



TELECOMMUTING

City of Portland Gives Telecommuting a Thumbs Up Following a Six-Month Test



Jan Hazzard manages the office of Mayor Vera Katz. Hazzard works at home on Wednesdays, processing bills for payment, reconciling accounting reports and coding documents for filing. That leaves her more time when she's in the office to assist staff.

The city of Portland invested six months in a pilot telecommuting project. The results: happier employees, many of whom were able to increase the amount of work they do — and do it better — and a permanent telecommuting program for city staff.

The City of Portland Energy Office directed the pilot project for 30 city employees in 11 bureaus. The Oregon Department of Energy provided funding.

“Our interest was to reduce fuel consumption and air pollution by making it easier for people to drive less,” says Susan Anderson, director of the Portland Energy

Office. “But we learned from city employees that telecommuting also is a great tool for improving morale.”

Among the jobs held by the telecommuters are hearings officer, planner, human resources analyst, administrative supervisor, management information systems (MIS) support technician, computer-aided design and drafting (CADD) technician, programmer analyst, community relations assistant, program specialist, customer services representative and office manager.

Participants began working at home one day a week following a half-day training for them and their supervisors. Many telecommuters commuted by bus, MAX, carpool or bicycle the days they worked at the main office. Commute times avoided on telecommuting days ranged from one to two hours.

Supervisors found that telecommuting improved employee morale, increased effectiveness and boosted staff productivity. They attributed the benefits to an improved work environment with fewer interruptions.

The quality and quantity of the telecommuters' work improved slightly or remained the same, as did the overall productivity of their work groups.

“The City Council and I have given our wholehearted endorsement to telecommuting as an option for city employees,” says Portland Mayor Vera Katz. “Telecommuting is one more way government can help citizens get more value for their tax dollars, while helping the environment at the same time. This is the kind of innovative solution to maintaining livability that Oregon's been known for.”



Nelda Skidmore is a senior human resources analyst for the Bureau of Personnel Services. She writes compensation and classification reports at her home office on her weekly telecommuting day.

PERSONNEL ANALYST CONCENTRATES ON REPORTS ON TELECOMMUTING FRIDAYS

Nelda Skidmore is a senior human resources analyst with the Bureau of Personnel Services. She spends much of her time meeting with supervisors and employees to collect information on duties and responsibilities of city positions and comparing it with information from other jurisdictions. Fridays are devoted to analysis, documentation and report-writing. She does that work at her home office — “a better place to do it,” says Skidmore — and skips the 45-minute round-trip bus commute.

“Our open-office environment leads to a lot of interruptions,” says Skidmore. “When I’m telecommuting my concentration is so much better. I can get more done because I can limit interruptions.”

Allan Messer is Skidmore’s counterpart at the bureau. They divide up many tasks, but collaborate on larger projects involving compensation policies, best practices and organizational structure.

They check in regularly with one another on Skidmore’s telecommuting days. “We like to keep track of what we’re doing and how things are going,” says Messer.

Occasionally Skidmore asks Messer to fax a hard-copy document in response to another agency’s inquiry or, since the city does not provide a telephone calling card, to return a long-distance phone call — “no task requiring any length of time,” says Messer.

Skidmore has a copy of most typically-used work-related documents at her home office. Occasionally she calls Messer to get additional information. “If it would take a lot of time, she typically saves that for the next day she’s in the office,” says Messer.

Skidmore returns the favor in spades. Because the team knows Skidmore can avoid the “constant phone calls, e-mail beeps, people walking through the door and fires to put out” when she works at home, says Messer, “she completed two complicated reports we weren’t able to get done in the office.

“Nelda’s telecommuting has been really good for us. We can organize our work so that complex reports that might take several days to complete in the office can be done in a day at home.”

Their team leader, Compensation Manager Judi Jones, agrees that Skidmore’s telecommuting is good for the team. “She’ll come back on Monday with three or four reports that are really well-thought out.” Jones herself telecommutes at least once a month.

In the beginning, Skidmore made communications with Jones a little more formal on her weekly telecommuting day. “I’d go over everything I’d be doing that day,” says Skidmore. Now, they simply call whenever they need to.

Sometimes the team has three-way phone calls on days Skidmore works at home. On the occasional Fridays when a bigger staff meeting is necessary, they connect her from home to a speakerphone in the meeting room. Skidmore also cancels or changes her telecommuting day when staff are discussing issues best suited for face-to-face meetings or when she needs to be in the office to get a project done.

Jones says that telecommuting fits well with Personnel Services’ work with bureaus on improving schedule flexibility and increasing employee diversity. Telecommuting can allow flexibility for employees with young children and help bring into the workplace people with disabilities, she explains.

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.

"I feel it's an important option that the city provides employees, depending on the situation and the needs of both the organization and the employee," adds Skidmore. "It's another way for an organization to be a little more flexible and actually come out ahead."



Jim Carlton is a computer-aided design and drafting technician for the Bureau of Environmental Services. He works four 10-hour days at his home office. If he had to go to the bureau office everyday, Carlton believes, he might only be able to work part-time because of the inconvenience of the commute and his exercise needs.

WORKING AT HOME MAKES JOB EASIER FOR CADD TECHNICIAN AFTER ACCIDENT

Jim Carlton does computer-aided design and drafting for storm and sanitary sewers and water quality and water detention systems for the Bureau of Environmental Services.

An all-terrain vehicle accident a few years ago left Carlton a quadriplegic.

"For people with handicaps, it's essential to work in an environment that works for them," says Carlton. "In the U.S., there are about 500,000 people with spinal cord injuries and 70 percent of them don't work. It's probably because of the hassle. If they can be in an environment that works for them, they can be produc-

tive. I like having my home office with things set up just the way I need them. Everything is easier."

If Carlton had to go to the Environmental Services office everyday, he believes he might only be able to work part-time because of the inconvenience of the commute and his exercise needs. He estimates his round-trip commute to be about two hours by van.

Telecommuting has allowed Carlton to continue full-time work. He works four 10-hour days at his home office. His typical workday begins at 8 a.m. He works until noon, takes two hours for lunch and exercise outside in his wheelchair, then works from 2 p.m. to dinner-time. He continues work after dinner as late as 9:30 p.m. He attends staff meetings at the bureau's downtown office about once a month.

"I try to check in with coworkers often," he says, "even to find out who's having a baby or what vacations people are taking."

Carlton's computer is connected to the city's network. He gets data from the network, does his drawings, sends completed projects to the bureau's plotter for printing, and sends and receives coworkers' e-mail.

PORTLAND'S TELECOMMUTING GUIDELINES

The city of Portland adopted telecommuting guidelines following the successful pilot project. Telecommuting is allowed as a management tool and work option for non-represented employees. It may be used to increase productivity, reduce commute trips and accommodate special needs of employees.

The guidelines outline criteria for employee eligibility. Managers define how telecommuting will work for each telecommuter.

Special conditions and needs of telecommuters are addressed in telecommuting agreements between employees and their immediate supervisor, with approval of the bureau director. Among other conditions in the agreement, employees agree to call the main office for telephone messages a specified number of times on telecommuting days and to return calls promptly.

The city plans to expand its telecommuting guidelines to cover represented employees.



Mike Murray is CADD manager for the Bureau of Environmental Services and Jim Carlton's supervisor. He sees telecommuting as a way managers can support and encourage employees.

Mike Murray, CADD manager for the bureau, says it's easy to quantify his employees' productivity, whether they're at their bureau desk or their home office. "Because I've done this job myself, I know how long it takes to draft a set of plans. Jim gets the work done when it needs to be done."

Murray sees telecommuting as a way managers can support and encourage their employees. "Production depends on the person's commitment to their work. One way to foster the commitment is to assign the work and let them go for it. Let them take work home and they realize they're being trusted and as a result they have a better work product."

Dave Nunamaker, an Environmental Services engineering associate, designs the storm and sanitary sewer systems that Carlton drafts plans for. Nunamaker usually sends Carlton the designs and redline plans by mail. If there's not time for delivery, Nunamaker takes them to Carlton's house.

Nunamaker says the main drawback to Carlton telecommuting is not always being able to review the

designs and plans with him immediately. "A lot of things can be covered over the phone, and that works pretty well. But sometimes you need to see the drawings."

Another engineering associate in the bureau, Steve Townsen, says computer software may be the answer. "We now have a program where I can view his drawings and make comments. It creates another layer — a redline. That way Jim has the comments and I can draw right on the drafts. Since we've gotten the program things are working out pretty well."

Both Nunamaker and Townsen rely on the phone to keep in touch with Carlton. If he's away from his desk, Townsen leaves a message on the answering machine that says "You can pull up the redlined file and go for it."

MAYOR'S OFFICE MANAGER CRUNCHES NUMBERS WITHOUT INTERRUPTION

Jan Hazzard is team leader for support staff, prepares the office budget, processes bills for payment, manages payroll, maintains personnel documents, and tracks documents for boards and commissions for the office of Mayor Katz.

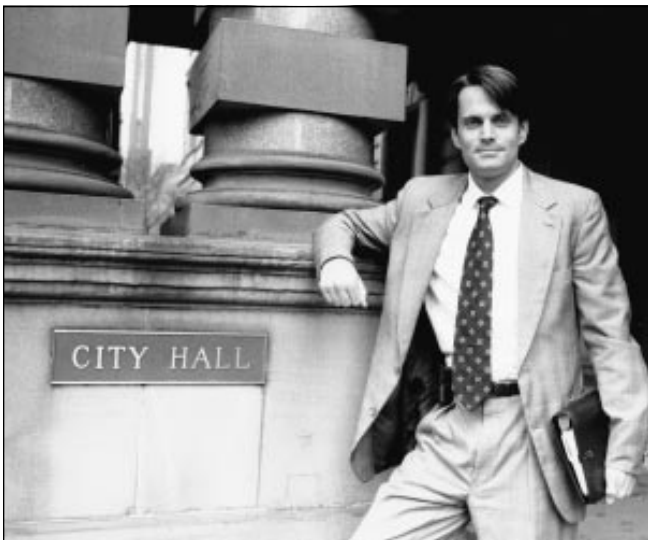
Hazzard works 30 hours a week, spread over three days. She communicates by telephone regularly with the office, even on her days off.

She began telecommuting informally, processing bills for payment on her home computer on one of her days off. Now she spends Wednesdays at home on that task, saving a 17-mile round-trip commute.

"I'm much more productive getting that particular assignment done at home," says Hazzard. "I'm not interrupted and the inconveniences have been minor." Better concentration, she says, means work quality is "bound to be better." Having more time in the office for interacting with staff is another plus.

Other work Hazzard does at her home includes reconciling accounting reports and coding documents for filing. She believes that telecommuters should work on projects that are "trackable" so managers know what employees are accomplishing at their home office.

Sam Adams, her supervisor, agrees. "Telecommuting requires a job description with performance measures that allow you to measure the work that's getting done," he says.



Sam Adams is Mayor Katz's chief of staff and Jan Hazzard's supervisor. Among the benefits of telecommuting, says Adams, are a boost in employee morale and work quality.

Chief of staff for Mayor Katz, Adams raises another requirement that telecommuting must meet for Portland city government — the City Council's directive that all city bureaus work collaboratively. "Telecommuting could be at conflict with that goal if we have employees at home isolated from the rest of their team," he says. "But this can be overcome as we overcome technology barriers."

The city recently helped Hazzard pay for a modem to access the network for e-mail and to get on-line with the city's financial management system. She had been getting any information she needed by calling Tricia Giering, staff assistant.

Giering says Hazzard's telecommuting doesn't have any major impact on the workload of the office. "If an urgent call came through on her telecommuting day for a proclamation or a letter of support, which we share responsibility for, I would be the one to do it," says Giering. "It's easy to do, so it's not a problem."

"Overall I'm very positive about the project, for Portland, for Jan and our office," says Adams. "Once we address the technological barriers it will be a fantastically productive option for city employees."

Among the benefits of telecommuting, says Adams, are a boost in employee morale and work quality. "It increases the ease in which they're able to complete a job and takes away the stress of having to travel to work. It also has a positive impact on the quality of work. The home environment allows a heightened degree of creativity."

TELECOMMUTING ALLOWS COMPUTER ANALYST TO PLAN AHEAD, NOT JUST TROUBLESHOOT

Karen Lundsten, MIS support analyst in the Finance/Support Services Division of the Bureau of Maintenance, spends most of her time troubleshooting network or system problems, upgrading hardware, and training and assisting users. That makes it hard to get to her other duties: keeping up with changes in computer technology and software, maintaining a database on all the computers, figuring the best ways to upgrade the bureau's computers and network, and thinking up computer tips and tricks that improve productivity in the office.

Lundsten thought she was a perfect candidate for the city's telecommuting project. But she knew she would have to find a way to fix any network or system problems that arose when she was telecommuting.

"I was nervous about it because I couldn't see how I could troubleshoot remotely," says Lundsten. "But I've only had to come into the office three times on a telecommuting day in two years because I wasn't able to fix the problem from home."

Instead of driving alone to work as she does the rest of the week, on Wednesdays Lundsten avoids a 12-mile round-trip commute by working at home.

Lundsten's pager lets her know she has a telephone message whether she's working at the office or at home. She has support backup from Larry Wolf, support services manager. They work out by phone solutions to problems that come up. Lundsten usually

UNIONS

The city is talking with two unions about extending the opportunity to telecommute to represented employees. The District Council of Trade Unions (DCTU) and the City of Portland Planning and Engineering Employees Association (COPPEEA) represent city employees in positions suitable for telecommuting. Examples of job classifications represented by DCTU include clerical specialists, procurement assistants, data entry clerks, police data technicians and senior accountants; classifications represented by COPPEEA include technicians, engineers, planners and architects.



Sue Anderson is director of the Portland Energy Office, which initiated the city's telecommuting program. Participating employees drive less, thus reducing fuel consumption and air pollution. Anderson says the city plans to increase the number of employees who telecommute to help achieve target reductions in commute travel in compliance with the ECO rules (see box, right). Anderson herself is a telecommuter.

can diagnose problems from her home office by connecting to the bureau's network.

Wolf says Lundsten has asked for his help more often since she began telecommuting — primarily to reset printers. But Wolf sees that as part of his job. "We work in teams," he explains. "We try to enhance each other's role as much as we can."

"I thought it would be more difficult, but actually it's worked out quite well. We understand that telecommuting is going to become more and more popular as a way of doing business. I don't have any qualms about trying something innovative."

"Getting more work done — I see that as the number one benefit," says Lundsten. "The city also gets a more knowledgeable person because of the time spent in research."

EMPLOYEE COMMUTE OPTIONS (ECO) RULES

The ECO rules are part of a 1993 law passed by the Oregon Legislature to help protect the health of Portland-area residents from air pollution and to ensure that the area complies with the federal Clean Air Act — avoiding restrictions on industrial growth and sanctions on federal transportation funds.

The ECO rules require employers with more than 50 employees to develop strategies to reduce the number of commute trips by their employees who drive alone to work.

Offering a telecommuting program for employees is one option for meeting the requirements.

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality is responsible for implementing the ECO rules. For more information, call Patti Seastrom at DEQ: (503) 229-5944.

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

This publication was prepared with the support of the Oregon Department of Transportation and Federal Highway Administration, Grant No. X-STP-0000(3), and the U.S. Department of Energy, Grant No. DE-FG51-95R020558-A001. However, any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of these agencies.

TELECOMMUTING SERVICES FOR OREGON EMPLOYERS

The Oregon Department of Energy and the City of Portland Energy Office are working to help make telecommuting a successful work option. We offer:

- A 35 percent state tax credit and low-interest loans for telecommuting equipment
- Publications, video tapes and one-on-one consulting for employers considering how telecommuting can work for them
- Training for supervisors and employees
- Case studies on successful Oregon telecommuting programs
- Ongoing assistance as employers advance their telecommuting programs

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

**Oregon Department of Energy
625 Marion St. N.E.
Salem, OR 97310**

**Receptionist and TTY: (503) 378-4040
Fax: (503) 373-7806
Toll-free: 1-800-221-8035**

June 1996

