

## THE MANAGER'S ROLE IN SELECTING TELECOMMUTERS:

### HOW TO DELIVER THE NEWS

**Note:** These guidelines have been developed by Gil Gordon Associates. For more information on telecommuting, visit [www.gilgordon.com](http://www.gilgordon.com). These guidelines are provided at no cost for general use by employers, with the understanding that they are not meant to act as specific legal advice or professional service.

#### How and Why We Select Telecommuters

Most telecommuting programs include some kind of selection process to choose the telecommuters from among those employees who are interested in the concept. Typically, these employees have been given some information about telecommuting and are then asked to express their interest - with the understanding that some will be selected and others won't. This is because telecommuting is generally not available to everyone who wants it; there are limitations on equipment and budgets, and managers typically choose not to make it available to everyone in a work unit.

Even though most organizations do a good job of announcing from the outset that telecommuting should be seen as nothing more than a special kind of job assignment, and not a "perk" or an employee benefit available to everyone, the reality is that people can still become disappointed if they aren't selected. The manager has an important role in dealing with this selection process so that those not selected aren't unduly upset or frustrated by this decision.

In a way, this is very similar to what happens with any other job placement and selection decision, most notably the job bidding or posting process common in many organizations. The opening is posted, those who are interested and who think they meet the qualifications submit their application, and management makes the final choice. Everyone understands the rules of the game, but those not chosen still can be frustrated, and good managers realize that they have the responsibility to do some coaching or counseling in this situation.

#### How To Get The Message Across Successfully

The same thing is true for telecommuting - perhaps even more so, because of how highly valued this work option is by many employees. Here are some tips for managers as they go about notifying those selected to (or allowed to) telecommute, and those who aren't:

1. **NOTIFYING THOSE SELECTED:** This is the easy part - delivering the good news. The manager should take the opportunity to tell the employee why he/she was selected - specifically, what is it about the person's work habits, job skills, motivation, or other factors that give the manager reason to believe that this

person can function effectively as a telecommuter. Thus, the message should be "Yes, you were selected," and also "Here's why you were selected."

Depending on how many people are involved, and the logistics of trying to speak with each one individually, the manager might ask those selected to keep this information to themselves until a certain time, such as noon of the following day, to give the manager time to talk to everyone.

**2. NOTIFYING THOSE NOT SELECTED:** This is the harder part - no one likes to deliver bad news. There are two main reasons why someone wasn't selected for telecommuting. The first is a "good" kind of bad news - that is, the person is suited and qualified, but the limitations on the number of telecommuters that can be accommodated (for various reasons) mean that this person wasn't chosen. Very often the manager can suggest that this person will be given an opportunity to telecommute in the future, especially if the plan is to rotate telecommuters back to the office after a certain amount of time.

Similarly, the person might not have been in the current position long enough to become as well skilled in the job as is required for telecommuting. If he/she is showing the kinds of job skills that are needed for telecommuting, the manager can suggest (but not promise) that telecommuting might be a possibility after more time has passed - and as long as the skills are maintained or improved.

The second reason for not being selected is that the employee just hasn't demonstrated the skills and work habits that give the manager the feeling that this person will be effective and productive as a telecommuter. The essence of telecommuting is the manager's willingness to trust the employee to self-supervise on the telecommuting day(s). That trust is based on experience in the office; if the manager's experience suggests that this employee isn't a good risk, the person won't be selected.

With this in mind, the manager must be clear about the reasons for not selecting or allowing the person to work at home. As with any other kind of performance feedback, this should be done with descriptive language and not just labels or summary judgments. For example, it's not useful to say, "I didn't select you because I just don't trust you," or "You just aren't conscientious enough." Also, the manager shouldn't avoid the issue by placing the blame on someone else, e.g., "I would have chosen you as a telecommuter, but the people in Human Resources wouldn't let me."

Instead, the manager should describe what he/she has observed in the person's performance that led to the decision. For example, "I was concerned about the fact that your reports and projects are frequently late or incomplete," or "Your work area is not well organized, and it seems like it's difficult for you to keep track of all the resources you're using when you're working on projects." Be specific

about what has been observed, and don't use vague labels that are likely to make the person defensive.

As difficult as it might be to be this specific, bear in mind that managers have a golden opportunity to give this performance feedback as they perhaps have never had before. The employee who wants to telecommute will want to know why he/she wasn't selected - even though it might be painful or upsetting to hear why. The manager has the person's attention, and this is a great time to do some performance coaching. It's very important not only to deliver the feedback, but to use it as the basis for some discussion about ways to improve.

In doing so, keep in mind that you should not do or say anything to promise the employee that he/she will be allowed to telecommute once these performance problems have been corrected. The message that must be conveyed is, "I'm not guaranteeing that you'll be able to telecommute once you improve in these areas - that will depend on lots of factors. However, I can guarantee that I won't be comfortable with you telecommuting as long as these problems remain."

It should be rare that this is the first time the employee is getting feedback on these performance problems. If they were serious enough to keep him/her from telecommuting, they should have been serious enough to affect performance in the office as well - and therefore should have been discussed earlier during informal or formal feedback or appraisal sessions. The manager can make reference to those earlier discussions to reinforce the point that these are, in fact, problems that affect ongoing job performance no matter where it is done.

#### To Summarize: Some Do's and Don'ts

- DO be clear about how you make your selection decisions
- DO discuss those decisions with employees individually, not in groups
- DO let employees know exactly why they were - or were not - selected
- DON'T rely on vague descriptions of performance to justify your decision
- DON'T pass up the opportunity to coach and counsel those not selected
- DON'T give the impression that telecommuting is a "perk" or benefit

As with all other aspects of telecommuting, this part of the process is a matter of good management skills. Good managers communicate openly and clearly about what they observe in the performance of their employees – and that's especially true when telecommuting is involved.