



UNIVERSITY *of* ST. THOMAS

## **Using Telecommuting as an Alternative Work Arrangement**

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### Introduction

This document provides guidance to employees and managers regarding the use of telecommuting as an alternate work arrangement for staff whose responsibilities can be performed outside the customary and traditional office setting during part or all of the work week. Not all positions are suited for telecommuting. These guidelines apply to regular, on-going arrangements, as well as those of a sporadic or infrequent nature. A telecommuting program provides alternate methods of addressing budget issues such as limited space and equipment, as well as accommodating an employee's short-term illness that precludes him or her from coming to the workplace but not from working remotely.

### Definition

Telecommuting is a voluntary work alternative that may be appropriate for some employees and some positions, functions, or activities. A telecommuting arrangement does not change the terms and conditions of employment with the University of St. Thomas. The success of telecommuting is dependent on it being a mutually beneficial arrangement for the unit and the employee. All telecommuting arrangements should be transparent to all parties, including the telecommuter's peers and co-workers. University and departmental demands must be the primary priority.

### APPROVAL

- Approval for an employee to telecommute rests solely with the employee's department head and appropriate member of the Academic and Administrative Leadership (AAL) group.
- As needed, department heads may review proposed telecommuting agreements with their Human Resources Partner before approving the request to assure compliance with University policy and applicable labor and employment laws.

### ELIGIBILITY

- Regular full-time staff after receiving written approval.
- These guidelines do not apply to independent contractors, part-time or temporary employees.

### STEPS FOR INITIATING TELECOMMUTING

Either employee or manager may propose a telecommuting work option for the employee.

1. If proposed by the employee, the employee completes a Telecommuting Proposal and submits it to the manager (see template).
2. The employee and manager assess the feasibility of telecommuting and determine telecommuting options. The manager:

1. considers proposal to implement alternate work arrangement for the particular position; if request made by incumbent, acknowledges request, discusses proposal;
  2. reviews the following: functions/tasks of position under consideration, departmental staffing needs, space and budgetary considerations; and,
  3. consults with the appropriate Human Resources Partner as necessary on proposal.
3. If the manager approves the telecommuting plan, the employee and manager complete a Telecommuting Agreement (see template). The manager's Academic and Administrative Leadership Group member reviews the Agreement for organizational and policy consistency.
  4. The manager gives the employee the following documents:
    1. UST Telecommuting Guidelines;
    2. Signed Telecommuting Agreement (and retains a copy for his/her files); and,
    3. Supplementary materials, as appropriate.
  5. Manager notifies employee(s) to begin telecommuting and monitors arrangement(s); maintains open communications and discusses concerns with employee(s) as needed.
  6. If the manager disapproves the employee's request based on business reasons or the employee's own performance, the manager should advise the employee as soon as is feasible after the decision is made.
  7. Either the manager or the employee may terminate the telecommuting arrangement for any reason, at any time.

#### **GENERAL TERMS OF IMPLEMENTATION**

- All approved telecommuting schedules are discretionary and require the manager's approval.
- Telecommuting used as a transitional work program in aiding an employee's return to work from disability shall be administered consistent with existing policies and laws.
- Telecommuting may not substitute for primary child or home health care giving.
- Telecommuters are expected to adhere to University rules, regulations, and policies and procedures regarding security and confidentiality. See the UST's Acceptable Use/Unacceptable Use Policy and the Personal Conduct Policy for more information.
- Employees must use established computing procedures established by the University.
- The employee is responsible for maintaining employee owned telecommuting equipment.
- Telecommuting employees are responsible for setting aside a home work space that is ergonomically sound, clean, safe, and free of obstructions and hazardous materials.

#### **SELECTION CRITERIA FOR SUCCESSFUL TELECOMMUTING**

Approving employees' requests for telecommuting privileges must not be based on seniority, but on specific, written, work-related criteria established by the manager. Selection should include reasonable accommodation for employees who are permanently or temporarily disabled. With input from prospective telecommuters, the managers should assess whether

telecommuting is a viable work option as follows:

- Decide if a job is amenable in part or in whole, to being performed away from the main office. At the manager's discretion, a job is amenable to telecommuting if the job or some components of it can be done off-site without disruption to the flow of work and communication. Examples of telecommutable job components include researching, processing, dispensing of information, report writing, or communications that can be done from a distance.
- Ensure that work can be equitably distributed so that telecommuting schedules do not require in-office staff to perform the work of the telecommuter.
- Where possible, have the telecommuter's phone calls forwarded to his/her home office phone, use voice mail, which the telecommuter can access from his/her home office phone.
- Care should also be taken to ensure that telecommuters continue to have access to needed office support. The employee should be able to be reached by phone during assigned work hours.
- Screen prospective telecommuters for telecommuting eligibility (See Telecommuting Checklist )

Candidates for telecommuting should display work-related behaviors consistent with those of successful telecommuters.

- A history of reliable and responsible discharge of work duties; e.g., at a performance level of "meets or exceeds expectations" or higher;
- Full understanding of the operations of his/her department;
- Has the trust of his/her manager;
- Is able to establish priorities and has demonstrated effective time management habits;
- Pursues high-quality work production;
- Can maintain a safe and ergonomically sound home work area, free from distractions; and,
- Is reachable by phone during assigned work hours.

Telecommuting agreements should be considered only for employees:

- Whose documented performance is satisfactory or whose performance rating on their last evaluation is at least satisfactory.
- Whose position deemed appropriate for a telecommuting arrangement.
- Who work effectively with minimal supervision.

Telecommuting may not be appropriate for candidates who:

- Do not feel comfortable with physical isolation from other employees.
- Do not work well independently.
- Cannot create a home work space that is safe (for them, for university equipment and files) and free from distractions.
- Feel they are "out of the loop" and overlooked when it comes to various workplace opportunities.

## **SCHEDULING**

Telecommuting schedules should balance the manager's needs for face-to-face meetings. The telecommuter must be able to be reached via telephone during assigned work hours and must check in via e-mail, phone, etc. Except under unusual circumstances, telecommuters should spend a minimum of one day per week in the main office to ensure that the telecommuter:

- Has regular contact with the manager and co-workers.
- Has access to specialized files and/or equipment.
- Does not become isolated from office staff.

Office needs take precedence over telecommute days. A worker must forgo telecommuting if needed in the office on a regularly scheduled telecommute day.

## **HOURS OF WORK AND OVERTIME**

All approved telecommuting schedules are discretionary and require the manager's approval. The manager may approve any work schedule for a telecommuter as long as it is consistent with the employee's work group's requirements and the provisions university policy.

Consistent with university policy, overtime must be approved in advance. As with any work schedule, temporary telecommuting assignments or schedule changes may be made at the manager's discretion to meet the business needs of the department. Telecommuting may not substitute for primary child or home health care giving.

## **CONFIDENTIAL AND SENSITIVE INFORMATION**

Telecommuters are expected to adhere to University rules, regulations, policies and procedures regarding security and confidentiality for the computer, its data and information, and any other information handled in the course of work.

## **MAINTENANCE, REPAIR, AND REPLACEMENT OF EQUIPMENT**

The employee is responsible for maintaining and repairing employee-owned telecommuting equipment at personal expense and on personal time. The University is responsible for maintaining, repairing and replacing University-owned equipment issued to telecommuters. In the event of equipment malfunction, the telecommuter must notify his/her manager immediately. If repairs will take some time, the department will find alternative means to continue the telecommuter's work including asking the telecommuter to report to the main office until the equipment is usable.

## **HEALTH AND SAFETY (See Checklist)**

Telecommuting employees are responsible for setting aside a space in their home for work and ensuring that it is ergonomically sound, clean, safe, and free of obstructions and hazardous materials. They must ensure that their home complies with all building codes, and health and safety requirements, and that they are free of hazardous materials. The University may verify that the home office meets these requirements.

If a telecommuter incurs a work-related injury while telecommuting, worker's compensation law and rules apply. Employees must notify their manager and the Human Resources Department immediately and complete all necessary forms regarding the work-related injury.

### **EMPLOYEE RIGHTS**

None of the employee's rights or benefits provided under university policy are enhanced or abridged by the implementation of telecommuting. Employees retain the right to grieve or file a complaint in accordance university policy.

### **TERMINATION OF PARTICIPATION**

The option to implement a telecommuting arrangement is at the sole discretion of the manager and applicable Academic and Administrative Leadership Group members. Either the manager or the employee may terminate an employee's telecommuting arrangement for any reason, at any time. If an employee requests to terminate telecommuting, the manager will arrange for the employee to begin working at the main office as quickly as possible, but no later than 7 days after notification by the employee. The manager may terminate an employee's telecommuting arrangement without notice, but when possible should provide an employee with as much advance notice as feasible.

Failure by the telecommuter to maintain a home office that is safe, ergonomically sound and free from distraction so as not to interfere with work, as determined by the manager, provides cause for terminating an employee's telecommuting arrangement.

The manager determines whether telecommuting is appropriate, based upon work requirements. Those who previously had a telecommuting arrangement are not assured of a telecommuting assignment when returning from a leave of absence or after a job transfer or promotion.

### **PERIODIC PERFORMANCE REVIEW**

Managers should meet regularly with their telecommuters to review performance, including any issues related to the telecommuting arrangement.

### **EMPLOYEE REIMBURSEMENT PROCEDURES**

Responsibility for maintaining the telecommuter's home equipment should be defined before the start of telecommuting. The employee is responsible for maintaining personal equipment at the employee's own expense and during personal time.

Each department must arrange to pay for business expenses incurred by telecommuters. Employees should retain copies of appropriate reimbursable expenses.

Each department will need to budget for charges for business related telephone calls and services.

The University will not pay for the following types of expenses:

- Usage fees for privately owned computers.
- Utility costs associated with the use of the computer or occupation of the home.
- Travel to the central office or parking during telecommuting days.
- Telecommuter purchased office supplies. Telecommuters should obtain supplies from their university office during non-telecommuting days.

#### **PROBLEM RESOLUTION**

Should problems occur with the telecommuting arrangement, managers should handle the issues using applicable University policies and procedures. Contacting your Human Resources Partner continues to be a wise first step.

#### **RENEWAL OF TELECOMMUTING AGREEMENTS**

The telecommuter and manager should review the telecommuting agreement annually to assure it continues to meet the business needs of the unit and, ultimately, the University. Telecommuting was selected because of the combination of job, employee characteristics, and manager characteristics. A change in any one of these may require a review of the telecommuting arrangement.

A telecommuter and a new manager may decide to continue a telecommuting arrangement by mutual agreement. Neither should feel obligated to do so--especially when it is not in the best interests of the department or either party.