Questions and

Answers about Telecommuting for Persons with Disabilities: A Guide for People with Disabilities

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ILRU is a program of TIRR, a nationally recognized, free-standing rehabilitation facility for persons with physical disabilities. TIRR is part of TIRR systems, which is a not for-profit corporation dedicated to providing a continuum of services to individuals with disabilities. Since 1959, TIRR has provided patient care, education, and research to promote the integration of people with physical and cognitive disabilities into all aspects of community living.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Guide for People with Disabilities

Introduction

This guide is for persons with disabilities who want more information about telecommuting. Telecommuting is the practice of working at home or at a satellite office site instead of at a central office work site. Most individuals who telecommute do so one or more days a week and not every day. Some telecommuters with disabilities, however, do work full-time or nearly full-time in their homes.

The guide is based mainly on a national mail survey of approximately 500 employers conducted in early 1995. Additional information for the guide came from telephone interviews; reviews of materials submitted by corporations and by departments of federal, state, and local governments; and analysis of prior telecommuting studies.

About 160 employers had responded at the time this guide was being written. Responses came from all types of employers: some employers did not track if persons with disabilities were among their organization's telecommuters; some employers did not have telecommuting employees with disabilities; and some employers did have telecommuting employees with disabilities.

The purpose of this guide is to present information that employees and potential employees with disabilities who may wish to begin telecommuting should consider. A companion guide addresses related issues from an employer's perspective. Both guides were prepared in a question-and-answer format for ease of communication.

Grateful acknowledgments are made to the sponsors of the research and the guides: The Dole Foundation for Employment of People with Disabilities, The JM Foundation, and the Rose M. Badgeley Residuary Charitable Trust. All views and opinions expressed are those of the research team and not the sponsoring organizations.

Overview

Q Do many businesses or government agencies employ telecommuters who have disabilities?

A Yes. A researcher at the Business School of The University of Texas (UT) at Austin in cooperation with The Institute for Rehabilitation and Research (TIRR) conducted a recent nationwide survey. This research identified more than 35 organizations that employ telecommuters who have disabilities.

The numbers of private corporations and government agencies were roughly equal with a limited number of nonprofit agencies. The organizations ranged in size from less than 50 employees to the U.S. Department of Defense. Geographically, all regions of the United States were represented as were organizations from Canada, the United Kingdom, and Japan.

> The survey found several distinct types of telecommuting programs established for persons with permanent and temporary disabilities.

The number of employers with telecommuters who have disabilities is greater than 35 organizations, without doubt, for three reasons.

- About half of all organizations responding to the survey do not track if they have telecommuters with disabilities, and some of these organizations have more than 1,000 telecommuters.
- Programs are known to include employees with disabilities but the surveys were not completed.
- The survey effort was limited to approximately 500 employers because of resource constraints.

Q What types, of telecommuting initiatives involve employees with disabilities?

A Several distinct types of initiatives exist although some overlap.

- Some programs and projects are established solely for persons with disabilities. Some have been in existence for more than seven years while others are relatively new. Generally, the older programs were set up for individuals with permanent, physical impairments. The more recently established programs often were set up not only for such individuals but also for the reemployment of employees with temporary disabilities.
- Another type of program is less formal and usually does not include a formal telecommuting program or telecommuting policy. In this instance, employees are working in unique job accommodations for temporary conditions such as pregnancy complications, cancer treatments, broken limbs, family medical emergencies, or other conditions.
- A third type of program occurs when employees with disabilities participate as part of an employer's larger telecommuting program. According to survey results, this program is the most frequently used type of telecommuting for employees with disabilities.
- Some telecommuting projects are in reality home-based employment programs. These programs are for individuals who, because of the nature of their disabilities or transportation difficulties, are unable to have a job in which regular and reliable on-site attendance is required.
- Employees with disabilities, who often have computer-related training, have been placed in probationary positions with for- profit firms by nonprofit agencies. Although many of these individuals are able to work on-site, others are not, and they perform some of their duties off-site. These employers often do not consider that they have formal telecommuting programs or policies in effect.

Q Why do firms, organizations, and governments use telecommuting for employees with disabilities?

> Try to emphasize the potential benefits of telecommuting for your employer rather than the benefits for you.

A Telecommuting might be seen as a work place option that primarily serves employees' needs. However, nearly all telecommuting programs involving persons with disabilities are established to fill employers' needs. The results of the UT-TIRR survey show that the most important reasons for creating and maintaining this work place practice are to accomplish the following:

- Retain valuable employees and/or reemploy trained employees, thereby lowering employee recruitment and training costs and in some cases reducing workers' compensation expenses.
- Respond to particular employees' medical or family situations, keep morale high, and retain their loyalty.
- Fill positions for which recruitment had been difficult or in which turnover had been high, for example, evening shift jobs, part-time positions, or jobs that previously were in crime-ridden locations.
- Comply with trip reduction and air quality regulations in certain metropolitan areas of the United States.

On the survey, 15 percent of employers indicated they had started telecommuting to increase diversity of their work force and ten percent to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Therefore, if you are interested in telecommuting, try to emphasize the potential benefits for your employer rather than the benefits for you. Remember that telecommuting is first and foremost a work practice option available to management and secondarily an employee benefit.

Q Are most firms satisfied with telecommuting?

A Nearly all employers are positive about their telecommuting employees. Fewer than three percent of employers indicated they had terminated their telecommuting efforts. However, some organizations probably did not respond to the survey because there were disenchanted with telecommuting. A majority of employers (57 percent) believes employees have become more productive since beginning to telecommute, while only six percent believe employees' work outputs have declined.

Q Are employees with disabilities satisfied with their current telecommuting arrangements?

A We did not directly ask employees with disabilities if they were pleased with their job arrangements, so we cannot provide a definitive answer to this question.

Some indirect evidence does exist, however. According to employers, very few individual telecommuters with disabilities have stopped telecommuting. Those who have stopped generally did so for the following reasons: they moved away; their disability became more limiting; or they took a job with another firm. Only a handful stopped telecommuting to resume their prior work

schedule at the employer's main location.

Successful Telecommuting

Q What are the requirements for successful telecommuting by employees with disabilities in contrast to telecommuting by nondisabled employees?

A The essential requirements are the same. For any telecommuting program or individual telecommuting work arrangement to succeed, employers maintain certain "musts" needs to be addressed.

- **Type of work assignment.** Your job duties and tasks must be capable of being completed off-site and without significant interaction with other employees.
- **Supervision.** Your supervisor must be able to manage and monitor your work output and feel comfortable that you will be productive even if he or she cannot see you perform work activities during the day.
- **Measurement.** Your completed work should be subject to measurement so that your supervisor will be able to assess your productivity.
- **Equipment.** You need the proper equipment to perform your work especially in interfacing with your employer's information technologies, for example, your employer's local area network.
- **Telecommuting work site.** An employee's work site must be conducive to completing assignments and free from distractions or interruptions. Ideally, you will have a separate work location that is away from family and personal living areas.

Q What do I need to do as an employee to be a successful telecommuter?

A First, you need to have the appropriate qualifications such as skills and work abilities to complete the tasks.

You should be able and willing to work relatively independently. If you are not a self-starter or someone who can manage time properly, telecommuting may not be for you. Also, to be a successful telecommuter you will need to set ground rules and inform family members, friends, and neighbors about the type of interruptions you will tolerate and when you will tolerate them.

Part of managing your time is planning your tasks. Most successful telecommuters rearrange their schedule so that they conduct tasks suitable for work off-site such as reading, writing, research, planning, scheduling, data entry, and telephone calls on telecommuting days. Meetings with co-workers, supervisors, and clients are scheduled on office days.

You should have a disposition toward working by yourself. If you thoroughly enjoy extensive interpersonal contacts in office settings, then telecommuting may be inappropriate.

You probably will need to make a greater effort to stay informed about office procedures, work group goals, and changes in policies. Because many organizations do not communicate

fully with their employees, telecommuting employees usually must make an extra effort to feel a part of their work teams and companies.

If you are working extensively with a computer, you will need technical skills to send and receive data as well as do minor equipment troubleshooting as problems arise.

Q What would be the benefits of telecommuting for me?

A Most telecommuters report increased flexibility, a reduction in commuting time and costs, improved family interaction, lower job stress, reduced job-related expenses, and sometimes greater job satisfaction.

Q If I request telecommuting, don't I risk being labeled a difficult employee?

A While some co-workers in your organization may feel you are using your disability as an excuse to telecommute, that attitude should be irrelevant in your decision as to whether or not to request telecommuting. Nearly all employers view telecommuting as a practice that should be under-taken only if both the employee and the organization benefit. Almost all employers permit telecommuting only when mutually agreed upon between an employee and his/her supervisor.

If your disability inhibits regular attendance at a central work site or affects negatively your job performance, then a telecommuting arrangement should be seriously considered if you feel it would improve your job performance, assist in meeting your job goals, and help your employer.

Q Because telecommuters are not at the central work-site as frequently as other employees, won't my promotional opportunities be reduced if I telecommute? Won't I be "out-of- sight, out-of-mind?"

Telecommuters may suffer fewer promotional opportunities although no research or data show this to be the case. Because telecommuters often have excellent work histories before telecommuting, we see no evidence that being a telecommuter will hurt your future advancement opportunities.

The best course of action is to do as well as possible with the job and show enthusiasm, For instance, one might come into the office on the weekend when traffic is less difficult to navigate. Do not let your supervisor or co-workers forget your talents.

However, if you are seeking a position in which you would supervise directly a group of employees, then your telecommuting may be limited. If being in the office is generally required, then telecommuting probably would not be compatible.

Making It Work

Q What about assistive technology and special equipment needs?

A Most employers will provide and pay the expenses of any equipment required at your telecommuting work site. Those expenses would also include online services if they are needed to perform your work. However, because the cost of some assistive technology is still relatively high, your employer may be unable to provide the latest or most advanced versions of specialized hardware or software. You and your employer need to work out this issue and state it explicitly in the telecommuting arrangement.

Q What about other costs? Will telecommuting cost me more or less? And what typically do employers pay for and what are telecommuters expected to pay for?

Typically, employees save money because of lower commuting and parking costs, food expenses, and sometimes clothing. Some employees will see slightly higher expenses in their utility bills. Most employers will reimburse installation charges for any new phone lines and for business-related calls made from the remote work site. Necessary office supplies are obtained from the central work site.

Q What if I cannot come to the central work site on a regular basis? Can I still be a telecommuter?

A Yes. Many employers have established procedures for employees who are unable to come to a central work site without undue difficulty. For the individuals with the most significant disabilities, work might need to be taken to their homesite. One state government agency, for example, sends a courier daily to six different home-based telecommuters to drop off new work assignments and to pick up completed ones. All six telecommuters live within 25 miles of the central office site.

Q What if I try telecommuting and don't like it? Can I stop?

A Nearly all employers follow the policy that telecommuting arrangements are voluntary. The exceptions are some firms having large roving sales staffs and some firms struggling to meet trip reduction mandates under air quality regulations. Because most firms adhere to the voluntary nature of telecommuting, if you do not wish to continue telecommuting after a period of time, you should be able to revert to your previous work schedule.

Q Telecommuting is most often an employment option for existing employees, but could I telecommute as a newly hired employee?

A Yes. Almost half of the firms will start off new employees under a telecommuting arrangement. About 47 percent of all employers reported telecommuting is workable for new hires, and another 19 percent think new employees "possibly" might be allowed to telecommute

by their firms. Fewer than ten percent of employers reported that telecommuting by new hires is not a good idea. The most commonly expressed reasons are the following:

- Probationary employees need to be monitored more closely.
- New employees need time at the central work site to develop solid working relationships and to grasp all aspects of the job.
- Incoming employees must be on-site at the start of their jobs to absorb the organization's culture.
- Most employers who expressed reservations about telecommuting by new hires indicated that employees should spend at least one year full-time on-site before telecommuting.

So while some employers can not be counted upon to consider telecommuting for new employees, by far many more employers will consider that possibility. For all practical purposes, if you are selected for a position and wish to telecommute, you probably will be able to do so in most instances.

Isolation and Accommodation

Q If I am not at the main work site as frequently, won't I become increasingly isolated from other employees?

A All telecommuting employees wrestle with some isolation especially those who work in their homes rather than at satellite offices or neighborhood work centers which house numerous telecommuters from a variety of organizations.

Most employers have adopted procedures so that employees do not become isolated. These procedures include the following:

- Mandating participation in on-site staff meetings, social events, and training sessions.
- Using a job coach from the work site as the key contact person to answer questions.
- Limiting telecommuting to a maximum number of days per week, usually two or three.
- Arranging occasional visits by supervisors and co-workers at your home or satellite work site.
- Requiring telecommuters to check in via telephone or electronic mail, a minimum number of times each day or week and/or at pre-established times daily.
- Increasing communication among telecommuters with disabilities through extra on-site meetings after normal departmental or work team meetings, through electronic mail, and other ways of creating an employment support network.

To prevent isolation over the long-term, some organizations now have policies that require on-site positions be made available to telecommuters with disabilities. For example, one federal agency has adopted a policy that telecommuters with disabilities be offered on-site employment at least every two years, and the employees may request a change to an on-site position at any time after completion of probation.

Q Have these practices been adequate to prevent isolation of telecommuters?

A Yes. As noted previously, telecommuters with disabilities were not surveyed directly, so we do not know for sure. Based on the nationwide survey, an overwhelming majority of employers believe current practices have proven sufficient to prevent isolation of telecommuters. Nearly 80 percent of employers who have one or more telecommuters with a disability believe ". . . existing practices are adequate to prevent isolation of telecommuters and to maintain satisfactory communication among employees." Only one of the 30 employers indicated existing practices are inadequate to prevent isolation from other employees. Among employers who do not have telecommuters with disabilities, about 60 percent reported their existing practices and procedures are proving successful.

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Q Won't some firms use telecommuting as an excuse to avoid making accommodations for people with disabilities at their main central office facilities?

A Some firms may do this, but telecommuting is considered a progressive work place option, and such options rarely are adopted by disreputable firms. Nevertheless, some disability advocates and advocacy groups caution against accepting a telecommuting position for exactly this reason.

We suggest that you be aware of the possibility that unscrupulous employers may try to use telecommuting as a diversion. However, you should not automatically assume that telecommuting is being offered for this purpose. Consider the possibilities and then suggest a solution that is best for you and your employer.

Q Should I view telecommuting as the primary work place accommodation which employers are willing to make for me and other persons with disabilities?

A No! Nor do the majority of employers! Most employers view telecommuting as a work place accommodation that is **not** a substitute for accommodations at the central work site but rather is another type of accommodation.

Several progressive employers who have the most extensive experience with telecommuting employees with disabilities had a somewhat different perspective. These employers believe the question about telecommuting by employees with disabilities cannot be answered in the abstract or for all employees. They have found telecommuting to be a successful work place accommodation for some persons with disabilities, and they have found telecommuting to be an inappropriate accommodation for other individuals.

These employers said that successful telecommuting by employees with disabilities depends on the individual employee, the type of work being performed, and proper equipment: in short, meeting the "musts" identified earlier. Telecommuting might be well suited for an individual who has difficulty with stamina and fatigue but inappropriate for an individual who thrives on social interaction throughout the day.

Final Points

Q So, after all is said and done, does this guide make a recommendation about telecommuting?

A Telecommuting is not right for everybody or every employer. Our advice is to investigate telecommuting as an option and discuss it with your supervisor or ideally your future supervisor and others in your organization. Contact individuals and disability advocacy groups with whom you are involved and then make the choice that is best for you at this time.

We do think, however, that increasingly work will be conducted wherever talented individuals choose to work. Being at an office every day is becoming less and less important. Being a productive knowledgeable worker is becoming more and more important. Both trends point to more employment possibilities for individuals with disabilities.

Telecommuting is growing rapidly, and this growth is quite likely to continue. While telecommuting by itself cannot solve the serious unemployment problems of many persons with disabilities, it is proving beneficial to some individuals and to their employers right now. Telecommuting is another option that needs to be explored further by more employers and persons with disabilities.

Box text: Investigate telecommuting as an option and then make the choice that is best for you at this time.

Appendix

Many resources are available to employers who are interested in telecommuting. Some of the best illustrative and helpful written materials from employers are listed below. Contact ILRU staff via E-mail at ilru@ilru.org or by telephone at 713-520-0232 or 713-520-5236 (TTY) for a referral to the organization which first issued the video tape or document.

Guides and Handbooks

Telecommuting Guide. Guidelines and suggestions for both supervisors and telecommuters covering the full range of implementation issues; also a fact sheet. County of Los Angeles.

Employee Handbook and Manager Handbooks. Each with self- assessment guides, agreements, hints and directions for successful telecommuting, and scenarios and pitfalls to avoid. Tandem Computers.

Telecommuting Manual. Training aid, ongoing reference, do's and don'ts for both supervisors and telecommuters, forms, checklists, ergonomics, diaries. City of San Diego.

Telecommuting Manual. Guidelines, suggestions for successful telecommuting, do's and don'ts, home office supply checklist and safety and ergonomics checklist. BULL HN Information Systems Inc., Phoenix.

Telecommuting Policy & Procedure Manual. Detailed sections on implementing telecommuting in a large organization, including the roles of departmental coordinators, training, forms and agreements, and screening surveys for both supervisors and employees. County of Sacramento.

Telecommuting Handbook. Guidelines, policy, agreements, checklist for telecommuters and for non-telecommuting staff support. California Department of Motor Vehicles, Sacramento, CA.

Telecommuting Guide. Agreement forms, benefits and adjustments, selection, supervising telecommuters, and being a telecommuter. City of Fort Collins, Colorado.

Implementing Telecommuting. A manual which supersedes the earlier federal government's Flexible Workplace Program Hand- book. Participation criteria, work schedules, telecommunications and equipment, the work site, and other considerations. U.S. General Services Administration, Washington, D.C.

Balancing Work and Family Demands Through Telecommuting. 16 page booklet that outlines the key elements that agencies, managers, and employees should consider when establishing a home-based telecommuting program. Provides a list of resources, a sample agreement, and a checklist about the home office. U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Washington, D.C.

Telecommuting Implementation Manual. Overview, how to get started, how to set up, how to supervise and manage, and how to be in compliance. Midwest Institute for Telecommuting

Education, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Is Telecommuting Right for You? A self-paced training manual for potential telecommuters and telemanagers. Telecommuting Advisory Group, State of California.

Agreements and Forms

Work-At-Home (Temporary) Telecommuting Agreement. U.S. International Trade Commission, Washington, D.C.

Telecommuting Agreement Form. Valley Metro Regional Public Transportation Authority! Phoenix. Equipment/Software Inventory Form. Department of Personnel, State of Washington, Olympia, Washington.

Telecommuting Application Request Form. Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Telecommuting Application Form. City of Los Angeles.

Other

Memorandum on Flexiplace for People with Disabilities. Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Civilian Personnel Policy /Equal Opportunity), U.S. Department of Defense, Washington, D.C.

Managing Information Resources for Accessibility. Center on Information Technology Accommodation (formerly the Clearinghouse on Computer Accommodation), U.S. General Services Administration, Washington, D.C.

A Day Seminar on Implementing Telecommuting. Midwest Institute for Telecommuting Education.

Policy and Procedure Statement on Telecommuting from Client Locations. Ernst & Young LLP, Houston.

Questions and Answers on Computer and Telephone Issues. 65 pages of questions and answers about technology to support telecommuting including five pages of questions for persons with disabilities. U.S. General Services Administration, Washington, D.C.

Orientation to Telecommuting. Trainer's Guide and Participant Workbooks. U.S. Department of Transportation, Washington, D.C.

Electronic Sources

Federal telecommuting bulletin board system (TeleConX). U.S. General Services Administration. Addresses: (1) Telnet FedWorld.gov and select #56 on Gateway menu; or (2)Via modem, dial (202) 501-7741.

Internet home page for Center on Information Technology Accommodation (formerly the Clearinghouse on Computer Accommodation), the U.S. General Services Administration. http://www.gsa.gov/coca/

Internet home page for Telecommuting Advisory Council (TAC), http://www.telecommute.org

Internet home page on telecommuting, teleworking, and alternative officing by Gil Gordon and David Peterson. http://www.gilgordon.com

Internet home page for Telecommuting and Travel Research Program of the Institute of Transportation Studies at University California at Davis. http://www.engr.ucdavis.edu/~its/telecom

Videotapes

A 12-minute video for upper management; A 30-minute video, facilitator's guide, and reproducible workbook slicks on implementing telecommuting. Arizona Department of Administration, Phoenix.

A 20-minute video, discussion guide, and participant hand-out that examines the lives and issues of four telecommuters (Working From Home). Midwest Institute for Telecommuting Education, Minneapolis.

A 10-minute video on "Home Based Employment." Bureau of Personnel Management, Division of Motor Vehicles, Wisconsin Department of Transportation, Madison, Wisconsin.

A **5-minute video on** telecommuting. County of Los Angeles.