



Member Resource Committee

Considerations for Successful Implementation of Remote Work/Telework in a Forensic Laboratory

Introduction

Many forensic laboratories have transitioned their employees to some level of teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic. Telework often requires coordination between parent agencies, IT departments, and Human Resources, depending on the laboratory's specific circumstances. While laboratories have developed a variety of ways to approach this challenge, this document will provide a number of general topics to consider when implementing/operating a telework program. By working together and being flexible with employees, a telework program can produce successful outcomes for all.

A. Operational Considerations

The capacity for a successful telework program in a forensic laboratory will be unique to each facility/system based on many factors.

1. **Space considerations:** The space allocated for laboratory operations, both office space and laboratory space, as well as its design, will be a key consideration when determining the number of personnel that can perform specific duties at the same time. Workspace or office redesign or renovation may be needed to safely utilize the space available.
2. **Office equipment considerations:** Purchases of additional equipment may be necessary for employees to successfully telework, such as laptops, extra monitors, printers, etc. Policies allowing the use of personal laptops at home have been useful.
3. **Document accessibility:** Fully paperless systems are ideal for successful telework programs. The use of web based systems such as PowerDMS for controlled documents, electronic notetaking, and web based LIMS systems along with secure access options such as VPN or Remote Desktop Access greatly expand the duties and activities that can be performed while teleworking. Paperless case files can facilitate off-site access for interpretation, technical and administrative reviews, as well as release of required records pursuant to Brady/discovery requests. Readily available and inexpensive approaches to convert to paperless case files, including the use of Adobe Pro, have been helpful.
4. **Security considerations:** Information security can be more challenging in a telework environment. Strict policies may be needed to maintain awareness and prevent unauthorized access to sensitive data. The uncontrolled environments used during telework (such as a dining room table) have unique challenges that should be considered. Policies should include monitoring settings on home devices such as



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Alexa and Google Home, securing laptops when in use and not in use, prohibiting at-home printing, and destroying paper documentation, etc.

B. Personnel Management

Telework can be a challenge for supervisors and management merely due to the nature of the arrangement.

It will likely be necessary to identify duties that can be performed successfully outside of the laboratory and which ones cannot. The duties that may qualify for telework will likely vary between forensic disciplines due to the varying nature of the methods used. The duties, individual staff competencies, along with operational resources and relevant labor agreements, may all impact decisions regarding duty allocation. Reassignment of duties and implementation of team approaches may be appropriate in order to balance productivity with personnel safety. There may also be instances when the number of employees allowed on-site requires that some employees telework with no duties that can be done outside of the laboratory.

1. **Virtual Training:** To expand options for offsite activities, consider transitioning some training modules to a virtual format.
2. **Employee Location:** It may be necessary to consider requiring employees who are teleworking not to move out-of-state or to a location a further distance from the laboratory.
3. **Scheduling options:** Flexible scheduling options for splitting time between the laboratory and telework and for those who require full-time telework can add to expected success levels. These include shift work, sliding schedules, split schedules, and duty reassignments. Availability of supervisors and lead technical staff should be considered when developing flexible work schedules for employees.
4. **Accountability:** Employees should have clear, quantifiable and reasonable productivity or work expectations. To ensure ongoing success, management should have robust methods to assess compliance with these expectations as well as to measure success of outcomes.
5. **Court considerations:** In developing remote work policies or alternate work schedules, the laboratory should consider potential effects on court testimony, such as transportation to court, remote testimony, overtime for those that are no longer on a traditional day-shift, and other availability issues.
6. **Wellness:** Since employers have less control over the telework environment, ergonomic guidance for employees may be warranted to avoid unnecessary injury to staff. Keep-safe policies such as exposure/quarantine practices for those working at home should be considered.



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C. Communication

Recent challenges have had significant impact on the way professionals communicate, both internally and externally. Remote platforms are being utilized more than ever, ranging from virtual section meetings to small- and large-scale online professional conferences.

Not having all employees together in one building increases the need to communicate comprehensively so everyone has the necessary information and is included in decision-making and the overall agency mission. Mandatory meetings minutes can be helpful; they should be shared with and acknowledged by all.

1. **Clarity:** Agency policies may need to be reviewed and revised (or expanded) as circumstances evolve. They may need details and examples that might have seemed overly prescriptive or obvious in the past. As personnel are onsite less and less, more detail may be beneficial for telework.
2. **Soft Phones:** Explore options to forward desk phone calls to laptops during telework. For example, Microsoft Teams has been used in some cases. Voicemail to audio email is another approach that can ensure continuity. This will allow for continuous customer service regardless of staff schedules.
3. **Collaboration Platforms:** Access to online collaboration platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Webex, Google Meet, and even FaceTime can greatly increase the ability to reach out for a quick chat, case conference, or a full section meeting. Collaboration with agency IT is usually required to determine what works best for your laboratory and complies with the agency's IT policies.
4. **Regular updates:** Scheduled large-scale updates is one way to keep in touch with staff. For example, a monthly 15 minute Webex meeting hosted by the agency head can go a long way in boosting employee morale as it demonstrates engagement by upper management, keeps staff up to date on key decisions and developments, and invites questions and feedback. Additionally, monthly full laboratory meetings hosted by laboratory management via Webex (for example) may create an opportunity for case presentations, policy updates, current challenges, introduction of new employees and will likely help people stay engaged, informed and less prone to isolation if they happen to be working from home more than others.
5. **Data practices:** With the increase in telework, what would previously have been a short verbal discussion at someone's desk now may be a Microsoft Teams chat or email. Verbal communication is usually much less formal and naturally conversational so it is important to recognize that, in written format, these



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conversations may be subject to new data classifications for the purpose of public release and discovery requests. Microsoft Teams video chat is an effective alternative.

6. **Etiquette:** As virtual meetings with video become more widely used, attention to dress codes and background images should be considered depending on the purpose and anticipated attendees of the meeting.