

TELEWORK COLLABORATIVE

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Health Care Organizations Credit Telecommuting With Productivity Gains, Cost Savings and Reduced Traffic



Rick Martin, vice president of operations at St. Charles Medical Center in Bend, Ore., gets away from the office midday. Managers and others at St. Charles have been telecommuting for several years. Martin schedules himself out of the office every couple of months, when he needs "quiet, creative time."

With operating costs rising, health care managers are looking for ways to increase productivity and reduce costs. Some are finding telecommuting pays as a work option for a variety of employees.

Among them are health care administrators, insurance claims processors, medical transcriptionists, nurse executives, secretaries, administrative assistants, personnel staff, information systems staff, public relations representatives, scheduling staff, social workers, therapists, attorneys, accountants and

accounting clerks, computer programmers and software applications developers.

Another impetus for telecommuting in the health care industry is commute-trip reduction mandates in areas with air quality problems. With a mission to promote health, hospitals and medical offices can set an example with telecommuting programs that reduce the number of employees driving to work everyday.

SOUTHWEST WASHINGTON MEDICAL CENTER — VANCOUVER, WASH.

Barbara Johnston, R.N., a project manager and Employee Transportation Coordinator at Southwest Washington Medical Center, wanted to telecommute and encourage others to do so. She began by talking with two department directors, one her own. She found they feared loss of control if employees began telecommuting.

"I told them, 'Who cares whether they keep their pajamas on or if they start work at 8 a.m. if you give them a certain amount of work and they're productive?'"

Johnston gave telecommuting a try, and within a few weeks got the directors to try it themselves. "They got a feel themselves for what can be accomplished," said Johnston. "Without the interruptions, they have been far more productive than they'd ever imagined."

The nonprofit medical center has what Johnston calls an “informal” telecommuting program, with policy-making still in progress. With a staff of more than 2,000, Johnston estimates 25 are telecommuters. They include directors, managers and clerical staff.

Like many managers, Johnston telecommutes two days a month. Others telecommute less frequently, to get specific projects done. Johnston uses her time at home to write policies, procedures, reports and memos and work on special events.

Johnston periodically makes presentations on telecommuting to department directors and managers. Because construction at the facility will consume hundreds of parking spaces, she’s been talking up telecommuting’s potential to reduce parking requirements.

THE TELEWORK COLLABORATIVE

This case study was prepared by Lisa Schwartz, Oregon Office of Energy, for The Telework Collaborative, a joint effort of the states of Oregon, Washington, Arizona and California. Participating agencies are the Oregon Office of Energy, Washington State University Energy Program, Arizona Department of Administration and the California Department of Personnel Administration.

For information on making telecommuting a successful work option for your organization, call the participating agency in your state or visit their Web site:

Oregon: 1-800-221-8035 or
(503) 378-4040 (Salem/TTY)
<http://www.cbs.state.or.us/external/ooe>

Washington: (360) 956-2055
<http://www.energy.wsu.edu/ep/telecomm>

Arizona: (602) 542-3637

California: (916) 327-9143
<http://www.dpa.ca.gov/jobspay/telework/telemain.htm>

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Manager of In-Patient Rehabilitation Cheryl Wright has worked at home once or twice a month for four years. All six Rehabilitation and Respiratory Services managers at Southwest Washington Medical Center telecommute.

Rehabilitation and Respiratory Services Managers Get Valuable Quiet Time

As director of Rehabilitation and Respiratory Services at Southwest Washington Medical Center, Barbara Ramaker was responsible for seven departments, one of which she manages herself. Her open-door policy made her accessible to staff and her management team, but made it difficult to write policies and procedures, prepare for accreditation surveys, do performance appraisals, read and review financial data.

“They all require a level of concentration that is hard to achieve in a regular work environment,” said Ramaker.

Four years ago, Ramaker came up with a solution: telecommuting two days a month. “It allowed me thinking and planning time,” she said. “I am happier with the quality of what I do at home than when I’m interrupted and do it piecemeal.”

Voice mail messages from staff alerted her to any issues she needed to respond to. And with a computer, fax machine and phone at home, said Ramaker, “Most anything that anybody would want from me they could get.”

Ramaker recently resigned from Southwest Washington Medical Center to pursue other interests. But her department carries on the practice she began. “I encouraged all six of my managers to do it and they’ve been equally successful,” said Ramaker.



Manager of Physical and Occupational Therapy Tena Tate telecommutes twice a month on average. Work at home includes preparing presentations, performance appraisals, quality improvement projects and scheduling for staff assignments.

Cheryl Wright, manager of In-Patient Rehabilitation, has been working at home once or twice a month for four years. Her goal is to telecommute one day a week.

Work at home includes outcome analysis, scheduling, research, reading and performance appraisals.

"It's amazing what you can get done in eight hours when you're not interrupted," said Wright. "Quality is a hundred times better, too. I usually take one thing home, and just focus on that one thing until I get it done." Another plus is reduced stress, says Wright.

Wright lets staff know she'll be working at home the day before, so she can take care of any issues they have at the office. "The staff only call me at home when they really need to," said Wright. "Otherwise they leave me a voice mail message."

She checks for messages once in the morning and afternoon. Staff also can leave Wright a message on her pager.

"I'm always available to come in if I need to," said Wright. "But a lot can be taken care of by phone or the next day."

Tena Tate, manager of Physical and Occupational Therapy, has been telecommuting two years, on average two days a month. At home she works on presentations, performance appraisals, quality improvement projects and scheduling.

"Quality is probably the same," said Tate, "but the time it takes to get to that quality is significantly less when I'm working at home. And the frustration of getting to that quality is much lower."

Tate checks voice mail every hour and is reachable by pager. "There are issues that come up that affect my ability to do what I intended to do," said Tate. "But I can have the interruptions when I want them, most of the time."

Secretary Works Smarter, Not Longer

The Family Birthing Center at Southwest Washington Medical Center handles 300 deliveries a month. Judy Clemenson is the secretary for the center and has been with the hospital for 14 years. She works four eight-hour days a week.

"I wasn't able to manage the work load, yet I wasn't willing to work more hours," said Clemenson. "I said to my manager, 'Let me work smarter, not longer.' I took to her an inch-thick folder of forms that needed to be developed and told her, 'If you give me one day a week to work at home, I'll take care of it.' In two telecommuting days, it was done."

Clemenson says her concern for the environment also motivated her to try telecommuting. She wanted to show that telecommuting could work for the hospital.

"Monday is a day I don't drive anywhere," said Clemenson. "I don't leave my house. That's my contribution."

At home, Clemenson uses the computer and software the hospital bought her for designing chart forms, word processing and drafting correspondence.

She saves all her computer work for her telecommuting day because she can't get to it in the office. Most of her time there is spent on the phone — she takes at least 50 calls a day, much of it to schedule people for classes — or taking patients on tours.

TELECOMMUTING DEFINED

Telecommuting is working at home or at an office near home one or more days a week instead of commuting to the main office or place of business. Because telecommuting reduces the work commute, it can conserve fuel, relieve traffic congestion and improve air quality.



Judy Clemenson, secretary of the Family Birthing Center at Southwest Washington Medical Center, takes care of all her computer work on her weekly telecommuting day. She can't get to it at the office, where she's busy scheduling patients for classes and giving tours of the facility.

"There are about 120 employees in the birthing center," said Clemenson. "I do support work for anyone who comes to me. Being able to do a whole bunch of things in that one day reduces stress. That way I can say, 'I'll bring it to you on Tuesday,' because I know I can do it on Monday."

"Her productivity has gone up because she is not constantly distracted by the phone," said Marcia Tolmasoff, nurse-manager of the center and Clemenson's supervisor. "She can focus on what needs to be done and just get it done."

Tolmasoff says that improves Clemenson's morale, which increases her productivity even more.

"It seems to be working real well for her," said Tolmasoff. "It's working for me."

When she's telecommuting, Clemenson checks for voice mail messages at the office and returns patients' calls. "Sometimes she catches them at dinner time," said Tolmasoff. "She flexes her hours to meet the patients' needs."

"I know I can call her voice mail, and she'll pick up her messages and respond," added Tolmasoff.

Tolmasoff herself telecommutes, one day a month. And one of her unit clerks telecommutes one day a month to schedule staff.

"I'm much more productive when I'm away from the phone," said Tolmasoff. "I pick up my voice mail messages and I have e-mail at home. Or I can be reached through my pager. It works great."



Ed Cheeney works exclusively at his home office doing work analysis, writing reports and grant proposals, and preparing documentation for award applications for St. Charles Medical Center. He stays in touch with leader-managers by e-mail and phone, and goes to the hospital for meetings about once a week.

ST. CHARLES MEDICAL CENTER— BEND, ORE.

A nonprofit acute-care hospital and rural referral center in central Oregon, St. Charles Medical Center is growing along with Deschutes County, the state's fastest-growing area. Office space is at a premium, and traffic and parking problems are escalating.

The hospital has a Commute Options Program that provides incentives for employees that carpool, walk or bike to work — or telecommute.

There's no formal telecommuting program, but managers and others have been telecommuting for a few years. Some work at home only on occasion to complete large projects; some work regularly before- or after-hours in a more comfortable home setting; some perform nearly all of their work at home.

Leader-Manager Set to Quit, Offered Work at Home

A few years ago, Leader-Manager Ed Cheeney turned in his resignation. With two teenagers at home needing adult supervision and Cheeney and his wife working full-time, "things were getting out of control," he said.

Instead of accepting his resignation after a 12-year career at St. Charles, his manager suggested he work part-time and the hospital provided him with a

Rick Martin, vice president of operations and Cheeney's supervisor, says Cheeney's telecommuting works for St. Charles because of his established working relationships with managers and because his projects have set time lines and outcomes.



computer so he could work at home. He became the first official telecommuter at St. Charles.

"It's been a very favorable experience for me," said Cheeney. "Working half-time my productivity is equal to 75 percent of full-time because I'm not interrupted by phone calls and impromptu meetings at the office. And work quality is better because I have better concentration and time to put the extra touches on the reports."

With telecommuting and a reduction in hours came a change in position. Cheeney now does project work for leader-managers, primarily work analysis.

He determines how much time staff spend on various tasks, determines whether that's the best use of their time, and helps realign jobs to give staff more time to do what they should be doing — spending more time with patients rather than doing clerical work, for example.

Besides analysis, Cheeney writes reports and grant proposals and prepares documentation for award applications.

"It helps us focus work on specific tasks," said Rick Martin, Cheeney's supervisor and vice president of operations at the hospital.

"It's worked well for us," added Martin. "Part of it's because Ed's worked here a long time. We have a lot of confidence in each other. And because of the kind of work he does. He works on projects on his own. They have a set time line and an outcome."

Martin gets a summary of Cheeney's activities each payday to keep track of how staff are using his time and whether it's been valuable. "It's not a trust thing," said Martin.

In fact, said Cheeney, telecommuting has made him feel even more trusted, and that's boosted morale. "It makes you want to give more," he said.

Cheeney keeps in touch with Martin and leader-managers through the hospital e-mail system and by telephone. He goes to the hospital for meetings about once a week.

Martin telecommutes, too. He schedules himself out of the office every couple of months, when he needs "quiet, creative time."

Nurse-Manager Delivered More Than Twice as Much Work at Home

Colleen Buchanan, R.N., is leader-manager of the Family Birthing Center at St. Charles. She supervises some 70 employees.

Buchanan telecommuted once or twice a month for three years, working on grant proposals, policies, procedures and correspondence. She also worked at home before- and after-hours and on weekends.

"I'm much more productive on project work at home," said Buchanan. "I could get done in about three hours at home what would take eight hours at the hospital because of all the interruptions."

Buchanan used telecommuting "as an organizational tool — a way to stay abreast," she said. "There's so much to stay on top of. I thought it would give me an edge."

Buchanan also was able to get home at a "decent" hour because she could finish work at home instead of staying at the office 'til it was done.

Recently, Buchanan was given sole responsibility for the birthing center, a responsibility she had shared with two other nurses. She hopes she'll be able to resume telecommuting one or two days a month, once she's established her new role with employees and others in the hospital.

There's a team leader who handles day-to-day operations. If there's a problem the team leader can't solve, says Buchanan, she can be paged.

Telecommuting on Trip Develops Into New Work Arrangement

Margie Lussier writes and designs two newsletters for St. Charles, and provides marketing services for the hospital's home health-care service.

She had worked at St. Charles for more than 20 years when she gave up her full-time job to take an extended trip with her husband. She trained her replacement from the road. But it turned out to be the start of Lussier's telecommuting, not the end of her career at the hospital.

There was still plenty of work when she returned from the trip. And the telecommuting? "It extended because it worked," said Lussier, "and because I had the equipment and it was easier than looking for a desk."

Lussier doesn't require an office at the hospital, but goes there about three times a week for meetings and to use the layout software available in Administration.

Like Cheeney, Lussier chose to cut back to an average work week of 20 hours. She says it would be difficult to fit into a regular work schedule taking care of business for her ailing in-laws.

"Telecommuting is simpler for me and is a better buy for the organization," said Lussier. "They're getting the value of a lot of years' experience that I can't give them full-time now. I'm very flexible with my hours. And the only space I'm taking up is an in-basket."

BENEFITS OF TELECOMMUTING FOR HEALTH CARE ORGANIZATIONS

- Boosts productivity for many employees
- Frees up valuable hospital or office space
- Reduces parking requirements and traffic at the facility
- Improves recruitment and retention
- Allows employees to better balance work and family life
- Reduces employees' stress
- Allows employees with disabilities to work at home
- Helps meet commute-trip reduction mandates

Todd Sprague, director of Marketing and Community Relations, oversees Lussier's work. He says e-mail makes it easy. And since the hospital uses e-mail extensively, her telecommuting often is "transparent."

"Most of what she's doing for me is computer-based," said Sprague. "And most of the information derives from e-mail. She doesn't have to see people in person. There's little difference interviewing them in person or by phone."

Sprague has two computers in his office. Lussier checks Sprague's schedule and uses one of the computers to do layout when he's not in the office.

"The system works well," said Sprague. "It gets the job done and doesn't impinge on my space."

Lussier's husband, Jim Lussier, is president of the hospital. "When he goes on trips, he has a computer with him," said Ms. Lussier. "He reads and responds to e-mail and sends documents back and forth. So when he's away from the office he's not out of touch."

Managers who work at home after-hours to make time for family before extending their workday also are learning the potential of telecommuting, said Lussier. "There's top-level awareness of what's possible when you're not sitting at your desk," she said.

KITSAP PHYSICIAN SERVICES— BREMERTON, WASH.

Kitsap Physician Services is a health-care service contractor, providing insurance and managed care products for more than 80,000 beneficiaries on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington state.

The company has a formal telecommuting program, though participation is still small. Employees may telecommute up to two days a week, with approval of their manager and department vice president.

Claims Review Goes Faster for Cost-Benefit Specialist

Monica Nesseth was the first employee in the company to telecommute. She began working at home once a week almost three years ago, when she was responsible for investigating claims for injuries or accidents where a third-party might be involved.

In her new job, she reviews claim reports to make sure the right service codes are used and determines

whether case management should continue or a claim should be released for payment.

The company provided Nesseth with a computer at home that's hooked to its main computer, providing her the same access as anyone in the office.

"I don't have to be in the office to do what I have to do," said Nesseth. "I can take home anything I need for my job."

Nesseth says her productivity is easy to measure whether she's working at home or in the office — just look at the number of claims she's handling.

"At home she can produce a good day-and-a-half-plus compared to in the office," according to Carrie DeBriac, Medical Services manager and Nesseth's supervisor. "It's worked very well."

"Uninterrupted time is the biggest plus — not necessarily having to answer the phone and having people stop by," said Nesseth.

Systems Analyst Reduces Commute Miles — and Increases Family Time

Scott Burgan wanted to reduce his two-hour and 20-minute round-trip commute between Olympia and Bremerton, where he's employed as a systems analyst in the Information Systems Department at Kitsap Physician Services.

He's saving the commute — and more than 200 miles a week — working two days a week at the company's one-nurse office in Olympia. Burgan could have worked at home instead, but didn't want to tie up the family's phone line.

Burgan's work includes programming, analysis and serving as the lead for application development projects. He believes the quality of his work is better when he's at his telecommuting office because he has fewer interruptions and more time to think and focus.

"You can program just about anywhere," said Burgan. "You can do analysis once you collect specifications and requirements. You can write your documentation and your plan without anyone's assistance."

Staff needing his help can reach him at the Olympia office by phone, pager and e-mail.

"Other than not being able to meet face-to-face with the users, nothing is different. They can call me while I work on the terminal at the same time. I've never had to go to Bremerton to troubleshoot."

What is different is the time Burgan gets home to his family the days he's telecommuting. "It makes life a little easier," he said.



Barb Laurenson, transportation systems manager for Kaiser Permanente, is exploring ways telecommuting can help the organization reduce requirements for leased office space. The Information Technology Services Department recently completed a successful telecommuting pilot program.

KAISER PERMANENTE—NORTHERN CALIFORNIA REGION

Kaiser Permanente doesn't know how many telecommuters it has among its 30,000 Northern California region employees, though 4 percent of the region's 1,430 managers responding to a 1994 survey said they supervised telecommuters.

Telecommuting is considered an alternative work schedule under the nonprofit health maintenance organization's flexible work policy and is decided on a case-by-case basis between the employee and the manager.

Office space costs are a major factor in pushing work out of the office, according to Barb Laurenson, transportation systems manager for Community and Government Relations. "Our goal is to reduce our lease space and to more efficiently use space," she said.

Laurenson recently proposed that an employee willing to give up his or her own office — and use hoteling sites or share an office on site — get a subsidy from Facility Management to help set up a home office.

Other forces driving telecommuting at Kaiser Permanente are the need to support managers who have responsibilities at several facilities spread geo-

graphically, to reduce traffic congestion at facilities, and to retain quality employees in a time of downsizing and cost-cutting.

"Telecommuting is one small perk that is tangible that we can afford to give to employees," said Laurenson.

To advance telecommuting in the organization, Laurenson conducted a pilot program in 1995-96 for the Information Technology Services Department. Thirty-one employees agreed to telecommute at least one day a week and provide their own hardware. Kaiser Permanente supplied a second phone line, modem and communications software, and paid monthly phone charges.

"I think the pilot program was a huge success," said Laurenson. She cites constituency-building to support telecommuting, a new telecommuting policy under development with Human Resources, and forthcoming improvements in dial-in access.

Ninety percent of telecommuters in the pilot program felt their productivity increased when they began working at home. More than half the managers noticed an increase in productivity six months into the pilot. Productivity gains were attributed to reduced interruptions and flexibility to work during personal peak-performance hours.

Telecommuting Complements Traveling for Applications Consulting Group

Eleven of the 24 consultants in the Northern California Applications Consulting Group took part in the pilot program. The group plans and implements software applications, develops training materials and trains users.

"There's a high trust level in this department," said Sandi Badley, manager of the group. "They're a high-performing group. So there was no reason not to allow telecommuting. I had to trust myself and my gut feeling that it would work, and it did."

The group now has 15 consultants who telecommute regularly. Work at home includes writing implementation guidelines and training manuals. Other staff work at home before or after meetings out of the office.

"Staff do a lot of traveling among facilities in northern California and to support applications used elsewhere," said Badley. "They may go someplace and spend only half a day there. Instead of coming all the way back to the office, they can go home and telecom-



Sandi Badley (left) supervises a team of 24 Kaiser Permanente applications consultants, 15 of whom telecommute regularly, including Noreen Wright. Badley counts cost savings on business trip mileage, reduced office space requirements and increased productivity among the benefits to the organization.

mute. Or when people need quiet time off-site, they can accomplish twice as much as they would here with the interruptions."

Some staff members telecommute to avoid lengthy commutes, added Badley. "They don't have to fight traffic to get here. They're in a more relaxed state and are more effective. You can see that more work is produced."

Badley cites cost savings on mileage between meeting sites and the main office as another plus. Badley also was able to consolidate office space for four telecommuters through cubicle-sharing — two to a cubicle. They use alternate office space in the regional office, too.

Any of Badley's employees, all applications consultants, may telecommute if they have their own equipment. The organization pays for telephone charges. Telecommuters have access to the mainframe computer, same as staff in the office. Badley says confidentiality concerns are not an issue for her telecommuters because all staff have taken confidentiality training and signed a confidentiality agreement.

Telecommuting days are flexible. Staff simply send Badley a memo, letting her know which days. Badley's main way of communicating with telecommuting employees is e-mail. Everyone carries a pager.

"I've not had any complaints about anybody in my group about availability, work quality or productivity," said Badley.



Elaine Sunnarborg (right) manages Pharmacy Voice-Response Systems for the Northern California region. Gerhard Richter (left) is one of two telecommuting programmers in her group. Sunnarborg says telecommuting boosts morale, which increases telecommuters' commitment to the organization. Also pictured is Anne Kracke, Sunnarborg's supervisor.

Prescription Refills Made Easy by Programmers Working at Home

Need to refill a prescription? If you're a subscriber in Kaiser Permanente's Northern California region, it's easy. Just use the touch-tone phone system designed and maintained by Pharmacy Voice-Response Systems.

Two of the three programmers responsible for the system telecommute one day a week. Because they provide production support, they're always on call in case something goes wrong with the application.

"When you give somebody a benefit, it affects their morale," said Manager Elaine Sunnarborg. "And they're in turn happier to accommodate you. They are real flexible about helping out."

She sees the same attitude toward carrying out project plans with schedule dates for testing and implementation. "We've had a very high success rate in meeting them," said Sunnarborg. "I believe telecommuting is part of that. I feel there's a stronger commitment about meeting a schedule."

Tasks requiring high concentration usually are scheduled for telecommuting days, added Sunnarborg. The programmers say they get more done on their telecommuting days, and Sunnarborg agrees that productivity has gone up.

Kaiser Permanente provided telecommuters "hand-me-down" PCs, a modem, software, and a second phone line and pays monthly phone charges. Sunnar-

borg mostly uses e-mail to keep in touch with telecommuting employees, and everyone carries a pager.

One telecommuter lives halfway between the Silicon Valley and the data center. He saves 70 miles each telecommuting day. That's more than 3,000 miles a year.

He might make more money working in the Silicon Valley, says Sunnarborg. But the telecommuting program she offers is an important benefit. "It's one more reason to stay on this project and employed by Kaiser," she said.

PACC HMO AND HEALTH PLANS—CLACKAMAS, ORE.

Judi Cope is on the road a lot. A PACC account executive, she handles group sales of employee benefits from Marion County south to Douglas County, including the coast. She spends much of her time meeting with human resource professionals and insurance brokers.

"My job is to go to *their* offices," said Cope. "The company was paying for an office I rarely was in."

Until two years ago, the company leased office space for her in Eugene, Ore., and provided a full-time receptionist. That's when Cope's manager asked what she thought about setting up shop at home.

Cope already had been thinking about it, and jumped at the chance. The company moved the office furniture, computer, fax machine and copier into her house and installed phone lines dedicated for office needs.

Now she works full-time out of her home, in a large family room underneath the garage. There's even a separate entrance to the office, on the side of the house.

"I absolutely love it," said Cope. "It is so much more efficient. And I'm much more productive without the distractions of the office."

The company not only saves office space costs; they no longer pay for a receptionist. Cope handles calls from members, providers, potential customers and brokers in her service area as well as troubleshooting for claims.

"At first I was concerned about customers getting voice-mail when I was out of the office, leading to the perception that we had withdrawn from Eugene," said Cope. "But because of the relationships I had established previously, that didn't happen. I haven't

received any concerns about not having a receptionist. I try to return all calls by the end of the day, so they've learned to trust my voice mail."

Like many workers who travel extensively for business, Cope makes good use of her car phone. She also uses e-mail to communicate with PACC colleagues through her hookup to the company's mainframe, and uses CompuServe to keep in touch with an increasing number of clients.

Cope used to run into the office to pick up faxes and other work on weekends and evenings after being on the road. Her home office has eliminated that stress, as well as the daily commute.

Cope's daily mileage savings far exceed the 12-mile round-trip to her former office because she made frequent trips there everyday. "Now, I leave my home office for the entire period of time I'm in the field and don't return until I'm done," said Cope.

"I get a great deal more work time," she added. "There's much less time wasted on needless running around."

So far, Cope is the company's only official telecommuter. "We're informally evolving into telecommuting, testing pieces of it," said PACC Vice President of Human Resources Louise Walczak.

"We've prepared ourselves by having flexible work schedules, by trusting people to produce results when they work early and leave late and their managers aren't here. There's also flexibility in our management process. If a project warrants it, people can work at home."

Marketing representatives likely are PACC's next candidates for telecommuting. Like Cope, they spend much of their time in the field. The company already took the first step by giving them laptop computers.

But before telecommuting extends beyond the demonstration stage, said Walczak, "we have to make sure that we have the infrastructure to support it."

That means devoting resources to developing appropriate policies, practices and measures of performance.

"We have a strong intent but are in the early stages of development," said Walczak. "There's obvious monetary benefit, including space savings. And employees are interested in it. We want them to be satisfied and happy."

MEDICAL TRANSCRIPTION DEPARTMENTS IN OREGON, WASHINGTON, ARIZONA AND CALIFORNIA

Medical transcriptionists interpret and transcribe dictation by physicians and other health care professionals. It's an ideal field for telecommuting because productivity is measured by the number of lines transcribed, quality is measured by accuracy and completeness, and work can be done fairly independently.

Transcriptionists retrieve dictation at home through telephone or computer technology, type the transcripts, and modem the files to the main office. Files are printed automatically along with those produced on site or are printed manually by clerical staff at the office.

Following are profiles of six Medical Transcription departments with telecommuting programs in Oregon, Washington, California and Arizona.

PROVIDENCE ST. VINCENT MEDICAL CENTER—PORTLAND, ORE.

A few years ago, the Medical Transcription area at Providence St. Vincent Medical Center in Portland faced a dilemma: They had a lot more work than work stations. And they were unable to staff the office 'round the clock to match the work load.

"Transcriptionists are like gold," explained Transcription Supervisor Nona DeDual. "They don't have to work evening and night shifts. We couldn't cover our shifts, so we started reaching out into the homes."

"Telecommuting is really a plus for recruitment. Now when I advertise, I say, 'Talk to me about our work from home program.' I get a lot of calls."

Providence St. Vincent started the telecommuting program three-and-a-half years ago with one transcriptionist. Now, 10 of the 30 transcriptionists DeDual supervises work at home, with two more about to begin.



Joanne Soreng, transcription manager at Providence Portland Medical Center, says her telecommuting transcriptionists are reliable and happy to be working at home.

"They're happy, they produce well, and they're reliable," said DeDual. "It's working for us. We're doing twice the work without having to build a new office or buy new furniture."

Nine of the telecommuters work at home full-time; one works four 10-hour days, working at home every other day. DeDual stays in close touch with them all, by phone and by e-mail.

Transcriptionists must work on site and demonstrate that they meet quantity and quality standards before they may telecommute. If telecommuting doesn't work well for the employee, the telecommuting agreement is reversible, pointed out DeDual. "If production or attendance slides, we bring them back in-house for closer supervision.

"It's all measurable," said DeDual. "That's why working at home works really well for us."

Confidentiality of patient records must be maintained whether transcriptionists are working at home or in the office. "They know that a breach of the confidentiality agreement could lead to termination," said DeDual. And, as in the office, all confidential documents transcriptionists work on at home are password-protected.

DeDual plans to expand the telecommuting program, making sure she maintains office coverage for the stat lines to ensure the rapid turnaround of patient records that's required. "The sky's the limit," she said. "We could take on more work and more transcriptionists."

PROVIDENCE PORTLAND MEDICAL CENTER—PORTLAND, ORE.

The telecommuting program at St. Vincent's sister facility, Providence Portland Medical Center, began in November 1993 when Transcription Manager Joanne Soreng picked one of her best transcriptionists to begin working at home full-time.

"The three now off-site have been really reliable," said Soreng. "They've maintained the accuracy and productivity that they had here in-house."

The hospital supplies telecommuters with a PC, modem, transcribing equipment, reference books and a phone line if they need one.

Originally transcriptionists working at home were unable to work on priority reports because they couldn't connect to the main computer to get patient data. "Now that they have access, they do almost every kind of report that we do," said Soreng.

Telecommuters call Soreng if they have any questions. She calls them if there are any problems — "which is not very often," she said. Soreng also calls telecommuters twice a month to verify their hours.

Telecommuters keep in touch with the office through the on-line bulletin board and by attending bimonthly meetings with all 26 transcriptionists on staff.

Soreng considers her telecommuting program a success because the transcriptionists who work at home like it so much. "And I appreciate making them happier doing their job," she said.

CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL—SEATTLE, WASH.

Limited parking space at Children's Hospital in Seattle and commute-trip reduction mandates spurred a telecommuting program and a 17¢-an-hour bonus for employees who get to work other than by driving alone.

The hospital has 18 telecommuters, according to Rideshare Coordinator Judy Bouse. A staff member or affiliate may telecommute if the department allows it and will pick up costs.

Telecommuters include unit coordinators and discharge planners, but most are medical transcriptionists. Some telecommute full-time, others one day a week.

The Medical Transcription Department began a pilot program in 1991 with three telecommuters. Their productivity increased 18 percent, but part of that was because they no longer had to print their own work, according to Edith Berkompas, Medical Transcription supervisor at that time.

The remainder of the transcriptionists were sent home to work by 1995, vacating expensive leased office space in Northgate. Productivity of the new telecommuters also increased, but less dramatically – by 7 percent, said Berkompas.

Overall quality remained high, she said, but more reports with blanks and more corrections for name spelling and dates required more follow-up for Berkompas and her assistant. Corrections decreased when telecommuters gained access at home to the hospital computer.

Berkompas says transcriptionists working at home have to make sure they don't get "too intense" about the work. "There aren't interruptions," she explained. "You need to pace yourself. You get a base salary plus incentives. People are very motivated to put a lot of work out."

Of the department's 12 transcriptionists, 11 work at home entirely. Some are part-time transcriptionists. One transcriptionist works on-site at night to cover stats.

During the day shift, telecommuters can handle the stats and modem the files to the office. Other reports are modemed to the office three times a day, at specific times, staggering the work load for the two staff members on site who print and distribute reports and fax stats to physicians. There's also a temporary employee on site who answers the phones and handles mail.

The department has extensive telecommuting guidelines. Telecommuter agreements document work arrangements. The department provides a computer, modem, software, transcribing equipment, reference books, and a chair and pays for installing a second phone line and monthly phone charges.

Transcriptionists attend monthly staff meetings and retrieve e-mail messages daily. They also receive information such as hospital schedules regularly by U.S. mail.

After supervising the department for nearly six years, Berkompas was diagnosed with cancer more than a year ago. With the intensive treatment she was receiving, she did not have the stamina to come into the



Of the 12 transcriptionists at Children's Hospital in Seattle, Wash., 11 work at home entirely. Medical Transcription Supervisor Marita Meyer says they're more productive.

office and manage the department. She was able to fall back on transcribing at home, six or seven hours a day.

"I don't know what I would have done otherwise," said Berkompas. "I may have had to go for disability insurance."

Marita Meyer took over as department supervisor seven months ago. A transcriptionist she hired just completed training on site and joined the other transcriptionists who telecommute.

"There is some portion of time that is an adjustment, probably for everybody – adjusting to working at home, a new office space, how to manage home duties and the distractions of home," said Meyer.

But far outweighing the challenges are the many advantages telecommuting offers employees, she says. Among them is avoiding the daily work commute. Meyer's telecommuters live as much as 30 miles from the office. Besides the time and money they save and the reduction in stress, the annual fuel savings are enormous.

Telecommuters also have some flexibility in work hours. Berkompas, for example, appreciates the flexibility that telecommuting gives her to occasionally spend time in her children's classrooms. She notifies Meyer of her plans, and makes up the time later in the day. "It's a great opportunity," said Berkompas.

"Most seem very much in favor of it," said Meyer. "They are more productive. It does seem to be working for the staff and the hospital."

ST. LUKES MEDICAL CENTER— TUCSON, ARIZ.

The Medical Transcription Department at St. Lukes Medical Center began its telecommuting program two years ago because “it was an easy and fast way” of getting work done by staff who lived scattered throughout the valley, according to Evonne Garza, department supervisor.

“It’s been an excellent cost-saver for us,” said Garza. “Employees who telecommute are more dependable when they’re ill. They may not feel well enough to drive into work. Or maybe the headache goes away in an hour. It’s real easy to dial in and telecommute.”

Another benefit of the telecommuting program, says Garza, are employees more apt to work around the clock to provide coverage. It’s also been a boon to recruitment.

“People are knocking down my door to do it,” said Garza. “I have a lot more people applying for positions because of telecommuting.”

Five transcriptionists on contract work at home full-time; three transcriptionists on staff telecommute — two work at home full-time, one works at home two days a week. Five transcriptionists and two clerks work entirely on site.

Garza submits daily to the financing department reports indicating productivity of transcriptionists, including telecommuters. “I find they are more productive,” said Garza. Twice a month, Garza calculates incentive pay for production exceeding 175 lines an hour. “Telecommuters tend to make more of that money,” she said.

As for quality, Garza reviews weekly two reports at random from each transcriptionist. “Telecommuters are just as accurate” as others in the department, she said.

All telecommuters attend monthly department meetings and read the staff notes that Garza puts on the system everyday. “Maybe it’s a new dictator, or an overtime issue, or to be careful with a certain physician’s reports,” said Garza. She also leaves “note logs” for each telecommuter that they check when they sign in for the day and when they quit. “The communications are there,” said Garza. “They’re not at a disadvantage.”

Telecommuters provide their own computer. The department provides the dictation unit, modem and software.

At first, there were problems with software setup and slow modems. Now that all the bugs have been worked out, said Garza, “I could probably install a modem and software at somebody’s home in 10 minutes.”

Garza said a barrier to increasing the number of telecommuters is her additional work load filling in blanks on reports from telecommuters who can’t discern a medical term in the dictation. In the office, co-workers help one another. Telecommuters type “supervisor” in bold at the top of any reports they turn in with blanks. Garza fast-forwards the dictation to the blank, adds the missing words to the report and prints it.

THOMAS-DAVIS MEDICAL CENTERS— TUCSON, ARIZ.

Telecommuting transcriptionists at Thomas-Davis Medical Centers solved that problem: They call one another to get help discerning any words they aren’t familiar with. So Manager Barbara Reed isn’t burdened with reports with blanks.

The Medical Transcription Department initiated a telecommuting program in 1993 because transcriptionists were asking to telecommute, the department was growing, and they were running out of office space. Reed started with a one-year trial program.

Today, nine transcriptionists — half of her transcription staff — telecommute full-time. They come into the office once a month for a department meeting. Reed says she still needs half her transcriptionists on site to take care of stats and specialized reports.

“The program is for my star employees,” said Reed. “Normally their productivity goes up between 10 and 20 percent. The at-home employees, because they’re able to control their work environment, are able to produce more work than in-house staff.”

Quality’s equally important, says Reed. To stay in the program, telecommuters must maintain accuracy levels. “If they drop below the standard level, they are counseled and may be brought in-house for additional supervision and counseling,” she said.

The department has a formal telecommuting policy. Employees must work in-house at least three months before they are eligible to telecommute. Potential telecommuters complete an application and sign an agreement outlining their responsibilities. They must provide their own computer and a second phone line if they wish, and pay monthly phone charges. The

department provides a modem, transcribing equipment and reference books.

Telecommuting's not for all employees, says Reed. "They have to be self-disciplined, self-starters." She also makes sure they're "savvy" with computer equipment, because they're expected to set up the hardware and software themselves.

Reed has several meetings with the employee before they begin working at home. At the last meeting, said Reed, she explains "what I expect from them, quality- and quantity-wise, when to call us and when not to call."

Transcriptionists in the office have some degree of flexibility in work hours, so long as they work 40 hours a week. Telecommuters have even more flexibility. "We expect they're going to work the days they're supposed to work," said Reed. "Whether they work in the morning or in the afternoon or in the evening is simply not an issue."

Telecommuters time their work, and at the end of their shift they "zip" their files together and modem the work to the office. A clerk prints the files the next morning.

Reed says her experience supervising telecommuters has been "extremely positive." Besides increased productivity, employee satisfaction has increased. "I'm able to retain top-quality transcriptionists. Sick leave for at-home employees is minimal, because they're given 24 hours to do their shift. If they're not feeling well, they can lay down for a couple of hours and get up and do their work."

"This is a win-win program for management and employees," added Reed.

HOAG MEMORIAL HOSPITAL PRESBYTERIAN—NEWPORT BEACH, CALIF.

The Medical Transcription telecommuting program at Hoag Memorial Hospital Presbyterian began in 1991 with a request from a transcriptionist who wanted to begin working at home instead of returning to work in-house following the birth of her second child. The department now has four transcriptionists who telecommute full-time and eight who work on-site.

"Productivity from the home-based transcriptionists remains at a consistently high level," said Supervisor Diane Walker. "They simply do not have the frequency of distractions as those working in-house."

To be eligible for the telecommuting program, transcriptionists must maintain their performance at a senior transcriptionist level and have worked on site a sufficient length of time to demonstrate expertise with systems, equipment, software, department policies and procedures, and the variety of dictations and types of reports.

The department provides the medical transcription software package and transcription unit. Telecommuters must provide their own work space, desk and chair, computer equipment, word processing and communications software, fax machine and reference library. They must have their own maintenance agreements and are responsible for getting their equipment fixed if it breaks down. There's a workstation in-house they can use if their system crashes. Walker said that's happened only three times since the program began.

Telecommuters also must install a second phone line and pay monthly charges. Three telecommuters live within the local calling area of the hospital; one minimizes toll charges by paying an additional fee for a local number with a wider calling zone.

Telecommuters have designated work hours and come to the office monthly for staff meetings and continuing education opportunities and to pick up dictator rosters, drug lists and other information. Any material that would sit more than a week before the telecommuters are due in the office is sent by mail.

Walker says there are additional management activities to consider in running a telecommuting program. She spends more time on memos, planning, procedures and logistics. She can't give feedback as meaningfully as she could face-to-face. Telecommuters don't always have access to all the patient database information they need and have to call the office sometimes to get it. And since there's no e-mail system for employees, Walker has to fax the information that transcriptionists need.

Overall, though, Walker says her experience supervising telecommuters has been "very positive." The benefits extend to the community as well: The group of four telecommuting transcriptionists save roughly 38,000 miles a year on their work commute.

This publication will be made available in accessible formats upon request.

TELECOMMUTING SERVICES FOR OREGON EMPLOYERS

The Oregon Office of Energy is working to help make telecommuting a successful work option. We offer a 35 percent state tax credit and low-interest loans for telecommuting equipment. We also help organizations determine how telecommuting can work for them and serve as an ongoing resource as they advance their telecommuting program. We train supervisors and employees on site. We research successful Oregon telecommuting programs and produce case studies. And we track down information employers need to develop a telecommuting program that works for them.

To learn more about telecommuting, call the Oregon Office of Energy toll-free: 1-800-221-8035. Or visit our Web site:
<http://www.cbs.state.or.us/external/ooe>

TELECOMMUTING SERVICES FOR WASHINGTON EMPLOYERS

The Washington State University Energy Program is working to help employers use telecommuting as an effective management strategy. We provide a range of services and resources including:

- Helpful tools such as a telecommuting guidebook, video tapes and other informative materials
- One-on-one consulting for employers considering how telecommuting can work for them
- Assistance with program implementation issues such as policy development, telecommuter selection and program evaluation
- Training for supervisors and employees
- Ongoing assistance as employers advance their telecommuting programs

To learn more about telecommuting, call us at (360) 956-2055, or visit our Web site at
<http://www.energy.wsu.edu/ep/telecomm>



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