

Survey: More Government Workers Can Telecommute

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U.S. government employees have a telecommuting gap -- nearly all of them could work from home at least part time, but only about 20% do, according to a survey released Tuesday.

More than four in 10 survey respondents didn't know whether they were eligible to telecommute, according to the survey released by Telework Exchange. But based on the results of an online quiz to determine eligibility, the group found that 96% of the U.S. government employees could telework at least part time, and 79% could telework full time.

A three-day-a-week government telecommuter could save an average of \$5,878 annually in commuting costs and avoid putting 9,060 pounds of pollutants into the environment, according to Telework Exchange.

If the 79% of U.S. government employees eligible to telework full time actually did, they would save \$13.9 billion in commuting costs and spare the environment 21.5 billion pounds of pollutants, the study said.

"The point here is that telework saves money, it saves the environment," said Joel Brunson, president of Tandberg Federal, a videoconferencing software and services vendor that helped fund the survey. "Telework is the panacea for a lot of the ills out there."

Congress passed a law in 2000 requiring federal agencies to offer telecommuting as an option to many employees, but it has been slow to catch on in practice. Advocates of telework said it can provide several benefits to government agencies, including a way to remotely continue operations during a natural disaster or terrorist attack. Telecommuting could also ease the enormous traffic problems in the Washington area, according to advocates.

To telecommute successfully, government employees need access to a good broadband connection and support such as a help desk, Brunson said. But it's easier than ever to telework, with broadband, mobile e-mail, easy-to-use videoconferencing and other services readily available, he added.

“Telework has grown leaps and bounds from five years ago,” he said. “With the prevalence of broadband service out there, there are a lot of tools we have that we didn’t have five years ago. With today’s technology, [videoconferencing] is pretty rock-solid and almost utilitylike.”

Employees have some responsibility to show that they can telework, Brunson added. They must prove that they can work without on-site supervision and still meet deadlines, he said.

This is the third government-focused telework survey done by Telework Exchange and Tandberg Federal since early 2007. The most recent survey had 664 responses -- 70% from civilian government agencies, and 30% from U.S. Department of Defense employees.