

Snowstorm's possible plus: Advancing cause of telework

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By Joe Davidson
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The snow may have closed federal offices this week, but that doesn't mean federal workers aren't working.

About one-third of the D.C. area employees at the Office of Personnel Management and the General Services Administration logged on to their agencies' mainframe computers, probably from their homes, according to OPM Director John Berry.

If the stats for those agencies are indicative of what happened around town, then the blizzard of 2010 may mark a real turning point in Uncle Sam's approach to telework.

"The only upside of this storm is that federal managers have been working from home," said Steve O'Keeffe, executive director of Telework Exchange. His organization advocates for telework and is supported by computer companies that would benefit from greater teleworking. But that funding doesn't detract from the truth of his statement.

An August OPM report cited management resistance to teleworking as one of the main obstacles to its spread in the federal government. "The biggest barrier to teleworking is a cultural mind-set that believes if you are not physically there . . . you must be eating bonbons," said Rep. Gerald E. Connolly (D-Va.).

But with so many bosses snowed in with the rest of us, that might change.

The OPM report said just 8.7 percent of eligible federal employees teleworked in 2008, although Berry said that may reflect only those with formal telework agreements. In addition to stubborn supervisors, office coverage and culture, both of which can be tied to the way managers manage, were listed as the main barriers to telecommuting.

Too many managers apparently believe they can't manage what, or whom, they can't see. Maybe they don't trust their workers. Maybe they are afraid of change.

One problem, says Max Stier, president and chief executive of the Partnership for Public Service, is the government doesn't really know how to manage performance. "If you know what good work is and you can hold people accountable," he said, "it shouldn't matter if they are in eye or ear shot or at home or in the office."

A big issue, says Bill Bransford, general counsel of the Senior Executives Association, is the impression among supervisors that some employees have "a sense of entitlement" to work at home, then act as if they don't want to be bothered with calls from co-workers and customers when they aren't in the office.

Whatever the reluctance to expanding teleworking, Mother Nature may inspire a reexamination of its value. Value is a key word here. If Uncle Sam provided his workers with laptops, the cost of equipment would be covered by the estimated \$100 million a day the government loses when offices in Washington close, Berry said.

Some agencies learned the value of telecommuting years ago. The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office is a telework success story. More than 80 percent of its eligible staff do some telework, according to agency figures.

Key to that increase is management support for telework as a practice that increases productivity, promotes good employee work-life balance, encourages applicants and retains workers.

"Telework is considered a business strategy that helps the USPTO achieve its mission and goals," said David Kappos, the agency's director. "At a time when the federal government has been shut down due to inclement weather, our agency has been able to maintain a high level of productivity due to our telework program."

The trademark side of the agency reported production at 85 percent of normal levels on Monday and Tuesday, when the government was officially closed, a spokeswoman said. That's remarkable.

Telework also is a key part of the culture at the Defense Information Systems Agency, where 45 percent of the employees do it regularly.

"Essentially the work of the agency goes on" even as the snow closed much of the government, said John Garing, DISA's director of strategic planning and information. "The work hasn't stopped." He said his agency overcame the reluctance of managers by showing them "the work is getting done."

Garing worked at home Wednesday, but as an executive he feels he should generally be in the office.

But there is one big federal boss who works from his home office almost every day and is pushing to get more federal workers to do the same -- President Obama. His proposed budget for fiscal 2011 calls for increasing the number of federal employees who are eligible to telework by 50 percent, from the 2009 figure of 102,900.

"The guy at the top understands the importance of it," Berry said.

Staff writer Eric Yoder contributed to this column.