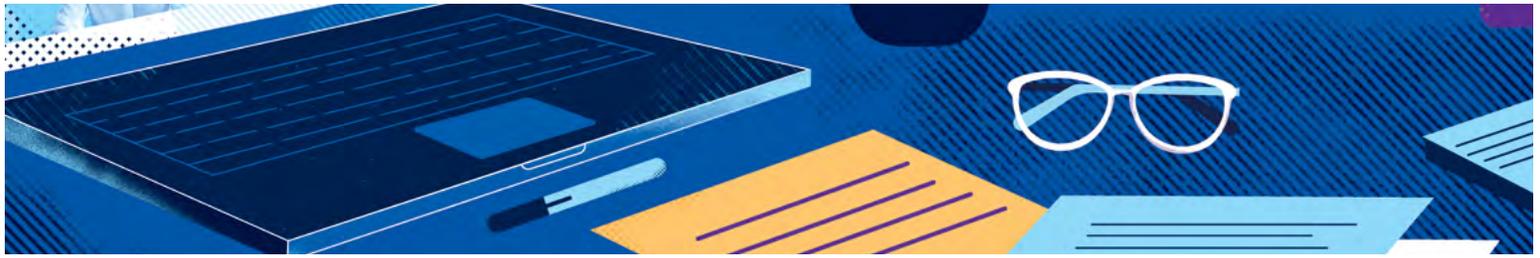
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Telework: Banding Together While Staying Apart

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By David Tobenkin



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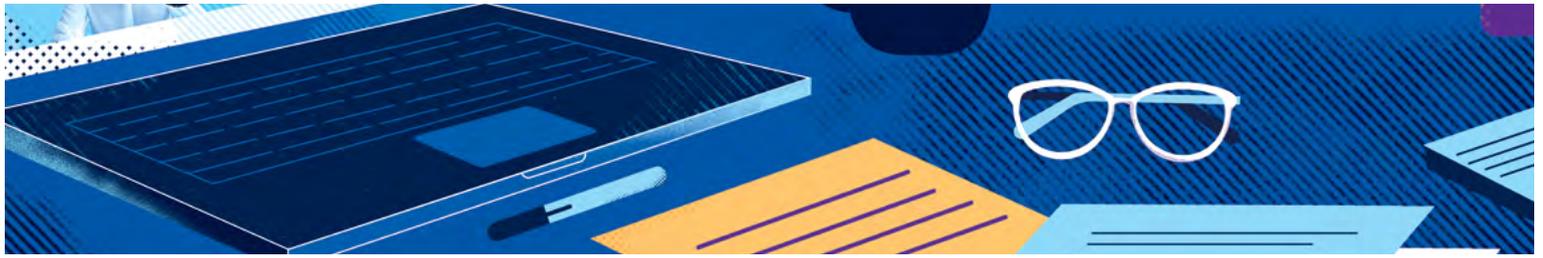
Telework: Banding Together While Staying Apart

The availability of telework—the workplace flexibility allowing employees to work remotely from home or from a more convenient alternate work site—was being reduced in many federal agencies when COVID-19, the disease tied to the novel coronavirus, arrived in the United States in January. Through subsequent months, the virus has caused a rapid about-face, with some agencies vastly expanding the availability and use of telework as a safety imperative.

While the long-term trajectory for telework in the federal government remains in question, the COVID-19 response could well prove a turning point over the longer term.

“COVID-19 will probably change the use of telework in the federal government, at the very least by requiring agencies to be telework ready in the event of emergencies,” says Jeffrey Neal, a publisher at ChiefHRO.com and a former Department of Homeland Security chief human capital officer. “COVID-19 has driven home that every employee who can telework needs to be ready to telework. More broadly, it could greatly change the debate over federal telework from one based upon political leanings and biases to one based upon actual evidence of outcomes. We will soon have a wealth of information about how agencies are performing under levels of telework that are greatly expanded over what they previously had. My guess is that since we have not heard of major problems so far, they are doing okay. And maybe the next administration will use that evidence to support a more reasonable and forward view of the use and potential of telework.”

“Many managers are reluctant to support telework due to concerns regarding the ability to supervise, and our command has never supported telework with the exception of medical situations,” says Linda Lentjes, a regional director of the Federal Managers Association who works as a resource director at U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. Fourth Fleet. “I work for the Department of Defense, which is now heavily relying on telework for social distancing. In my experience, telework is functioning very well. I think this experience will demonstrate the positive side and value of telework, and agencies will be more willing to implement the program. Use of the program on a routine basis will enable agencies to be more prepared to support future crisis or contingency situations.”



COVID-19 AND TELEWORK

Mass federal telework scenarios have occurred in the past following snowstorms and, in 2015, Pope Francis' visit to the states. But the extended COVID-19 pandemic has caused telework on a scale never before seen.

On March 7, 2020, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) provided some telework guidelines related to COVID-19 in a general coronavirus update to federal agencies.

On March 12 and March 15, 2020, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in the White House published updated guidance recommending that agencies in the National Capital Region—which encompasses Washington, DC and parts of Maryland and Virginia—allow expanded use of telework. OMB encouraged:

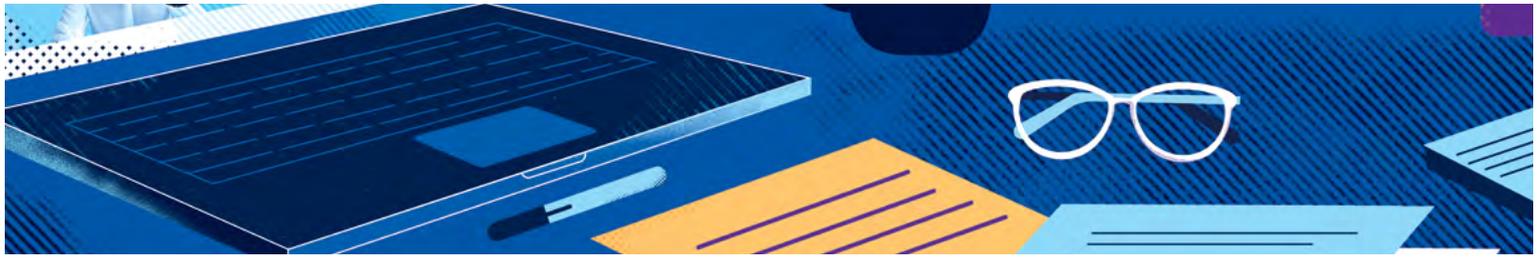
- Agencies to maximize telework flexibilities for telework-eligible employees. For nontelework-eligible employees located within the region who are at higher risk for serious complication from COVID-19, OMB encouraged agencies to offer weather and safety leave.
- Agencies across the country to expand telework options as much as possible for those at higher risk.
- Agencies to consider extending telework options to all eligible workers if state and local responses, like school closures, warrant.

The directive was not mandatory and left decisions about teleworking up to each individual agency, resulting in a variety of different policies.

On March 16, 2020, *The Washington Post* published an editorial calling the OMB guidance inadequate, noting that while leading public health experts have pleaded for employees to stay at home as much as possible to prevent the spreading of COVID-19, the federal government has trailed state and local governmental bodies and many private companies in allowing their workers to telework, and thus far, it has lacked a government-wide plan or approach to telework.

AGENCY RESPONSES

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak and OMB's directive, many agencies requested that employees who could telework at home do so, and, in some cases, directed them to do so. In mid-March, the Securities and Exchange Commission transitioned to full telework for employees, with some exceptions. In addition, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, the IRS and the Federal Communications Commission implemented mandatory telework for much or all of their workforces. Around



the same time, NASA had employees at two of its centers test positive for COVID-19 and mandated telework for those centers.

Some agencies that had previously taken steps to limit telework reversed course. The Social Security Administration (SSA) has a complex approach to telework in which availability varies by location and employee type. In October 2019, SSA eliminated telework for regional offices and central operations staff, including a pilot program that allowed employees to telework three days a week. In March 2020, SSA revamped its telework policies to restore some telework in several regional offices in light of the COVID-19 situation in those locations, says American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) spokesman Tim Kauffman.

ADVERSE HEADWINDS

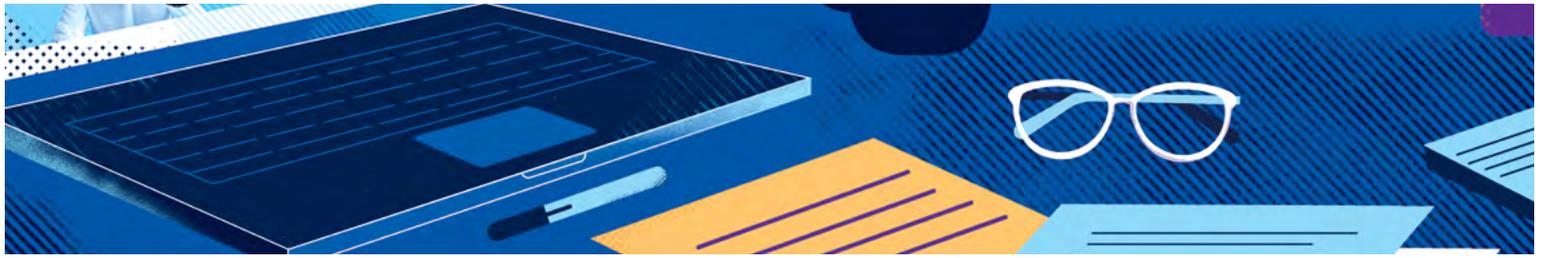
Some aspects of telework at federal agencies are a matter of federal law. The Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 (TEA) established a framework to guide implementation of telework across the federal government and directed OPM to prepare an annual report to Congress on the availability of telework. The act required management training on telework and clear notice to federal employees regarding the availability of telework.

But federal agencies were given great flexibility in whether and how they would make telework available to their employees on a regular basis. Some positions never have been and almost certainly never will be available for telework, such as law enforcement and public security positions that require staffing at a certain site, other employees who must physically interact with the public in person, factory employees, and employees dependent on access to physical records or key equipment that cannot be accessed remotely to perform their jobs.

More than 43 percent of 2.1 million civil servants were eligible for one or more days of remote work in fiscal year 2017, the most recently reported data, down slightly from 44 percent in fiscal year 2015.

For many years, the OPM annual telework reports were cheerleading more telework. But under the Trump administration, the White House has questioned the utility and extent of telework.

“Agencies have been digging deep to say, ‘The way of work in our agency—is it achieving mission, service and stewardship objectives?’ Particularly when it comes to service, we have to ask the question, ‘What is the best modality for delivering service?’” said Margaret Weichert, former deputy director for management at OMB, to *The Washington Post* in January 2020. “Telework is not proving the most effective way of delivering.”



Leadership at many agencies, such as the Department of Agriculture, the SSA, and the Department of Education, have expressed concern in recent years that extensive telework might lead to abuse or impaired service, and have consequently reduced the availability of telework.

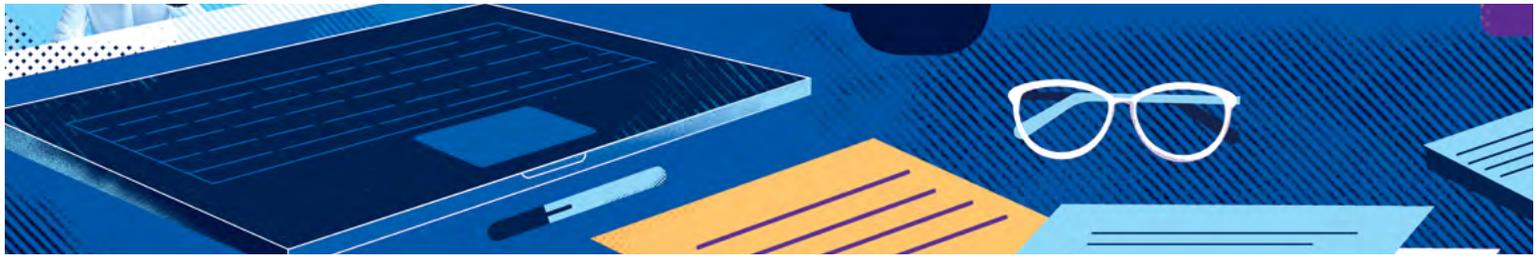
MANAGEMENT, IT AND SECURITY CONCERNS

Among the biggest impediments to successful implementation of telework has been managerial opposition. “I, myself, as a manager expressed reluctance to use telework,” FMAs Lentjes says. “I believe the decision to allow telework must be managed at the command/ agency level and not at the individual manager’s level. I am not sure that telework would make it more difficult, but I believe it would increase a manager’s supervisory workload. I believe that can be addressed by a reduction in manager’s nonsupervisory responsibilities. I do not feel that training is adequate for either managers or employees. We received online training only, understandably given the [COVID-19] situation; however, this was the first telework training offered in years.”

Telework penetration, particularly the move to full remote operations, also presents a host of IT issues for agencies. The demands of Internet traffic, particularly of large numbers of individuals trying to remotely stream video and audio conferencing, can tax agency IT systems. The enterprise-wide virtual private networks (VPNs) many agencies run are expensive to maintain, and sometimes IT problems are difficult to resolve remotely.

“Speaking for the Navy and my command, IT is not adequate to allow broader use of telework,” says Lentjes. “Limited funds restrict the command’s ability to purchase additional laptop computers or refresh/upgrade those on hand for telework. In the current situation, it was a struggle to support personnel who required network- and Wi-Fi-capable computers. More investment in equipment to support telework is needed.”

—DAVID TOBENKIN IS A FREELANCE WRITER BASED IN THE GREATER WASHINGTON, DC AREA.



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106

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