Time has come for teleworking as staggering $100 fill-ups loom

By DIANE O'GRADY

WITH GAS PRICES at record highs, driving to work every-day is becoming more and more expensive, and for some employees, a genuine hardship.

Soaring gas prices, however, are only one reason to launch a telework program in your organization. Less traffic, less pollution and happier employees are just a few of the other reasons to get your management on board. Happier employees translate into increased employee productivity and decreased absenteeism. And should a natural or manmade disaster disrupt normal operations, telework can ensure the continuity of your operations. Who wouldn't want to take advantage of these benefits? So how do you get a program started or kicked into high gear? Below are some tips from Loudoun County, with an award winning telework program.

1. Set a goal for employee participation. The VML Green Government Challenge goal is 20 percent participation by 2010. It's achievable if your top executive is committed. Determine your first year goal, say 10 percent, and broadcast it. Employees will see a serious commitment to implement and endorse telework from top management. It helps with the "hallway talk" in the early days, when many folks may be skeptical. Front-line supervisors need assurances that this isn't a pilot program, knowing they will get top level support, and in fact, executives are expecting them to supervise teleworkers.

2. Engage your IT Department. Ideally, the teleworker's location should be viewed as an extension of the office. Many organizations choose to invest in Virtual Private Network (VPN) software to enable employees to access all their work files and systems through the Internet in a secure environment. Your IT department needs to specify standards

for equipment and software and to define remote-access procedures for teleworkers. Often desktop computers are replaced with laptops as part of the standard replacement cycle in order to facilitate teleworking. Behind the scenes, IT should review current practices for data security, backup and virus protection. They should also be visible from the start in offering training on equipment and on-going support through the help-desk.

3. Develop your telework policies and a formal telework agreement. The policies should describe who can participate and the overall work guidelines. The agreement spells out "ground rules" of the program and the specifics of the work arrangement between an employee and his/her supervisor, including how frequently the employee will telework, tasks to be completed on telework days, and the vehicle miles saved by not driving to work. Telework can be working from home as little as one full day per month. Often employees and supervisors will start with a telework arrangement that is a couple days a month or once a week for a several months, and then assess whether it's possible for the employee to telework more frequently.

4. Talk with each department. Highlight the benefits and help supervisors to identify suitable employees and tasks. Look at the work, the worker and the work unit to assist supervisors in recognizing situations where dependable workers can easily and effectively do some of their work at home. Often workers have tasks that require quiet and concentration such as writing, data analysis, research, developing Web content, contacting clients by telephone or computer programming, which are ideally suited for teleworking. These are also tasks supervisors can manage

for results. Recognize that work units are "teams" and look for cross-training opportunities to provide in-office back-up for teleworkers, but also coverage for planned vacations and unexpected illnesses.

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5. Provide training and support. Get the word out about how the program works, ensuring a good home work environment, helping an employee approach his/her supervisor, getting enrolled, and getting started. Announce the program through your intranet, employee manual, newsletter and executive memo. Some employees will be eager to get started; many others will have questions and wait to learn from the experience of their co-workers. Two common myths surrounding telework are that every employee will want to telework, and most teleworkers will want to work from home every day. Neither is true. You will find that telework is not a fit for everyone, and most teleworkers have a schedule with days in the office and days at home. Provide a training session for both teleworkers and their supervisors to address equipment and tools, but also underscore the importance of pre-planning, communication, performance, teamwork and trust in making this work arrangement work well for everyone.

In Loudoun County, a broad base of support for telework developed in the two years since the program was launched. Supervisors report a 20-plus percent increase in productivity among teleworkers and teleworkers report feeling less stressed and appreciative that the county cares about their well-being. In doing so, Loudoun County is contributing to a healthier, more livable and economically strong community.

Another good resource for information and support about starting a telework program, can be found at Telework!VA (www.teleworkva.org).

About the author
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