



First Sgt. Aaron Halter, HHC First Sgt. at Fort Hunter Liggett, California, shows how he adapts to teleworking while caring for his family during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Courtesy photo)

Adapting Telework Strategies for the U.S. Army

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The global COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2019 and had devastating effects impacting millions worldwide (Center for Systems Science and Engineering, n.d.). It caused a seismic shift in how businesses and institutions work every day. Like many other organizations, the U.S. Army quickly adapted by

moving most of its staff to remote work.

Telework's enduring importance is evident when one examines the related real-world issues and solutions. A closer look also yields important insights about how to improve processes and extend capabilities.

Problems

The problems unique to telework include practical restrictions and limits that may seem insurmountable (Golden & Veiga, 2005). It is essential to deal with these problems directly.

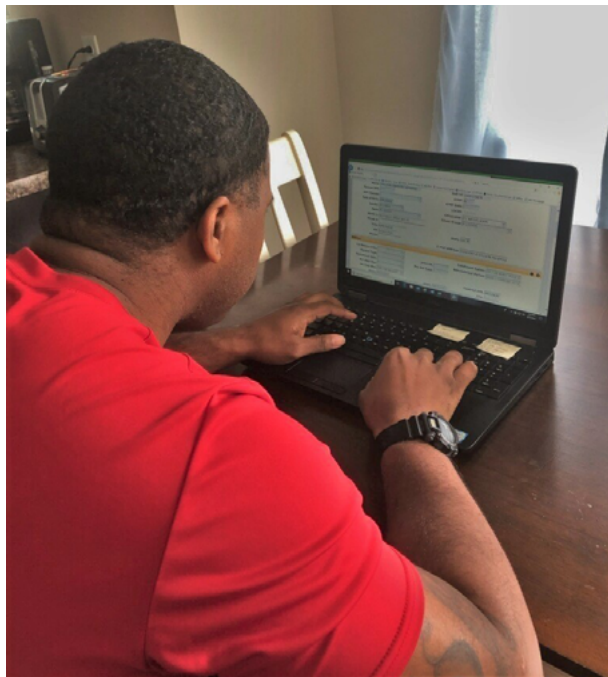
Challenges to consider include:

- **Limited funding:** Some units may only be able to issue laptops for remote work to essential personnel because of budgetary limitations. Affected units need to develop realistic, flexible plans that work with limited resources.
- **Cybersecurity:** Exploitable flaws in hardware and software make systems vulnerable to attackers.
- **Mental health:** Telework makes jobs more flexible but blurs personal and professional lines. This ambiguity complicates a healthy work-life balance (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), which could increase stress and harm well-being. Mental health directly affects employee productivity (Golden & Veiga, 2005).

Solutions

Counseling

Dynamic leaders can create workplace settings where subordinates understand expectations, easing the team's pathway to success. A great telework environment depends on proactive leadership that ensures everyone



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Vincent Dillard, the Division Artillery Brigade career counselor with 3rd Infantry Division, works on a reenlistment contract from his home in Ludowici, Georgia, April 7, 2020. In the telework environment, dynamic leadership and clear communication are critical to fostering an effective workplace. (Courtesy photo)

knows the critical tasks required to accomplish goals. Clear standards are essential for good performance since communication has long been the key to Army success.

Noncommissioned officers (NCOs) need to counsel their Soldiers on what good work looks like in the telework setting. A study investigating the relationship between managing expectations and performance effectiveness concluded that leaders who set clear expectations positively affect productivity (Awan et al., 2020). Although the study was about work in general, its results have substantial implications for telework. Clear expectations must be set for tasks to be successful.

Another study examined how telework affects worker productivity and found that telework tends to lead to increased productivity (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). While telework has been positively associated with enhanced job performance, it's crucial to acknowledge how clear expectations significantly drive increased productivity. Participants' prior understanding of their responsibilities was instrumental in their smooth transition to working from home and maintaining or improving their output and efficiency.

Defining goals, objectives, and performance metrics in Soldiers' counseling is essential to upholding standards of excellence during telework.

Standard Operational Procedures

Standard Operational Procedures (SOPs) for teleworking can empower NCOs to enhance productivity in remote work environments. SOPs have a proven track record of facilitating clear communication regarding expectations and responsibilities (Page, 2014). Soldiers perform tasks the same way, quality control stays at its best, and everyone on the team knows their job.

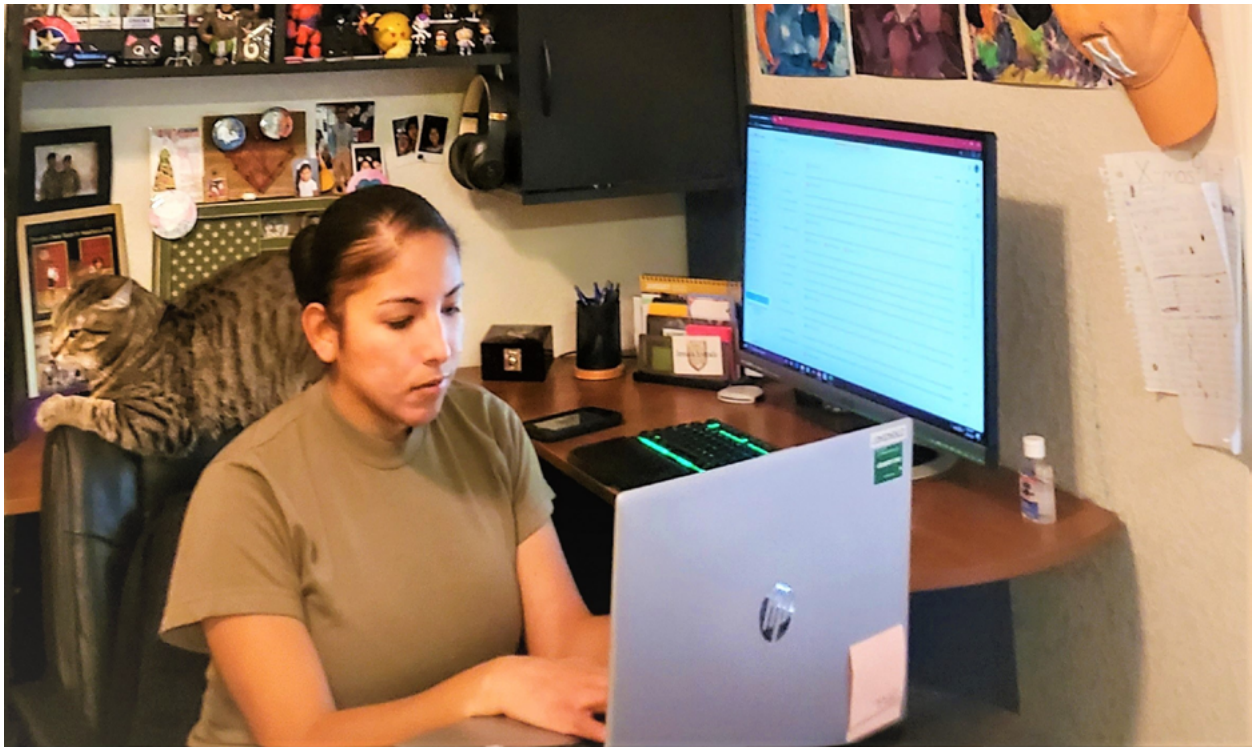
Implementation can initially appear more challenging than anticipated, as recognizing the extent of our limited knowledge requires considerable understanding. However, dedicating time and effort to this initiative will yield substantial rewards in the long run.

SOP strengths:

- **Address operational shortfalls in equipment**, like government-issued laptops, allowing NCOs to set up courses of action ahead of time. This measure can guarantee that units manage resources more efficiently and are better prepared for a unit-level shift to teleworking.
- **Spell out each specific duty**, which helps everyone understand how things should work together.
- **Provide clear procedures** that ensure Soldiers complete tasks more efficiently, which supports productivity and effectiveness.

Cybersecurity

Cybersecurity is a critical aspect of telework. Protecting sensitive information outside the traditional



Sgt. Jessica Estrada, executive assistant to the U.S. Army Network Enterprise Command's Command Sergeant Major, teleworks from her government quarters on Fort Huachuca, Arizona. As telework continues to evolve, the lessons drawn from this period will be invaluable in refining remote work strategies, ensuring the Army's resilience and productivity in the face of future challenges. (Courtesy photo)

workplace is vital for maintaining operational security.

Incorporating cyber awareness training tailored explicitly for telework could offer several benefits. Cyber awareness training teaches personnel to identify and mitigate potential cyber threat actors, which is vital when working outside the confines of the installation.

Training helps Soldiers understand the importance of safeguarding sensitive information, especially when using nonsecure networks. Training also increases awareness of and compliance with Department of Defense (DoD) policies and procedures related to telework, thus maintaining operational security standards.

Mental Health

When discussing telework, it's essential to stress mental health, which directly affects productivity. Although telework makes jobs more flexible, the blurring of the personal and professional challenges a healthy work-life balance. Increased stress could result.

These situations can decrease job satisfaction and negatively impact mental health (Park et al., 2011). Before switching to telework, leaders should determine if Soldiers are going through anything that could change their lives and cause mental health concerns. Examples include marital problems or divorce, ongoing discipline issues, financial trouble, or drug abuse.

NCOs must determine the controls needed for each

possible problem. They must also talk to their Soldiers about their concerns, address any ongoing issues or worries they think might affect their mental health while teleworking, and devise a good action plan with them. Leaders should also check in with their subordinates to ensure they follow the plan.

When necessary, set up regular face-to-face talks. Use these meetings for meaningful conversations. NCOs can ensure the effectiveness of a plan of action and verify no new issues emerge after previous sessions.

When Soldiers return to their units after teleworking, NCOs should give them feedback on their overall performance, including areas where they did well and could do better. They should also review the action plan to ensure subordinates get the help they need.

Conversely, NCOs should reassess what they could have done to support Soldiers' mental health better while they worked from home.

Subjects to review include:

- **Risk control measures:** How well did they work at giving Soldiers the help they needed?
- **Problems or restrictions:** What got in the way of the best outcomes? (For example, insufficient mental health support or improper resource allocation.)
- **Improved implementation:** What possible solutions could be used better at the unit level or with the help of outside support channels to improve outcomes?

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic altered the work landscape, compelling institutions like the U.S. Army to embrace telework. The real-world examples and insights above underscore the significance of telework and reveal inherent challenges (such as resource constraints, cybersecurity risks, and diminished mental health).

Remote work has transformed from a niche option

to a global standard. In the telework environment, dynamic leadership and clear communication are critical to fostering an effective workplace. Counseling and setting explicit expectations can ensure performance standards are maintained.

As telework continues to evolve, the lessons drawn from this period will be invaluable in refining remote work strategies, ensuring the Army's resilience and productivity in the face of future challenges. ■

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