

Telework

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES

What is telework and why was it selected?

Telework is a type of alternative work arrangement in which employees perform some or all of their job duties at an approved location other than their official worksite. Other labels for telework include telecommuting, remote work, mobile work, virtual work, distance work, distributed work, work from/at home, and flexplace, though definitions can vary (e.g., [Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015](#)).

The Washington Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF) selected telework in response to several factors identified during the exploration phase of the project:

- surveys showing staff dissatisfaction with the limited mobility of their work,
- a new executive order from the governor that required state agencies to increase the mobility and flexibility of work,
- interest in expanding on the agency's recent experience with piloting telework for some intake staff,
- the agency's desire to have support for implementation and evaluation of the program, and fit with the QIC-WD's goals. For further information on how telework was selected at Washington DCYF, see the Needs Assessment Summary and [Theory of Change](#).

What is the research behind telework?

The most comprehensive quantitative synthesis of telework research was conducted in 2007, so the most stable findings are likely outdated, especially with the technology changes that have happened since then and with the increase in the occurrence of telework, given COVID-19. The findings of that study showed that

telework is associated with several job attitudes and behavior, though the connections were not very strong. More specifically, telework was moderately associated with perceived autonomy and modestly associated with supervisor relationships, role stress, performance, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions ([Gajendran & Harrison, 2007](#)). It was not associated overall with coworker relationships, but for employees that telework a lot (more than 2.5 days a week), coworker relationship quality was lower ([Gajendran & Harrison, 2007](#)). A more recent synthesis focused on work-family conflict found that, contrary to common perceptions, teleworking is not associated with family interference with work or work interference with family ([Allen et al., 2013](#)). Since the 2007 study, research has continued to expand our understanding of the effects of telework, using a variety of methods, measures, and outcomes, and resulting in mixed findings. (For more information, see the QIC-WD's Umbrella Summary on [Telework](#).)



Relative to how popular and common telework is in the workplace, research thus far is fairly limited. Overall, there is a great need to understand the ways in which telework is more or less effective and the conditions that influence that effectiveness. One of the biggest limitations is that most studies lack the empirical rigor needed to draw more confident conclusions about the effect of telework. Most telework studies are observational, looking at teleworkers only or comparing matched or unmatched groups of teleworkers and non-teleworkers. Thus, experimental or quasi-experimental studies make an important contribution.

In addition to the need for more rigorous evaluation designs, more evidence is needed around a range of outcomes beyond common job attitudes like job satisfaction and organizational commitment. For example, aspects of employee well-being, such as stress and burnout are also important to assess, as is the impact on coworkers, supervisors, and office culture. Though turnover intentions are often measured, actual turnover and tenure are not.

Beyond looking at what outcomes do or don't result from telework, it is also important to consider what factors may make telework more or less effective. Possibilities include the nature of the job duties, the degree of interdependence with others, commute distance, telework frequency, employee personality, supervisor and organizational support, and employee perceptions of the physical conditions of their official worksites, among others.

How was the Washington telework intervention designed?

The DCYF telework program was highly formalized (see the [Intervention Overview](#)), with clear parameters, processes, and expectations, all outlined in a [handbook](#). For example, there were specific eligibility criteria; limitations on the number of telework days per week; a formal application, approval, and agreement process; and training for all eligible staff. A telework application self-assessment was also created to help workers consider if they are a good fit for the intervention.

What research gap is the QIC-WD addressing?

Though there are several studies that focus on government employees, they tend to be at the federal level and therefore do not include employees working in child welfare agencies. Thus, a systematic implementation and evaluation of telework in child welfare would begin to build evidence to inform agencies' decisions around telework. The evaluation of the Washington telework project will answer process and outcome research questions, as described in the [Evaluation Overview](#), and add to the body of knowledge about telework.