



TELECOMMUTING

Oregon Agencies Discover That Telecommuting Serves the State Well

State government is under pressure to provide more public services and get better results with fewer resources. Some state managers see telecommuting as a way to do more with less.

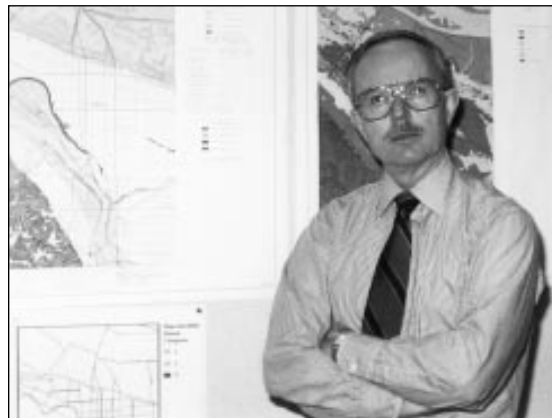
Telecommuting already has a foothold in Oregon's private sector. Oregon businesses with successful telecommuting programs include U.S. Bank, Sequent Computer Systems, AT&T, Orcom — a Bend company that produces software for utilities, and the Portland law firm Davis Wright Tremaine. Nationwide, an estimated 10 percent of the country's adult work force will be telecommuting by the year 2000.

The Oregon Department of Energy is leading the state's efforts to make telecommuting available to more Oregon workers, in business and in government. "State government should take advantage of the same tools that private businesses have," says Bill Nesmith, Conservation Resources Division administrator.

TELECOMMUTING DEFINED:

Telecommuting is using telephones, computers and other equipment to work at home or at an office near home — usually one to three days a week — instead of commuting to the main office or place of business.

The Energy Department sees telecommuting as an effective, low-cost way to save energy. But along with the Oregon Department of Transportation and Oregon Department of Geology, they are discovering first-hand telecommuting's other benefits.



"...State government is as adaptable to telecommuting as any other organization, public or private."

— Oregon Department of Geology
Director Don Hull

ADVANTAGES FOR SUPERVISORS AND EMPLOYEES

Agencies and companies that have adopted telecommuting have documented increases in productivity as well as:

- *Improved employee morale and job satisfaction* - Happier, more relaxed telecommuters feel better about themselves, their employer and their performance.
- *A better work force* - Telecommuting has significant advantages for workers, so it helps retain valued employees and recruit top quality new people.

- *Access to a broad and talented labor pool* - Telecommuting provides access to persons with disabilities, part-time and semi-retired workers, and residents of rural communities.
- *Less sick leave and absenteeism*
- *Reduced office and parking space requirements* - When there are fewer people in the office, less space is needed inside and out. Over time, telecommuting may allow state government to reduce costs for office and parking space.
- *Enhanced public image* - Because it reduces gasoline use, air pollution and traffic congestion, and allows employees to better balance work and home life, telecommuting shows that the agency cares about the environment and community.

Employees also appreciate the advantages: opportunities to be more productive and to better balance their work and home life, reduced stress, and less money and time spent commuting.

Telecommuting Is a Tool to Improve Management

Telecommuting is “selfish from the employer’s standpoint,” according to Oregon Department of Geology Director Don Hull. “It allows a better balance of workplace obligations and personal obligations. Unless people achieve a good balance, they won’t be maximally productive.... Through telecommuting, they have an opportunity to achieve a balance that fits them.”

Telecommuting also boosts productivity by allowing employees to take a large block of work into a quiet workplace. Take, for example, Hull’s technical engineers. They spend a lot of time writing for publication – work that Hull says requires “essentially total concentration to do efficiently.”

About 10 of his 37 employees telecommute at least some time during the year. Besides engineers, they include an executive assistant, field geologists, secretarial personnel and regulatory personnel.

Hull is convinced that “state government is as adaptable to telecommuting as any other organization, public or private.” At the Geology Department, he expects that “in five years 90 percent ... will be doing 10 percent of their work at home.”

Like Hull, Oregon Department of Transportation Manager Jef Kaiser has seen his employees struggle to



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 Manager Jef Kaiser

get projects requiring concentration done at the office. Telecommuting was the solution for some employees in his Environmental and Major Projects Division at Region 1 headquarters in Milwaukie. “I find that for those people who are self-directed ... having that time alone away from distractions increases their productivity and reduces stress,” reports Kaiser.

Jeanette Kloos, scenic areas coordinator at the Department, agrees. “I get more done on a telecommuting day because of the lack of interruptions. I save those things that need a lot of concentrated effort.”

Productivity also has increased at the Energy Department since it began its formal telecommuting program two years ago, Division Administrator Nesmith believes. Sixteen of the Department’s 85 employees telecommute: seven from home and nine from satellite offices in Portland and Corvallis.

“It also has a positive impact on morale,” adds Nesmith. “I think employees who telecommute feel trusted and have a better feeling toward their employer.”

Mary Lou Blazek, Nuclear Waste Program manager for the Energy Department, telecommutes one day a week. “I have a stack on my desk that’s for my Friday telecommute day. It’s for things that I can’t get to during the week – things that I need to be dealing with but that aren’t crises. And I take care of all that so I have a clean slate the next week.

“It has made my day more productive, it’s made my week more manageable,” she says. “And actually I think it has made us as a unit more productive.”

Two people on Blazek's staff telecommute — one from Portland and one from Corvallis. "They're so grateful that they don't have to do that one extra day of commuting. They have an opportunity to get organized and work on a project without interruption," explains Blazek. "I think the payoffs are just phenomenal."

Sometimes the payoffs are easy to measure. Kaiser figures he saved the Transportation Department a half million dollars by having telecommuting as an option:

The manager of a large corridor study underway in his division was called away on another project. Putting the corridor study on hold while he recruited a replacement in the Portland area would have cost the

STATE AGENCIES ARE REQUIRED TO PROMOTE SMART COMMUTING AND REDUCE VEHICLE MILES TRAVELED:

Telecommuting programs help state agencies comply with state mandates:

- *The Governor's State Energy Initiative aims to lower costs and improve efficiency in state government. It directs agencies to encourage employees to adopt alternatives to driving alone to work and reduce vehicle miles traveled for agency business 20 percent by the year 2000. Blazing the trail for a project that eventually will include all state agencies are the departments of Administrative Services, Energy, Transportation, Land Conservation and Development, Geology, and Employment, and Oregon State University and the University of Oregon.*
- *The State Transportation Rule requires land use and transportation plans in metropolitan areas to significantly reduce vehicle miles traveled.*
- *Achieving Oregon Benchmarks related to energy use, transportation, carbon dioxide emissions, air quality and livability may require reducing vehicle miles traveled.*
- *The Employer Commute Options Rule, to be adopted in 1995, will require Portland area employers with 50 or more employees to develop programs that reduce single occupant vehicle travel to and from worksites. The Department of Environmental Quality will approve plans that meet targeted reductions: a 10 percent reduction in trips for employers with 50 to 100 employees and a 20 percent reduction in trips for employers with more than 100 employees.*

Department a bundle. Luckily, Kaiser knew a perfect candidate who was available immediately. "I had someone willing to go work but unwilling to drive the 50 or 60 miles," says Kaiser. That someone was Teresa Lee, now a Transportation Department employee telecommuting nearly full-time from her home near Hood River. She comes in for meetings and to pick up mail, about once every other week.

The Department's telecommuting program allowed Kaiser to quickly hire a qualified replacement. "Telecommuting has given my unit flexibility to take advantage of employee opportunities that we wouldn't otherwise have," he points out.



*"Everything about telecommuting has been positive.... My productivity is as high or higher, just for lack of interruptions."
— Oregon Department of Geology
Executive Assistant Angie Karel*

Employees Confirm Telecommuting's Appeal: What's Good for Them Is Good for the Organization

In turn, Kaiser's employees appreciate the flexibility that telecommuting gives them. And it shows. During the first six months of the Transportation Department's pilot program, telecommuting reduced absenteeism an average of 25 hours per participant.

Kloos, scenic areas coordinator at the Department, recalls the first day she telecommuted, when a pipe broke in her house. She was able to get a plumber to fix the pipe and still work a full eight hours. Since then, Kloos reports many other occasions when telecommuting allowed her to schedule her time more effectively. She has been able to work on snow days and days when she needed to shuttle her boys to camps and classes near their home.

Being available for school activities is why Geology Director Hull suggested Executive Assistant Angie Karel telecommute. At one of her performance evaluations, Karel recalled, "he was asking me what I would really like to do. I've worked at the Department for so many years and my boss knows how important my daughter is to me. I really believe it's important to volunteer in her school."

Now Karel avoids 30 miles of driving by working from home two days a week. Instead of spending time on the road, she spends it in her daughter's classroom.

On her telecommuting days, Karel takes care of the Department's governing board work, sets up meetings, prepares meeting minutes, gets meeting packets ready, and schedules appointments for the director. In fact, she says, "There's not very much that I can't do."

"Everything about telecommuting has been positive," adds Karel. She believes telecommuting has helped her to be better organized at her job. And she says her productivity is "as high or higher, just for lack of interruptions."

Having fewer distractions also appeals to Suzanne Dillard, residential team leader for the Oregon Department of Energy. Dillard says working at the Department's satellite office in the State Office Building in Portland lets her "focus in on one project a little more exclusively."



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– Oregon Department of Energy Residential Team Leader Suzanne Dillard



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– Oregon Department of Energy Resource Specialist Tom Hewes

Dillard reduces her Gladstone home-to-work commute an average of about a hundred miles a week using the Portland satellite office. She also saves vehicle miles traveled for agency business by scheduling her one or two weekly telecommuting days around business appointments in the Portland area. But, she says, "the big benefit, more than miles saved, is I feel I can put in really productive time at the satellite office and still be linked into the Salem office."

Like Dillard, Energy Resource Specialist Tom Hewes says his satellite office is a boost for him as well as his agency. "I get more work done when I'm telecommuting," says Hewes. "It's quieter, there are fewer distractions, and I'm not tired from driving. I come right in and I'm ready to go."

Hewes lives in Philomath and telecommutes from nearby Corvallis on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, borrowing office space at Oregon State University. He has his own phone line and uses a laptop with a fax modem that the Energy Department provides.

Hewes says he does the "same thing" no matter which office he's working out of: "I answer questions from the public, write reports, and talk to other program people throughout the region."

By telecommuting from Corvallis three days a week instead of driving to Salem, Hewes saves 264 miles. He cites other benefits of working at a satellite office: "It gets the resources out in communities. I'm an advocate

for the Department in Corvallis. We've developed one – possibly two – pilot projects in Corvallis because I'm here and I can do the field work."

The Transportation Department also is testing the waters with a drop-in work center in its new quarters in Salem's Mill Creek Office Building. Transportation Data Section Manager Dave Ringeisen plans to make available immediately at least four seats for out-of-town staff to get work done between meetings in Salem. Ringeisen hopes to eventually have 10 to 12 work stations available and to add telephones and computer hook-ups. He also envisions a telework center for Department employees who live in Salem and work at the Portland office.

MAKING TELECOMMUTING WORK

Successful telecommuting programs require support from the top, policy guidelines, employee selection, up-front training, and good communication.

Supervising Telecommuters: Out of Sight, Out of Mind?

How do you know whether telecommuting workers are getting their jobs done if you can't watch them work? "I can see that if a manager has a group that's not self-motivated and not aggressive, there might be



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*– Oregon Department of Energy
Division Administrator Bill Nesmith*



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*– Oregon Department of Energy Program
Manager Mary Lou Blazek*

some concern," acknowledges Blazek, a program manager at the Energy Department. "But when you're working with a group of professionals who have a very strong work ethic, who are motivated self-starters, it just isn't a problem."

Nesmith, a division administrator at the Department, feels the same way. "We have dedicated employees who are committed to what they do. And whether they're here at the office at their desk or at home, I know they're being productive."

Not everyone has a job that's suitable for telecommuting. Some workers need daily, face-to-face contact with managers and customers. Others miss teaming with co-workers on projects, access to files and equipment, and meetings. But many state employees have tasks that can be done away from the office. They include analysis, auditing, computer programming, data entry, design work, editing, evaluations, field visits, graphics, preparing budgets, preparing and monitoring contracts, project management, reading, research, word processing and writing.

Good candidates for telecommuting are employees who are self-motivated and results-oriented, need minimal supervision, and are able to plan and work on their own time.

"I don't think telecommuting is for everybody," says Kaiser, who supervises environmental and major projects at the Transportation Department. But "those people who have proven that they have used it wisely work better, more effectively."

Managers of telecommuting workers must set milestones, deadlines and objectives, and focus on results. Managers also must be able to delegate responsibility and forego direct oversight.

"You have to take the plunge and feel good about the people who are telecommuting," advises Nesmith. "It's a two-way street: Employees who telecommute need to go to extra lengths to make sure their supervisors know they're being productive, that they're accessible and that things are going well. And I think that supervisors have to stretch a little bit."

Telecommuting Can Be Seamless

Telecommuting requires good communication between supervisors and staff. The days that Karel works on Geology Department business from her home, she talks on the phone with the director at least twice. "We both make a conscious effort to keep that work bond and to keep on top of things," says Karel.

Staff also must keep in touch with co-workers and respond quickly to customer calls. A receptionist handles messages at the Geology Department. Telecommuting employees at the Departments of Transportation and Energy use voice mail and call in frequently to get their messages.

Making sure telecommuting would "appear invisible to the public" was an important part of the Transportation Department's pilot program. Program coordinator and participant Donna Robinson says the Department achieved that goal through "professional behavior — especially when handling telephone messages."

Kloos, another participant in the pilot program, says that most of her work for the Transportation Department is with people in Hood River, White Salmon, Salem, Bend and at another office in Portland. "I just call in for my messages so they don't know if I've just been away from my desk temporarily," says Kloos. "It's really transparent. They get their call back from me in a reasonable time frame."

In fact, none of the participants' clients that Robinson surveyed reported any problems with timely return of telephone calls.



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*— Oregon Department of Transportation
Scenic Areas Coordinator Jeanette Kloos*

"Communication hasn't been that big of an issue" at the Energy Department, says Nesmith. "When people are telecommuting they're at work so no one is bashful about calling them at home. We loop telecommuters in on conference calls when we have issues we need to discuss. Telecommuters have been responsible in checking their messages and keeping up with what's going on at the office."

Blazek believes her telecommuting hasn't been a problem for the Energy Department employees she supervises because of "easy access." Staff can call her at home just as easily as they can talk to her at the office, Blazek says. Her home fax machine makes document sharing easy.

Blazek answers her phone at home the same way she does at the office. A separate tape for her home recording device gives a standard office message when she's unavailable to take calls. She calls the Department's voice mail system hourly to get messages and promptly returns calls.

According to Nesmith, one sign of a successful telecommuting program is that the public and clients aren't aware that it exists. Communication is key.

"Telecommuters know that it's important to keep their clients happy," says Nesmith, "so they make an extra effort to stay connected and take care of business."

GETTING STARTED

Nesmith recognizes that state government must be concerned about the public perception of telecommuting. The Energy Department offers training and technical assistance to help state agencies develop successful telecommuting programs.

Pilot programs are a low-risk way to prove telecommuting's worth. Most employers that are believers in telecommuting started with pilot programs.

"I'm pleased with ODOE's approach," says Nesmith. "Not every employee has run out and started telecommuting. We're starting slowly. We're evaluating it carefully as we go. We're balancing it in a way that we still have good coverage in the office."

Another believer in telecommuting's worth, Geology Director Hull is gearing up to make it more available to his employees.

"Initially it will be more costly," he says. "We're getting ready to purchase laptops and full size monitors so people can work more effectively. That additional cost will be behind us in a year. Beyond that, it's a matter of increased productivity."

FIND OUT MORE

Free video tapes and publications are available from the Oregon Department of Energy to help agencies decide whether telecommuting is right for them and to guide program implementation:

"Telecommuting: Management Tool for the '90s" - A 13-minute video tape and companion brochure featuring employers and telecommuters telling how they've benefited from telecommuting.

Telecommuting Handbook - Explains what it takes to set up and manage a telecommuting program, what types of jobs are appropriate for telecommuting, what people make good telecommuters, and what supervisors expect of telecommuters.

Telecommuting Training Kit - A 17-minute training video tape and workbook for telecommuters and supervisors. The program covers telecommuting agreements; communications with peers, supervisors and customers; planning workloads and schedules; setting up a telecommuting office; managing telecommuters; and workplace safety.

To request video tapes and publications, call 1-800-221-8035 (toll-free) or 378-4040 (in Salem).



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