

Mobility Myth Busters

Rapid changes in technology allow many of us to complete practically all of our work tasks remotely. The ability to work anywhere and anytime is becoming the cultural norm and the expectation of the current and future workforce. This is both an opportunity and challenge for government.

Mobility is a workplace strategy that enables the workforce to shift between different modes of work — regardless of location — to maximize productivity. State agencies are beginning to adopt mobility and many have put an emphasis on telework.

In an effort to shift the culture of the state government workforce, a group of human resources, IT, policy, facilities and budget professionals met recently to discuss common misconceptions and myths about mobility. The following statements were confirmed as true, busted (not true), or plausible.

1. Only certain generations will be successful as mobile workers. (Busted)

The ability to work effectively in different locations is the desire or expectation of many workers of all generations. Success as a mobile worker is related more to attitude, core business need, culture, the nature of the work and preferences in work environment, than being part of a specific generation. All generations can be successful as mobile workers, yet not all people will thrive as mobile workers.

2. Mobility means people are always telecommuting. (Busted)

Mobility does not have the same meaning as telecommuting. Telecommuting is the practice of working from home or other alternative locations closer to home. It is a type of mobile work. Mobility means to enable employees to be equally effective regardless of the physical space or location they are using. Telecommuting is part of a good mobility strategy. However, the more common use of mobility is giving employees the tools for working in other parts of their primary work location or while visiting another office, client location or in the field. Most teleworkers do so on a less frequent basis, such as one or two days a week.

3. The work can be done away from the workplace but management does not support mobility. (Plausible)

Traditionally, government work has been a culture of hierarchy and line-of-sight management. Providing more workplace options and flexibility to employees is a change for state workforce managers. Change is hard for almost everyone. Some agency executive managers have made shifting the culture of their organizations a priority, while others remain cautious. To gain support from leadership, the business case for mobility must align with the agency's business needs, mission and future vision. Management can ensure successful implementation by setting clear expectations for accountability and performance, and encouraging managers to experiment, adapt and revisit as needed.

4. Employee unions support mobility. (Confirmed)

Many collective bargaining agreements already include support for telework and alternative/flex schedules, as long as they meet business and customer needs. While mobility is not specifically mentioned in the agreements, unions are generally supportive of empowering employees. Agencies considering strategies that may impact the working conditions of represented employees should consult with their human resources team, then work in collaboration with unions to ensure successful implementation.

5. A sense of interconnectedness, community and collaboration is lost in a mobile workforce. (Plausible)

Increased remote work may have an impact on team cohesion. Working in proximity to one another does not guarantee that people will work well together, but face-to-face communication provides opportunities for unplanned interactions and comradery. Using video, voice chat and collaboration tools can help, but it takes a change in behavior and effort from the team in the physical and remote office.

Workplaces can be designed for team interactions by providing informal spaces where employees can go to connect with each other and collaborate.

6. “I once had a bad experience with mobile employees and, therefore, it will not work now.” (Plausible)

It is possible that people may have had a bad experience with teleworking or mobile employees in the past. Determine what caused the problems in the past, understand if there are risks of similar issues recurring, and come up with ways to address them. There are a variety of tools and resources to help managers manage mobile work effectively, such as employee self-assessments, clear performance expectations and mobile arrangements. Even with the best planning, unexpected challenges may arise. Be prepared to work with your employees to tackle problems as they occur.

7. Employee performance cannot be monitored in a mobile workplace. (Busted)

Managers and supervisors should create clear expectations of mobile workers, including availability, responsiveness, communication protocols and engagement with the team. Work performance for mobile workers should be monitored in the same way as for all employees, based on the quality and timeliness of the work product. This can be accomplished by establishing timeframes for completion dates, key milestones, project schedules, regular status reports and team reviews. Consider meeting with employees on a regular basis to check in and establish a feedback loop.

8. Quality customer service declines with mobile staff. (Plausible)

Providing high quality customer service should be priority No. 1 for government. A quality customer experience requires continual commitment, focus and responsiveness regardless of

the location of workers. As workers become more mobile, organizations must have a mobile strategy that defines expectations for meeting customer needs (without removing too much personal interaction). If not done well, customer service could decline.

9. People cannot personalize their space in a mobile work environment. (Busted)

Employees can let their personalities shine at work while still meeting agency needs and remaining professional. Many people decorate their personal workspaces – either at the office or in a home office – with family photos, plants, and other items that have personal meaning. Mobile workers and workers in shared workspaces may have limited options, but still can find ways to bring a bit of their personalities to wherever they are working.

The office can be supportive of this by creating spaces for everyone to post pictures or designated shelves where frames and knickknacks can be displayed. The office could also purchase plants and place them throughout the space. Screensavers and mobile devices can also be personalized to bring a sense of creativity and community.

10. Mobility is expensive. (Plausible)

Whether or not mobility costs a lot of money depends on the specific situation. Mobility could save agencies money by reducing physical space, resulting in a large return on investment. The biggest expense could come from implementing WiFi for agency locations. Switching from desktops to laptops will have a nominal cost, especially when older desktops need to be replaced. In some instances, mobility can provide direct cost reduction as is the case with “bring your own mobile device” (BYOD). While the employee gains the benefit of increased flexibility and choice, the agency stipend for BYOD is lower than the monthly carrier charges for agency owned mobile devices.

11. Employees are required to be assigned to a designated desk. (Busted)

State policy requires all employees be assigned an official station (worksite, duty station) to determine per diem and travel reimbursement. Agencies also use the information to manage employee-related issues such as workforce reductions, inclement weather, commute trip reduction, parking, assignment pay and to designate a position’s supervisor. The definition of an official station does not necessarily mean a specific cubicle, office, desk or workspace. An official station is a particular location.

12. Tools do not exist to support a mobile workforce. (Busted)

The tools exist today that enable most agencies to have a mobile workforce. Many employees have been mobile for decades as they collect data or perform field inspections. New technology can help mobile workers be more efficient and enable more workers to become mobile. Tools such as laptops, smartphones, Wi-Fi and mobile hotspots enable employees to access state resources from anywhere. Collaboration software, such as web and video conferencing applications (WebEx), instant messaging, web presence and desk sharing applications (Skype for

Business), and workflow management tools (SharePoint) provide communications to bring teams together.

13. The data is not secure on devices when mobile. (Busted)

Mobile devices are just as secure as desktop devices, when used properly. All state-issued windows machines use the Microsoft product BitLocker to protect state data. WaTech provides a Mobile Device Management service that also ensures all email records are encrypted on smartphones and can be remotely wiped. WaTech also uses remote access tools such VPN and Citrix that enable employees to connect to the state network securely from anywhere on any device.

14. Bring your own device (BYOD) is the primary component of mobility. (Busted)

The largest factors that would move the needle on mobility are: 1) agencies defaulting to laptops as the employee's primary device instead of desktops; 2) ensuring Wi-Fi access is available in agency buildings; 3) offering remote access (VPN) service to employees; and 4) updating agency policies and employee training to clarify record management topics.

15. Public disclosure is an impediment to mobility. (Plausible)

All records can be managed with mobile devices; agencies just have to decide which strategy they want to take. With new technology comes new opportunities and changes in how records are managed. There are two new areas of change for public disclosure and mobility — cloud-based storage and text messaging. Cloud-based storage solutions (Box.com or Microsoft OneDrive) are capable of effectively managing public records. However, agencies should update their policies to clarify which storage solutions can be used to store records, which can be used for sharing records and which should not be used. Agencies need to have a strategy for how the agency or staff will collect and retain records as well as respond to public disclosure requests. This is a risk of mobility but can be mitigated.