

D.C. ranked No.1 for teleworking potential

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The nation's capital was ranked "Best City For Teleworking" according to a recent nationwide study. It was followed by Boston, Atlanta, Chicago and San Francisco respectively, rounding off the top five in the extra-large metro-area category, said the study released by research firm Sperling's BestPlaces and Intel Corporation.

The survey ranked 80 of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States in terms of its telework potential by looking at commuting, office-based workforce, Internet infrastructure, extreme climate and natural hazards.

"Recent increases in fuel prices, crowded highways and security concerns have all combined to make telework increasingly important in today's world," said Bert Sperling, principal author of the study. "Our analysis shows that working from home even one day a week can have a huge beneficial effect for employees, companies and the entire community."

Meanwhile, California's San Jose topped the large metro area followed by Baltimore, Denver, San Diego and Indianapolis.

And medium metro areas were led by Bridgeport/Stamford/Norwalk, Conn., and Boulder, Colo., for the small metro area.

According to the study, the D.C.-Va.-Md. region has one of the highest percentages of white-collar workers and a daily commute that is one of the most time-consuming and costly in the nation.

The study reported that "a single Washington office worker who teleworks just one day each week can see savings of \$488 in transportation costs and \$2,708 in time savings each year."

Intel is one company among others including JetBlue Airways and Alpine Access, who have been promoting telework. At Intel more than 80,000 of its workers participate in teleworking.

"D.C. wins or loses depending on how you look at it," said Nigel Ballard, Intel's teleworking campaign manager. "So many people have a long commute. It's got one of the worse problems in the nation."

Ballard has spent time and effort in researching teleworking, talking to IT professionals and those in the federal government; and despite the benefits of this new model, he says that he's found a great sense of reluctance to adopting telecommuting despite fines and relevant congressional legislation.

And he says the government, if not businesses, would benefit from huge savings from teleworking, higher worker morale combined with effective training.

"It takes the ability to change and trust your employees," said Ballard, describing the old-school management liking to see their people 9-to-5 because that's how business has been for a long time.

Based on interviews with 235 IT professionals and 542 Washington-area federal employees, a recent study by CDW Government Inc. found that 41 percent were teleworking and 43 percent had recently just began.

But teleworking could be much higher especially in the public sphere unlike the private sector where it's been catching on, says Chuck Wilsker, president of advocacy organization The Telework Coalition.

Wilsker mentions that there is a continued frustration in the lack of telework in government voiced by the concerns of teleworking advocates like Republican Reps. Tom Davis and Frank Wolf of Virginia.

And what started out as an issue to address environmental issues such as gas prices and global warming, telework has become a solution for real-estate savings as well as business continuity.

According to Wilsker, the big push for teleworking came after Sept. 11, 2001, when businesses realized that they did not want their key people all on one site. Moreover, it was apparent with Hurricane Katrina when people wanted to maintain business continuity despite facilities being destroyed, he said.

And it will even address the baby-boom generation retiring where many will choose to work full time or part time from home thanks to teleworking, which simply does not only mean working from home but means mobility.

More importantly, he says that by preparing a contingency plan using teleworking, it will greatly enhance businesses and government operations in terms of hurricanes, terrorist attacks and the potential outbreak of a pandemic looming.

And the benefits of teleworking are numerous, he says, which will bring jobs to a broader base of people, widen the labor pool by bringing jobs to the rural areas and those with disabilities, reduce dependency on imported gas, reduce absenteeism and raise worker morale.

But before teleworking can be offered, he warns that training and practice must be in place as well as standard technology.

In the 2006 telework benchmarking study on large-scale telework

implementation of organizations sponsored Intel, it was found that most telework programs were voluntary and provided training that ranged from none to intensive with a focus on online training.

Moreover, it found that a certain standardized set of technology solutions were in place including laptops, virtual private networks, file-sharing, a help desk and increasingly Voice over Internet Protocol.

"You can't just go home and work," Wilsker said. "You need a program in place, what you are going to do and how, practice, refining the program, more practice, and fine-tuning."

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