



New work styles work wonders at Telus

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"To support people working when and where they can be most effective," is how Telus Corp. executive Mark Lang characterizes the goal of the *Workstyles Program* being formally rolled out across his company today.

As HR Business Partner at Vancouver-based Telus, Lang has been a driving force behind the project. He outlined its evolution during a session at Showcase Ontario 2007, a public sector information technology education event, held in Toronto last week.

For the past couple of years, Lang has been studying, designing and mustering support for non-traditional work options – such as mobile working and teleworking – within the company. Many crucial elements of the telecom firm's *Workstyles Program* are the acknowledged outcome of his efforts.

These include key components of the new Workstyles portal that goes live on Telus' intranet Monday, and serves as a "one-stop resource" on telework for managers and employees (dubbed "team members" in Telus parlance).

Instead of a teleworking policy, Lang says the portal will offer "guidance and tools for managers and team members to have the conversation and make intelligent decisions."

Team member resources on the portal include: telework guidelines, a telework agreement and checklist, as well as a learning guide on how to work virtually. There's also a section on virtual workplace risks and precautions.

Lang says the inclusion of an entire section on team member resources demonstrates just how far Telus has traversed – and how quickly – in this exciting arena of non-traditional work options.

"Up until now, telework on our internal site was listed as a management-only program, which I find quite fascinating because we had 1,200 people already doing call centre work from home."

But today all the "management-only" language goes away, and the program has been thrown open to all team members. The latter will also have a far bigger say than previously in the decision on whether or not they can telework.

The language on the site previously suggested that this was an arbitrary management decision, said Lang, though it wasn't quite put that way.

Moving forward, he said, that decision will be "49 per cent team member, 51 per cent manager."

But Lang didn't quite spell out how this 49-51 per cent split would play out in the event of a disagreement between manager and team member on whether, and how often, the latter should telework, for instance.

The Workstyles launch at Telus is a milestone in a process that began more than a year-and-a-half ago.

Around that time, Lang reminisces, there was a growing awareness that work patterns were already changing very significantly within the company. "But there was also some discomfort, internally, about the full import of all of these changes, so we ran a couple of pilot programs."

He said 170 Telus team members, who were already telecommuting, participated in one of the pilots. "There were many more, but we called on 170 and enabled them to measure the environmental and other benefits of

teleworking, of not commuting."

Telework tracking

This tracking was accomplished with tools and resources provided by Calgary-based Teletrips Inc., whose overarching goal, according to its Web site, is to "promote sustainable urban development [by designing] incentive based approaches to commuter trip reduction within the private and public sector."

To this end, the company offers Web-based software – also dubbed Teletrips – that helps corporations and public sector organizations manage and audit trip reduction programs.

The software collects data from individuals participating in corporate telework programs, and uses this to measure key metrics such as time saved, as well as the environmental impact of not commuting each day to work.

In the Telus Workstyles pilot, all these metrics were meticulously tracked for participating team members. The results were "pretty staggering", noted Lang.

By not commuting to work daily, he said, over the period of the pilot these 170 team members:

- Saved 13,865 hours of commute time
- Avoided \$125,000 in fuel and maintenance costs
- Reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 114 tons and air pollutants by four tons

The kicker was that 82 per cent of pilot participants said teleworking actually had a positive impact on the likelihood of them being retained as Telus employees.

According to one expert, the developments at Telus exemplify a growing trend across North American cities, where enterprises – both in the public and private sectors – are supporting alternative employee work styles.

Teletrippers rapidly growing

Teletrips founder and CEO Scott Fleming, who also spoke at the Showcase event, said today in North America today around 20 million people work from home a day each week.

He said analyst firms such as IDC and Gartner Group have predicted that number will spiral to around 100 million within the next five years. (Teletrips, however, forecasts a more conservative growth in the 50 million range).

In Canada, said Fleming, around 1.5 million people currently telework a day a week. "Within the Ontario government alone there are about 12,000 VPN hookups."

Changing workforce demographics, said the Teletrips CEO, is a big driver of this trend. "Highly skilled youngsters are joining the workforce; they are very intuitive on the Web, and are demanding telework in their resumes and in job negotiations."

These trends, recent studies indicate, are already having an impact on urban infrastructures and amenities.

For instance, an extensive study published last year by Los Angeles-based think tank *The Reason Foundation* indicates that telework is surpassing transit riding in 21 out of 50 major U.S. cities.

Fleming believes this trend will continue. "We know it's big. It's just that no one's seen it right now - but it's there."

He said telecommuting has become especially common in certain professions. "Virtual call centre agents – such as those employed by Telus – represent an exploding market."

The Teletrips CEO said for years his company has been empirically measuring the triple bottom-line benefits – economic, social and environmental – of telework, using a simple tracking system..

People who've been allowed to telework at a company fill in a short profile – which includes their name, vehicle type, distances usually driven to work. This information is tied in to the Environmental Protection Agency database.

Then these employees' commute behaviour (days they teleworked or "green commuted" in a given time period) is also tracked. (Green commuting would include activities such as car pooling to get to work).

"We aggregate all this information and generate reports for the company."

Teletrips, he said, also provides feedback to the employees on the impact of their telework/green commuting practices – including total hours saved, total pollutants reduced, and estimated vehicle maintenance costs saved.

This software that was used by 170 employees in the Telus pilot will be available to all 30,000 company team members from today.

Telus' Lang noted that 18,000 of these staffers are already remote-work enabled, and so will almost immediately be able to take advantage of the program.

At Home Agents Program

Around the time of the Workstyles pilot, Telus also rolled out an *At Home Agents* program, targeted at its consumer call centre employees who preferred to work from a home office.

Participation, which is based on performance, has quadrupled since the program was launched. "We started with about 300 folks," said Lang. "By the end of this year we'll have 1,200 and are looking to grow that number in the coming years."

And instead of keeping these projects under wraps, Telus consciously took the exact opposite approach. It went to town with the news. The company's communications folk got to work and garnered a whack of media coverage on its telework initiatives.

A tale of three approaches

According to Lang, such active support – even promotion – of non-traditional work styles (where that makes sense) contrasts with the way most companies come at the whole issue.

Among organizations not averse to telework and other non-conventional work styles, he said, three approaches prevail: Allow, Support and Encourage.

Allow is the commonest approach, he said, and was the dominant one at Telus until just nine months ago.

Lang describes *Allow* as the "don't ask, don't tell" approach, where the company doesn't articulate its position on telework.

This "*we're not going to say its okay, and we're not going to say you can't,*" attitude leaves the door open for individual managers and employees to work out their own private little arrangements ("you can work at home once a week, just don't tell anybody").

Very different from "*Allow*", he said, is the "*Support*" approach, where the company openly acknowledges its staff are working differently, declares its support, and says it will provide the tools for them to do them to do

it more effectively.

"*Encourage*" takes this significantly further, he said. "Here you say to your staff: 'we're telling you to work from home, and because we're doing that, we'll give you a laptop and other tools for your home office.'"

Lang notes that there's far more than a psychological difference between "Support" and "Encourage." From the perspective of the company there is a financial difference as well.

"When people are [teleworking] by their own choice, you don't need to equip them, but you can reserve the right to inspect them. However, when you tell them they *have* to do it, you need to equip them."

But Lang suggests that equipping non-traditional workers may be less of a hassle than most companies imagine.

This may be especially the case with mobile workers, who Lang distinguishes from teleworkers. Telus, he said, defines teleworkers as employees who "work remotely at least 40 per cent of the time" (usually from home, but possibly also at other locations, such as vendor sites).

By contrast, Lang says mobile workers come into a space owned by the organization, though it may not always be the same space. "They will work from home once in a while, and when they're in the organizational space they move around a lot."

The Telus exec dubs himself the "prototype of a mobile worker."

He said when he joined Telus a couple of years ago he was greeted with an office, a desktop, a landline, a laptop, a cell phone and a BlackBerry.

"I asked them to keep the beautiful office because I was going to be traveling most of the time, along with the desktop and the landline. I was pretty sure I wouldn't need two mobile devices, so I told them: *why don't you let me keep the BlackBerry and you can keep the cell phone.*"

Lang recalled how on the first day on the job he "scared the daylights out of people" saying all he needed was the laptop and the BlackBerry. "I've been there two years now and that's still all I need."

Enterprises by understanding their workforce composition – in terms of resident workers (who come into the office and sit in the same spot every day), mobile workers and teleworkers – can more effectively plan their real estate requirements, noted Lang.

In firms where non-traditional work styles are not encouraged or acknowledged the ratio of workers to seat space is usually 1:1 and real estate savings are either non-existent or negligible.

However, Lang said, companies that actively support and provision for mobile working and teleworking can use very different ratios. "Some companies leave the threshold at 1.5:1, others at 3:1 or even 4:1."

Optimizing real estate usage by actively supporting non-traditional work styles can translate into massive cost savings for companies, according to Lang. He cited the example of Sun Microsystems that he says saved \$406 million by reducing its real estate footprint through non-traditional work options.

"Sun really pushed teleworking. Teleworkers constitute a very substantial percentage of their [employee] population."

This was brought home very forcefully to him during a visit to Sun's San Diego offices. He said the day he arrived on the premises, a major interchange of a highway close to the Sun facility blew up completely taking out the interchange.

"People couldn't get to [the office]. But Sun didn't miss a beat, because their people don't have to do that anyway."

Lang said Sun Microsystems is one of the "best practice" companies that Telus checked out before designing its own Workstyles program. "We also looked at Capital One Financial out of Richmond, Va. and Cisco Systems."

Unfortunately, rued the Telus exec, there aren't many such companies in Canada for this kind of a program.

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