



Employer Telework Case Study

Employer

U.S. Postal Service Office of
Inspector General
1735 North Lynn Street
Arlington, VA 22201-2020

Contact

Bryan Jones
Smart Workplace Program
Sponsor
703-248-2343
bjones@uspsoig.gov

Nicole L. Dunn
Smart Workplace Program
Coordinator
703-248-2110
ndunn@uspsoig.gov

Background

The U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General (OIG), an independent agency within the Postal Service, employs more than 1,100 auditors, investigators, and

professional support staff located in more than 90 offices nationwide. The OIG plays a key role in maintaining the integrity and accountability of America's postal service, its revenue and assets, and its employees. With \$73 billion in revenue, the Postal Service is at the core of a \$900 billion mailing industry that employs more than nine million people. The more than 700,000 employees of the Postal Service comprise the largest civilian federal workforce in the country.

In December 2004, the OIG launched an advanced telework policy, named **Smart Workplace** (SWP), as part of an overall effort to focus on the management of work assignments — not just the management of employees. This policy provides greater flexibility for OIG employees to perform their jobs where it makes the most sense, including outside of their assigned duty station.

The “Smart Work” Experience

The Smart Workplace program enables OIG staff to perform their assigned duties at optimal locations, including those outside of their regularly assigned duty station. Smart

Workplace allows employees to “work smarter” by working wherever it makes the most sense based on their assignments. Inherent with the program’s flexibility is the option to telework.

Flexibility from both managers and employees is critical to the success of SWP. There are organizational or business needs that require individuals to be present at an assigned duty station and in those instances they are to provide appropriate notification and communication accordingly.

Challenges and Investment

In 2006, the OIG’s Smart Workplace program was deemed successful and given the *Telework Award by Commuter Connections*. In mid-2008, an advisory council of managers and employees from across the OIG convened to re-examine the program. They discussed how to enhance the submission process and address concerns from managers and employees alike. One concern raised was the inconsistent application of some aspects of the policy. The council’s general consensus was to formalize and standardize the process for submitting and approving Smart Work requests. The council believed this would result in consistency and enable monitoring. They also recommended utilizing new technologies to place the program online, to streamline and automate the process.

In September 2008 a smaller focus group of council members met and prompted the following SWP program enhancements:

- The policy supporting the program was updated to clarify and formalize the process of ‘Smart Working,’ and included a reporting function to better

gauge consistent application across the agency and to measure program effectiveness.

- In conjunction with policy revisions, the council created an action plan calling for continuous communications from the highest levels of leadership to the managers and employees out in the field.
- Online tutorials walking through the process of filling out and reviewing plans to Smart Work were launched.
- Additional training is planned for later this year, and initial data from the reporting function will be analyzed to determine usage and indicators of improved performance trends.
- An online request form was created to track employee and manager accountability. It links to an automated calendar housed in the OIG’s intranet portal — the Knowledge Centered Environment (KCE). The calendar (Consolidated Calendar) connects to various applications that track Leave, Training, and Travel. Now Smart Workplace information is displayed to both managers and employees at their team level allowing an at-a-glance indication of business activities to the individual and his or her management.
- Whenever an employee submits a plan to work away from their duty station, their manager receives an e-mail notification to review the plan. A form was designed to capture minimum information — such as the date and time of the requested SWP plan. Optional fields include alternate contact information such as a phone or e-mail address. The simplicity of the form and

the automated e-mail notifications were intended to help keep the administrative burden to a minimum for both the individual and manager. Requests that are denied are also tracked. Smart Work arrangements may be denied due to the need for face-to-face meetings or other business reasons that require the employee to report to their office.

After input from senior leadership, the legal department, council representatives, and the Inspector General, the policy was formally updated in April 2009. The revised policy and reporting functions enable managers and employees to approach SWP with more balance. The policy further clarifies manager and employee responsibilities when Smart Working, and even provides guidance for exceptional circumstances including limitations on employees whose work necessitates their presence at their assigned duty station. Open discussions between employees and managers about the best way to apply SWP, along with clear directions on assignments and expectations, are prerequisite to the submission of any SWP plans.

Program Outlook

The OIG's revised SWP policy and advancements in SWP tracking usage is timely and progressive in light of the two telework bills introduced before Congress this year* proposing updated standards for telework. Once the initial usage tracking data is analyzed, the OIG believes the reporting and flexibility of use across the organization will further validate the improvements, and show a return on

investment in terms of continuity of operations, continually increased productivity, and improved employee satisfaction.

The OIG faces the same human capital crisis as other government agencies, with the majority of employees coming from the "Baby Boomer" generation who are eligible for retirement in the next 5 to 10 years. Increased flexibility to work remotely is a privilege many of the Millennial generation consider highly valuable when seeking employment, and will assist OIG efforts to remain a competitive employer with other federal agencies and the private sector.

Most Helpful Resources

The OIG's Smart Workplace program owes much to the Inspector General, as the program's initial sponsor in 2004, and through his continued support for enhancements. The feedback from employees and managers, especially those from the September of 2008 council focus group meeting, was invaluable in identifying opportunities for program enhancements. The OIG's Information Technology team customized the online calendar and reporting to provide the increased accountability necessary to truly gauge the program's participation and outcomes. The revisions also relied on guidance from our legal office on the specific wording of the policy itself. Ultimately, support and promotion from the agency's executive management will be key to successful communication and program effectiveness.

Success Tips

To achieve similar telework results along the line of a Smart Workplace, the OIG recommends:

- Benchmarking with other agencies that perform similar functions.
- Solicit feedback from within all levels of the organization.
- Keep the rules simple as possible to provide guidance but allow for exceptions.
- Obtain communication support from leadership.
- Provide training and support on both the policy and associated tracking tools.

Above all else, trust in the professionalism of staff members is integral to successful telework programs!

**The Telework Improvements Act (H.R. 1722) and
The Telework Enhancement Act (S. 707) –111th
Congress*

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