

A Telework Pilot for the City and County of San Francisco

A Case Study

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Executive Summary

In a time when many private and public sector(s) are re-awakening to the need to plan for business continuity, the City and County of San Francisco is well ahead of the game with a pilot project focused on telecommuting and distributed work for both members of the City/County Board of Supervisors and their management staff.

Gloria Young, Clerk of the Board/Chief Legislative Administrator for the city, established the pilot project in late 2004/early 2005, with significant support from Sun Microsystems and SBC Communications. In the fall of 2005 the concept has proven its viability and is now in the process of being expanded and extended.

This brief report describes the need for telework within the San Francisco city government, the formation of the San Francisco/Sun partnership, and the results of the pilot project.

General Background

Like any other significant organizational change, undertaking a move to distributed work involves the introduction of new systems, new management procedures, and new values and working relationships. And like all change management programs, the San Francisco telecommuting project emerged within a context whose characteristics are important to understand.

For the past seven years Gloria Young has been leading a behind-the-scenes “revolution” in the way the San Francisco Board of Supervisors staff operates and is managed. While not the focus of this report, this basic transformation is an essential component of the telework pilot project and in many ways constitutes its foundation.

When Gloria arrived at City Hall in 1998 she discovered that 30% of the staff who reported to her were due to retire by 2006. In addition, most of these potential retirees were “single points of failure” – meaning they had no backups and virtually no one else knew what they actually did from day to day. There were no personal computers on their desks, and IT awareness was almost zero. There was no documentation of the work processes; things got done only because the workers had so many years of experience on the job and did the assignments by rote. But they had virtually no “big picture” understanding and no ability to innovate or even respond to out-of-the-ordinary problems.

The result was that there had been little opportunity to cross-train the skills and knowledge embedded in those long-term workers to their peers or to a new generation of workers.

Over the next several years Gloria set out to redesign the context and rebuild the culture in which her staff accomplished their work. She upgraded the computer systems, built a team of cross-trained workers by having staff shadowed, and created a solid succession-planning program.

The Succession Knowledge Management Program (SKMP) included an Alternative Work Schedule (AWS) that provided Board of Supervisors/Clerk of the Board's employees with greatly increased flexibility in their work schedules, including opportunities for job sharing, rotation, and telecommuting. Gloria described the primary goal of the entire effort as "creating an adaptive, flexible organization."

By 2004 the atmosphere in city hall had been completely transformed. It had become a "can-do" environment in which all key staff understood not only their own jobs, but also those of their colleagues. A number of people had been promoted, jobs had been redesigned, and both morale and productivity were significantly improved. And Gloria's staff was taking more and more personal responsibility, focusing on goals and deliverables rather than activities and procedures.

The City was also increasingly recognizing telecommuting as an important component of its work environment and offering. The major city workers union had actually included the right to telecommute as a fundamental right of all its members (although the union had not pressed on this issue, and the city had not taken major steps to implement it, nevertheless the concept was embedded in the contract).

Gloria had subsequently led an analysis of her entire department's work to identify which elements of each of her staff's responsibilities could be carried out remotely. So there was a general understanding of telecommuting within her group already. And virtually everyone in her group had access to a laptop.

The Need for a Distributed Work Capability

During this period of time the country suffered through the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the East Coast. The heightened awareness of vulnerability in San Francisco, in combination with the Bay Area's history of earthquakes, sensitized City Hall to the need for disaster recovery plans and the critical importance of keeping the city going in the event of any disaster.

One of the obvious consequences of this need was the necessity for the Board of Supervisors to continue to operate in an emergency even if individual Supervisors were unable to get to City Hall. The Mayor can declare an emergency, but, the Board must approve any action shortly thereafter. By Charter, the BOS could only pass that kind of motion when a quorum of the Board of Supervisors was physically present in the meeting chamber. The logic was that the Supervisors had to be able to see original copies of any documents they were reviewing and approving.

And it's not just the Supervisors themselves who are needed to keep San Francisco operating. In a city where only 45% of the workforce actually lives within city limits, there was also the serious risk that after a disaster many key employees might be unable to travel to their assigned work locations.

Thus there was a solid need for telecommuting, both for business continuity and transportation issues and live/work balance.

Launching the Pilot Project

These issues were clearly on Gloria Young's mind when she met Eric Richert of Sun Microsystems at the first annual *World Congress on the Future of Work* (organized and led by the Work Design Collaborative), which the Board of Supervisors hosted at San Francisco City Hall in March of 2004.

Over the course of the two-day World Congress event Gloria and Eric spoke several times about the city's telecommuting program, and in particular the challenge of supporting the Board of Supervisors in the event of a natural or man-made disaster. Eric told Gloria about Sun's *Work* program, in which many Sun employees had given up assigned workspaces in return for having access to a wide variety of "free address" work locations across the Bay Area. Naturally in the course of those conversations Eric described the Sun technology and the SunRay cards that made the *iWork* program so easy to set up and operate.

Gloria and Eric's conversation at the World Congress led quite naturally to an extended conversation about collaboration opportunities. Over the next several months she learned a great deal more about telecommuting in general and Sun's technology approach in particular.

(Sun's proprietary technology depends on a "thin client" workstation in combination with a central server where all an employee's applications and personal files are maintained. When the individual closes out a session on one machine and moves to another in a different location, or at a home office, for example, he or she simply inserts the SunRay card and picks up right where she/he left off. The security and convenience of Sun's technology was a major part of its appeal for San Francisco employees.)

Gloria learned more about telework at Sun when she attended a summer 2004 program in Palo Alto that was sponsored by Gensler Architects and featured Crawford Beverage, Sun's Vice President of Human Resources, who spoke at some length about Sun's *Work* program (Eric Richert was part of the panel discussion following Beverage's opening presentation).

As the discussion of collaboration developed, Sun agreed to provide the city with several Sun Ray terminals and a highly secure server where city documents could be maintained and accessed from multiple locations. The project was formally launched in January 2005.

The specific mission of the Telework Pilot was defined as:

- ◆ To respond to a changing environment and possible workforce resource shifts
- ◆ To move towards an adaptive organization with staff working across boundaries and taking responsibility for organizational outcomes
- ◆ To provide for virtual workforce, enhance productivity and flexibility.

The project's objectives were much more specific:

Implement a proof of concept that would enable the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and Clerk of the Board to:

- ◆ Carry out critical business processes from alternative work sites
- ◆ Integration towards a more adaptive organization
- ◆ Offer alternative work sites
- ◆ Demonstrate business continuity
- ◆ Conduct legislative responsibilities in case of emergency
- ◆ Improve emergency and disaster preparedness
- ◆ Improve both employee productivity and work/life balance

The specific tasks and scope of the project included:

- ◆ Duplicate the Board of Supervisors systems on a Sun server
- ◆ Install Sun Ray Ultra Thin clients in participants' offices
- ◆ Install DSL lines, as required, in participants' homes
- ◆ Install Sun Ray Ultra Thin clients in participants' homes
- ◆ Track and monitor results and experiences over a 3-4 month time frame following proof of concept

The Pilot Project was confirmed with a formal agreement that was signed by each participating employee as they joined the pilot. In all, six city employees, including Gloria herself, and three (of eleven) Supervisors participated in the pilot. One member of Mayor Gavin Newsom's staff also participated, although the emphasis was clearly on the legislative side of the city organization.

Gloria obtained legislative approval from the Board of Supervisors supporting the pilot project. As she said, "It's important to ensure that they know about it, and also to have a public record of their support."

Each participating employee received a Sun Ray terminal at both his/her workplace at city hall and at another location (most commonly a home office). The formal agreement included specific provisions describing in detail which expenses and liabilities the city would incur on the employee's behalf, and the obligation the employee had to be available for work and communication with other employees during assigned business hours, no matter whether he or she was working at city hall or from a remote location.

Results

By late summer 2005 Gloria was convinced the pilot project had been a solid success. She recalled several occasions (including the very first weekend after the pilot was in place) when she personally had been able to complete work begun at the office by logging on to her files from her home. There had also been several occasions when she was able to respond to requests from Supervisors over a weekend, or to take immediate action that in the past would have required special meetings or several days of back and forth memos.

On August 1, 2005, Gloria, her staff, and the members of the project team from Sun Microsystems described the project to the Board of Supervisors at a regular public meeting

of a Board Committee. During the ensuing discussion Supervisor Bevan Dufty commented extensively on his experiences during the pilot.

Here is an edited summary of his comments:¹

I now have a Sun Ray terminal at home, which I am using primarily for email, checking my calendar, and accessing documents. Email is wonderful and awful at the same time....but in this modern era people view email as an important form of communication, just like a telephone call or an office visit.

Just last week I got a message at 6 AM from one of my constituents whose home had burned down the night before. He had been illegally forced to charge his motel room to a credit card, when it was supposed to be taken care of by the Red Cross. I was able to contact the Red Cross and get him help right away.

I must say I feel better coming into the office in the morning having already checked email and knowing there aren't any unexpected ticking bombs in my inbox. And I work all the time to keep my Inbox down below 100 unopened messages....

My experience is that this system has been very helpful. It makes me happy to know I can help people more quickly, and around the clock. The amount of information flow, and the pace of work, has fundamentally changed our jobs as legislators.

At the August 1 meeting the project team cited a number of specific benefits that they had observed or had reported to them by participants:

- ◆ There is much greater workplace independence, or location independence. Work can truly be done from anywhere the technology is available.
- ◆ The data is highly secure – not only through passwords and network control, but because it is stored on a secure server in an offsite location. The Sun Ray terminals are “stateless,” meaning there is no data stored on them; if a terminal is stolen, it is useless to anyone who doesn't have a Sun Ray card.
- ◆ Employee productivity is clearly higher. People are working longer hours (voluntarily). There is evidence from this project and others that most people “give back” to their employer about half of the time they save by not commuting as much.
- ◆ Job satisfaction is also higher. People feel more in control of their lives; they can take time off mid-day to take a child to a Doctor's office, or visit with a teacher, and then get their work done later that day or evening.

¹ These comments are not verbatim but contain the essence of Supervisor Dufty's remarks. A video recording of the entire report presented to the Board of Supervisors, including the Q&A discussion, is available online at: http://sanfrancisco.granicus.com/ViewPublisher.php?view_id=8

- ◆ For the organization, the server-based approach also makes systems upgrades and applications upgrades much easier, since it can all be done at the server level.
- ◆ Finally, the thin client terminals use much less power, as they do not have hard drives and therefore no internal fans. And they don't need as much maintenance either.

As of September 2005 the pilot had essentially completed its Proof of Concept phase. Gloria is now working on obtaining funds to extend the telecommuting capability to a wider group of city employees and the entire Board of Supervisors (while Gloria is very positive about the Sun technology, the city of course requires an open bid process for any future technology investments).

There are several other city departments and the Port of San Francisco who have also expressed interest and are working with Gloria and her staff to benefit from their learnings.

Reflections

Gloria believes strongly that the telework pilot would never have succeeded had it not been for the organizational foundation that she had built over the last several years. Without the succession planning, process redesign work, and knowledge management capabilities that she had implemented, it simply would not have been possible for people to pick up their work at home and operate so independently and effectively.

In her words:

It's important to understand that had we not collected all the knowledge about our work procedures and systems, the shift that my organization has just gone through would not have happened.

And it's interesting that even at Sun they had experienced resistance to virtual work – from both managers and individuals. There is still concern there about trust – about who's working when they are "unsupervised," and who is not.

The power of our approach with this pilot and our prior efforts has been that, with the systems and new culture we put in place over the last couple of years, we just don't have to worry about trust. Our folks are focused on results – on deliverables. So we really don't care when they get it done, or where. We know they're producing what we need.

And we just don't worry about it. In fact, I just got an email last night from one of my people asking why I was still on the computer – she said it was time for me to quit for the night! Our evidence is very clear that we're getting a lot *more* out of our people now than we ever did before. They genuinely care about producing quality service to the Supervisors and our citizens.

That's the real story of this whole pilot. It's not only wonderful for business continuity, but it's improved productivity and created a whole different atmosphere here. We've got a genuinely results-oriented organization now.

Lessons Learned

The project team highlighted two important lessons learned during their August 1 report. First, distributed work, or telecommuting, really is a new paradigm – a new way of working. It requires different management styles, and it produces a different kind of organizational culture.

Second, it is essential that distributed workers have access to a 24x7 technical support system. When they are working on something at 10 PM at night or on a weekend, and they need help – they expect it right away.

In summary, there are five important principles for managing distributed work that emerge from San Francisco's experience (and are fully consistent with WDC's experience with other organizations, both public and private):

1. **Optimize your business processes and procedures before implementing a distributed work program.** If your systems and procedures are messed up before you distribute the work, they'll be a disaster when they are spread out all over the area. And above all, focus on managing by outcomes and results, not activities.
2. **Document the work process (and the transition process as well).** Documentation gives you a means of training newcomers, and of checking on how far along any given activity is towards completion. In addition, documenting the migration to the distributed work program helps to determine its success and communicate benefits and impact to senior management.
3. **Link the program goals to strategic priorities.** In this case, business continuity of operations was clearly the most fundamental need and the defining objective of the entire project.
4. **Training, training, training.** You just can't do enough education, training, and communication. And remember that distributed work affects everyone in the organization – not just those who are working in a distributed environment.
5. **Get IT pro-actively involved.** There's no way distributed work can be implemented effectively without the active support of the information technology group. Distributed work introduces all kinds of new challenges – not just security and transportability, but the need to provide tech support to people who are not in the facility (and to be available 24x7), the need to access those secure networks and servers from outside the "walls" of the organization's own facilities, and the need to train distributed workers in how to do much of their own troubleshooting, to make minor repairs to their equipment, and to use all their key applications – or know where to get online help.