

Nearly half telework under informal policy: study

People, not technology, limit teleworking effectiveness, says AUT University professor

Adam Bender (CIO) | 30 October, 2013 14:10 | Comments | [Like](#) 1

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Nearly 90 per cent of employees work from home at least an hour per week, says Cisco study.

Teleworking is increasing even while many businesses in Australia and New Zealand lack written agreements or training for remote working, according to a report released today by Cisco.

The Trans-Tasman Telework Survey was jointly conducted by the University of Melbourne's Institute for a Broadband-enabled Society and AUT University's NZ Work Research Institute.

The researchers surveyed about 1,800 employees and 100 managers from 50 organisations in Australia and New Zealand. The research took place between April and September, and consisted of an online survey and manager interviews.

While 89 per cent reported teleworking one or more hours per week, and the mean number of teleworking time was 13 hours per week, only 22 per cent of businesses in Australia and New Zealand have a formal written teleworking agreement with employees, the survey found.

On the contrary, 47 per cent of teleworkers said they have only an informal arrangement with their manager and 3 per cent said they telework without the organisation's knowledge. The other 27 per cent of teleworkers said they

have a verbal agreement with their manager.

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The largest proportion of employees surveyed, 38 per cent, said they do "hybrid teleworking," working remotely one to three days per week. Another 16 per cent reported teleworking more than three days per week. The study found that 35 per cent work remotely sometimes, but not more than eight hours a week, and only 11 per cent did no teleworking at all.

"A lot of the organisations couldn't actually tell us ... how many of their workers actually teleworked to any degree, and that reflected a lot of it is actually ad hoc," said Laurie McLeod, a researcher at the NZ Work Research Institute.

However, establishing a policy for telework will yield the greatest results, said Tim Bentley, director of the NZ Work Research Institute.

"Teleworking will be effective to you in terms of productivity and wellbeing if you provide the necessary support, including technical support," he said at a media conference today in Sydney.

Organisations interested in teleworking should start with a hybrid teleworking pilot program and then do a cost-benefit analysis to prove its benefits, he said.

Bentley said a major gap was overcoming cultural resistance to teleworking. Having training for both managers and the teleworking employees could overcome those kinds of problems, he said.

"It's people, not technology, that are limiting teleworking effectiveness," he said.

"Managers tell us [that] a lot of them don't have the necessary attitudes or skills to promote and manage teleworking, and they also have some concern about some employees not having the necessary skills and training."

Less than 50 per cent of employees said they had been given any training related to teleworking, including how to set up a home office and effective IT security, he said.

Cisco does teleworking training for its own employees, said Tim Fawcett, Cisco general manager of government affairs and policy. Support services are mostly online rather than face-to-face, he said.

On covering employee expenses related to teleworking, Bentley said most companies are paying for equipment like mobile phones and laptops, but the employees tended to provide their own broadband connection.

"Generally, it was something negotiated between the manager or the organisation and the employee, and it depended ... a lot on the role," said Marianne Gloet, research fellow at Melbourne University's department of management and marketing.

Health and safety issues such as maintaining an ergonomic work space are still a "grey area" in teleworking policy, Bentley said. However, he said the study found no more health and safety problems with those who teleworked compared to those who stayed in the office.

Many companies provide ask employees to complete a self-assessment survey of their work environments, said Rachelle Bosua, a lecturer in Melbourne University's school of engineering.

"The organisations don't necessarily go out and have their own assessment to see whether the things are really in place and as they should be, which is a bit of a concern and can be improved," she said.

Employers tend to only inspect the home offices of employees who telework 100 per cent of the time, added Gloet.

McLeod noted that a barrier to conducting more intensive inspections is that employees may feel uncomfortable about their companies dictating how they set up their home office.

Cisco sees health and safety as a "clear issue that needs to be dealt with" by government regulators, said Fawcett. "Twentieth century regulations don't

necessarily automatically fit a twenty-first century economy.”

The report found many benefits to teleworking, including increased productivity and wellbeing of employees. For the business, teleworking can save money on office space, provide access to a wider pool of talent and increase employee retention, it said. Outside the company, teleworking can reduce traffic congestion and is more environmentally friendly.

The report found that 71 per cent of employees said teleworking has a favourable influence on their job attitude. Only 4 per cent said that teleworking makes it tougher to communicate and collaborate with colleagues.

Internally at Cisco, teleworking has improved employee retention and increased worker productivity, Fawcett said.

“We see teleworkers as actually being amongst our top workers right across our business.”

National Telework Week takes place in Australia from November 18 to 22.

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