



# Umbrella Summary

## Telework

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

### What is telework?

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). Telework arrangements can be informal and determined through individual agreements or formal, as part of a more structured program. Formal arrangements may be governed by federal or state statute, executive orders, organizational policy, or collective bargaining agreements. The following factors are often addressed in formal telework programs:

- ▷ Program oversight and coordination (who is responsible for the program, such as a department, unit, cross-functional team, and/or telework coordinator)
- ▷ Voluntariness (whether voluntary or required)
- ▷ Eligibility requirements (e.g., based on nature of the job duties; employment status; employee tenure, experience, and performance history)
- ▷ Process for seeking and getting approval (oral or written, who can or must review and approve, criteria for approval, timelines for applying and approving, appeals processes)
- ▷ Agreement (e.g., contents of agreement, such as requirements, responsibilities, roles, expectations; conditions under which agreement is required and can be modified, renewed, terminated, or withdrawn; who can or must review and sign)
- ▷ Telework workspace (requirements or restrictions for alternative workspace, such as distance from official worksite, equipment, connectivity, information security, and other aspects of the physical or social environment)
- ▷ Materials or equipment required and provided (desk, chair, laptop, monitors, keyboard, printer, scanner, phone, software, supplies, internet service)
- ▷ Frequency and duration of telework (e.g., whether telework is routine or ad hoc, how many hours or days of telework are permitted, whether those days are fixed or flexible, how long the arrangement can be in effect)
- ▷ Work schedule and use of leave (telework implications for work hours, such as start and stop times, breaks, overtime, leave use, etc.)
- ▷ Dependent care (whether and to what extent an employee can be responsible for dependent care while teleworking)
- ▷ Work performed (what work can, cannot, or must be done while teleworking)
- ▷ Meeting attendance (expectations regarding meeting attendance while teleworking)

- ▷ Assistance from non-teleworkers (expectations regarding requesting assistance from non-teleworkers while teleworking)
- ▷ IT support (when, where, how much, and how IT support will be provided)
- ▷ Training (e.g., what training is provided on the telework program, how it is delivered, whether it is required or optional, who can or must attend)
- ▷ Supervision (expectations and guidance for supervising a teleworker)
- ▷ Communication (expectations and guidance for availability and communication while teleworking or working with someone who is teleworking)
- ▷ Performance management and reviews (expectations and guidance around overseeing and evaluating teleworkers' job performance)
- ▷ Large-scale emergencies (parameters for telework during natural disasters, extreme weather, or local or national emergencies)
- ▷ Other contingencies (impact of unexpected or occasional contingencies such as holidays, illness, need to work at official worksite on an established telework day, etc.)
- ▷ Documentation and record keeping (expectations for telework-related documentation for teleworkers, managers, and the organization overall)
- ▷ Expense reimbursement (circumstances, if any, under which employees may be reimbursed for telework-related expenses, such as equipment, internet service, travel)
- ▷ Liability (employee and employer liability for various behaviors, events, injuries, accidents, etc.)

Popularly stated reasons for having a telework program include boosting employee recruitment and retention, improving employee work-life balance, increasing employee efficiency and productivity, increasing employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, cost savings through reduced need for facilities and lower energy use, decreasing traffic congestion, benefiting the environment through a reduced carbon footprint, and ensuring continuity of operations in the event of disasters or other emergencies. As of 2019, 69% of US employers offered remote work on an ad hoc basis to at least some employees, 42% offered it part time, and 27% offered it full time (SHRM, 2019).

Employees elect to telework for some of the same reasons (e.g., work-life balance, reduction of commute time and costs), but also to escape distractions and disruptions in the office, concentrate better, and have better control over their workspace. Estimates of the incidence of telework vary, in part due to different definitions of telework. A 2019 survey of full-time workers in the US found that 30% of people worked remotely full time, and another 32% teleworked between less than once per month and at least three times per week (OWL Labs, 2019). Teleworking was more common among employees at higher-level jobs, with higher salaries, and with higher tenure. At the time of this writing, telework has increased drastically, having been necessitated by the COVID-19 virus. A recent global survey found that 31% of respondents were working at home on a regular basis (one to five days a week) prior to the pandemic, whereas 88% have done so during the pandemic (Global Workplace Analytics, 2020). For a compilation of various trends and statistics around telework, see:

<https://globalworkplaceanalytics.com/telecommuting-statistics>.

Due to the use of different labels, definitions, and measurement, there are no standard telework measures. Personnel data is one means of assessing telework status, but surveys are more commonly used. Respondents are asked about their teleworking status and a number of telework-specific perceptions and attitudes, such as interest in teleworking, perceived challenges and benefits, fairness, supervisor or organizational support, and satisfaction (e.g., Clark, Karau, & Michalisin, 2012; Hoang, Nickerson, Beckman, & Eng, 2008).

## Why is telework valuable?

Telework is valuable because it is associated with several job attitudes and behavior, though the meta-analytic research thus far has not found the connections to be very strong. More specifically, telework is moderately associated with perceived autonomy and modestly associated with supervisor relationships, role stress, performance, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). It is not associated overall with coworker relationships, but for employees that telework a lot (more than 2.5 days a week), coworker relationship quality is lower (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Teleworking is not associated with family interference with work or work interference with family (Allen, Johnson, Kiburz, & Shockley, 2013).

## What research is needed?

Relative to how popular and common telework is in the workplace, research thus far is fairly limited. More research is needed to address gaps and to keep pace with changing conditions. Unfortunately, the window of opportunity for rigorous experimental or quasi-experimental research (with random assignment) has probably closed, possibly permanently, due to nearly every organization suddenly implementing telework on a large scale to cope with the pandemic. Organizations will likely curtail teleworking when it is safe to do so, but it seems unlikely that they will be willing to revert to their pre-pandemic arrangements and engage in highly controlled studies. Thus, the next alternative is to study the natural variation within and across organizations. 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. First, it will be important to strive for some consensus around different terms, definitions, and measures; it is difficult to identify patterns and make steady progress without some consistency. Beyond that, there many outcomes and factors to explore.

### Telework Outcomes

Based, in part, on the popularly stated reasons for having a telework program, outcomes fall into four categories: employees, customer or clients, the organization, and the environment.

- The employee category includes both teleworkers themselves and other employees (e.g., coworkers, supervisors, and subordinates), either teleworkers or non-teleworkers. Example outcomes in this category include job attitudes

(e.g., telework attitudes, job satisfaction, work relationships, engagement, role overload), well-being (e.g., physical and mental health, burnout, work-life balance), work time and expenses (e.g., time and expenses associated with either commuting or working at home), productivity, performance, leave use, and turnover.

- The effect of telework on customers or clients will likely be manifested through employee performance (e.g., in the case of child welfare, facilitating achievement of outcomes for children and families), but there may be other customer or client reactions that are important (e.g., satisfaction with worker engagement and responsiveness).
- The organization category includes the net effects of individual employee outcomes (e.g., aggregate turnover rate, performance outcomes) and organization-level factors such as recruitment, ability to continue operations in an emergency, and a variety of overhead expenses, such as office space, office supplies, maintenance, equipment, and energy use.
- Finally, the environment includes local and global effects, such as traffic congestion and pollution.

### **Telework Factors**

Many of the common telework program ingredients identified in the first section (i.e., *What is telework?*) are factors worth evaluating. If they cannot be varied, it is at least possible to assess people's reactions to those factors. Other areas of interest include the nature of the job duties, including the degree of interdependence with others; employees' reasons for teleworking; commute distance and means of travel; frequency of telework; individual differences among employees, such as personality, work habits, and technology literacy; supervisor and organizational support; amount of information sharing and collaboration with coworkers; employee job experience and tenure prior to teleworking; and physical conditions of employees' official worksites (e.g., temperature, sound, density, layout), among others.

### **Agencies' Role**

Child welfare agencies are in a good position to contribute to new knowledge around telework. It will take time to settle on long-term plans around telework, but the future of telework has likely been changed in significant and unforeseen ways. Agencies have probably learned many lessons the hard way, through trial and error, but there will be opportunities to evaluate their telework programs when operations stabilize. It is recommended that agencies use their existing administrative data and gather additional data to establish evidence that can support decision making and future practice.

## QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ Telework arrangements can be either informal or formal. To ensure clarity, consistency, and fairness, there are dozens of factors that should be addressed in a formal program.
- ▶ Due to the use of different labels, definitions, and measurement, there are no standard telework measures. Surveys are most commonly used, but administrative data can also be a valuable resource.
- ▶ Telework is moderately associated with perceived autonomy and modestly associated with supervisor relationships, role stress, performance, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions.
- ▶ Telework is not associated overall with coworker relationships, but for employees that telework a lot (more than 2.5 days a week), coworker relationship quality is lower.
- ▶ Teleworking is not associated with family interference with work or work interference with family.
- ▶ Relative to how popular and common telework is in the workplace, research thus far is fairly limited. More research is needed to address gaps and to keep pace with changing conditions. 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.
- ▶ Potential telework outcomes fall into four categories: employees, customer or clients, the organization, and the environment.
- ▶ There are many factors that could influence the effectiveness of telework. Among them are the dozens of factors identified as being important to address in a formal program.
- ▶ Child welfare agencies are in a good position to contribute to new knowledge around telework. It is recommended that agencies use their existing administrative data and gather additional data to establish evidence that can support decision making and future practice.

## Additional Resources

[Supervising Child Welfare Professionals Virtually During a Pandemic](#): A list of practical tips for supervising teleworkers.

[Telework.gov](#): The official website of the Federal Government's telework program. The information there pertains only to executive branch agencies and employees, but it can be useful to other organizations considering telework.

[Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families Telework Program Employee Self-Assessment](#): A self-assessment to help interested employees decide whether telework is right for them.

[Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families Telework Program Handbook](#): A handbook created in partnership with the QIC-WD to implement and evaluate telework for select jobs in DCYF's Child Welfare Field Operations.

[Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families Telework Program Progress Update](#): A brief summary of DYCF's experiences with implementing telework.

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