

January 2018
Publication 17.09i

Summary of Austin Independent School District Telecommuting Surveys



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Overview of Telecommuting in AISD

Telecommuting supports the districts vision of reinventing the urban education experience which improves the way we work to support our schools. AISD promotes the core belief that an “effective, agile, and responsive organization” can be created with the following practical commitments:

1. Create a positive organizational culture that values customer service and every employee
2. Develop effective organizational structures
3. Generate, leverage, and use strategically all resources

Telecommuting is currently used in many industries and is celebrated for fostering job satisfaction and increased productivity. However, telecommuting is not widely practiced in K-12 environments and some industries are actually moving away from telecommuting. As the district looks for ways to support our practical commitments, it is exploring this 21st century innovation in employee work-style. AISD will incorporate lessons learned from other industries. Additional goals of telecommuting include to support Mayor Adler’s initiative to reduce Austin traffic congestion and its environmental impact, and to enhance job satisfaction, thereby increasing the probability of attracting and retaining high-quality employees.

Two AISD departments have implemented telecommuting: the Office of Accountability and Assessment (OAA) and Management Information Systems (MIS). OAA was surveyed before, during, and after its 8-week pilot of telecommuting 1 day per week. Using thematically consistent questions, MIS was surveyed after 7 months of full-time telecommuting. The purpose of these surveys was to identify patterns of implementation that could guide future decisions about the implementation of telecommuting in AISD. This report summarizes lessons learned from OAA and MIS to better understand the challenges and best practices of implementation.

Lessons Learned

Going forward, there is a need to:

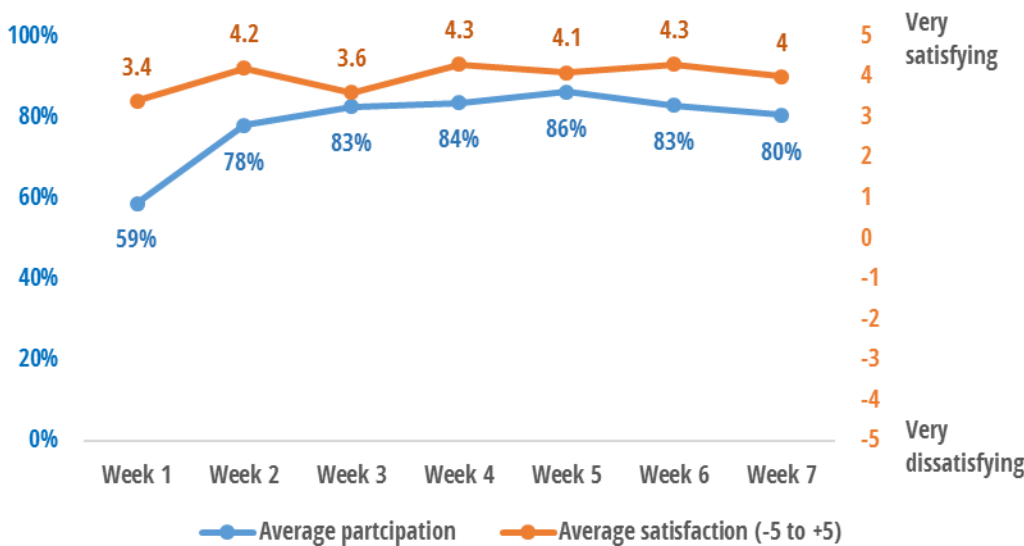
- Understand that the conversation around telecommuting is tied to the conversation around flexible working conditions.
- Provide clarity about who holds financial responsibility for setting up and maintaining a home office.
- Provide proactive support to help staff feel masterful using digital tools that foster remote collaboration among colleagues.
- Establish telecommuting infrastructure and guidelines for technology use.
- Utilize careful pre-planning of the work week to make best use of offsite time.
- Provide guidelines for understanding expectations regarding telecommuting and flex schedules.

Lessons on Logistics of Implementing Telecommuting

The most immediately useful information coming from the telecommuting surveys highlighted logistical details that might be transferred to other departments as they embark on telecommuting for the first time. With any change, growing pains can be expected, but if we can anticipate the growing pains, we will be better prepared.

While most OAA employees who participated in the telecommuting pilot reported high degrees of satisfaction throughout, the lowest satisfaction occurred in the first 3 weeks. During this time only 54%, 53%, and 50% of OAA’s employees (in weeks 1, 2, and 3, respectively) reported being ‘very satisfied’ with the pilot. That gradually increased to 63% reporting ‘very satisfied’ by the end. During this same 3 to 4 week time period, there was a gradual ramp up in participation. It took 3 weeks for staff to use an average of about 83% of their allotted telecommuting time (i.e., 1 full day) and stabilize at that level of participation (Figure 1). Of the people who telecommuted less than their allotted time, most reported needing to come into the office for meetings (31%) or due to technology challenges at home (28%). Internet connectivity seemed to be a persistent distraction when working at home in the first few weeks, with personal distractions (e.g., family, pets, chores) being less intrusive than anticipated.

Figure 1
During the 8-week OAA summer pilot it took 3-4 weeks to arrive at a stable level of average participation and average satisfaction.



Source: OOA Pilot Telecommuting Surveys.

Narrative comments from the OAA’s weekly surveys reveal almost all concerns throughout the pilot were about the adequacy of technology to support the initiative (e.g., software, internet access, call forwarding, laptop speed, monitors). Although supervisors can often support employees with work-day challenges in the office, and the Technology Department can support standard technology issues, in this case, most supervisors had no more experience telecommuting than their employees did, and OAA did not yet have a protocol for setting up an employee to work offsite. The individuals in OAA were aware that the nature of the pilot experience was to figure out some of these exact protocols, so they were creative in deriving solutions. Sometimes they continued

Telecommuting has been implemented and researched in AISD (i.e., in MIS and OAA). The OAA pilot was designed to cover the first 8 weeks of implementation, during which employees had the option to telecommute 1 day per week (10-hour days on the AISD summer schedule). Surveys were given before, during and after the pilot. Forty OAA staff members participated in the survey. MIS employees were surveyed after 7 months of full-time implementation. Fifty-four MIS staff participated in the survey.

Survey responses were disaggregated by department and by employee characteristics. A complete interactive report is available for internal stakeholders. Contact Holly Williams for access.

Summary of employee characteristics.

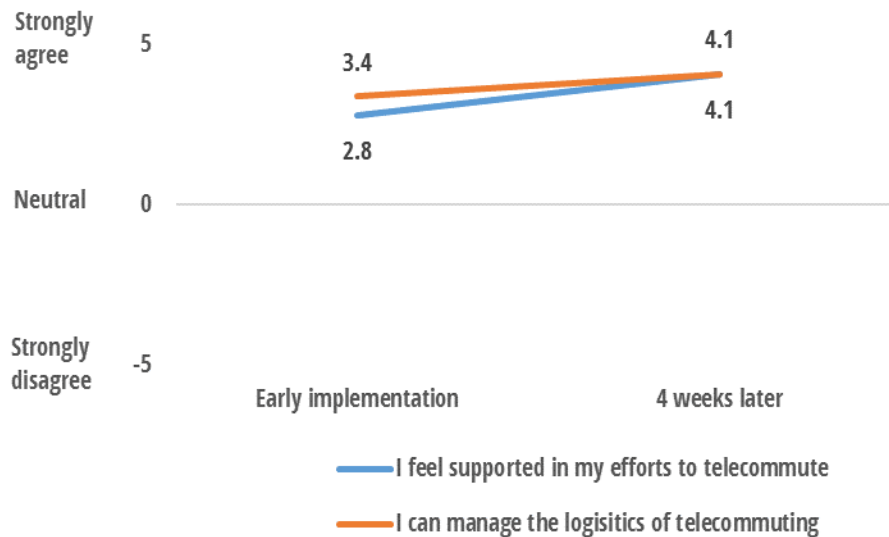
	MIS	OAA
Less than 2 years of experience telecommuting	70%	90%
2 years or more prior experience telecommuting	30%	10%
Worked in department less than 1 year	9%	15%
Worked in department 1 to 5 years	55%	53%
Worked in department more than 5 years	36%	33%
Commute less than 1 hour per day	57%	35%
Commute more than 1 hour per day	43%	65%

What did we learn?

1. It took 3 to 4 weeks for people to find their groove.
2. When they came in to the office on their telecommuting day it was usually for a meeting or because of technology challenges.
3. Technology challenges dominated their early concerns.
4. Participants felt more capable and more supported over time.
5. Many took on extra expenses to set up a home office.

their work on a slower platform; at other times, they changed their work plan for the day to accommodate their technology challenges, or decided to just come into the office. As the pilot continued, many useful software platforms and communication strategies were adopted to smooth out the process. After about a month, OAA employees reported feeling more confident in their ability to manage the logistics of telecommuting and more supported in their efforts (Figure 2).

Figure 2
After 4 weeks, OAA employees reported feeling more supported in their efforts to telecommute and reported improvements in their ability to manage the logistics of telecommuting.



Source. OOA Pilot Telecommuting Surveys.

In addition to struggles about technology, narrative comments also revealed concerns about the issue of financial responsibility. Who should be paying for technology and furniture to set up a home office or for a monthly Internet bill? Does the answer to that question differ if the district is “requiring” staff to work from home versus making it “optional”? In the case of OAA, this was only a short-term trial and only 1 day per week, but in the case of MIS, it was a long-term and required aspect of the job. Several MIS employees reported that they had increased their home Internet service to accommodate working from home. While some recommended stipends to cover those expenses, others thought the expenses were offset by no longer paying for gas or eating out for lunch.

MIS staff were asked “What advice would you give to others in order to be successful telecommuting?” The three main recommendations were to set up a comfortable work space at home, proactively communicate with colleagues, and develop a plan for your work each week.

One MIS employee one said to “be prepared to make more effort to be connected with your colleagues”. Also having a plan for your workweek and day was recommended.

AISD's Long-Term Goals of Telecommuting

In addition to examining lessons learned about telecommuting from its pilot studies, AISD also explored the attainability of the long-term goals of telecommuting: to support Mayor Adler's initiative to reduce Austin traffic congestion, and to enhance job satisfaction, thereby increasing the probability of attracting and retaining high-quality employees.

Long-Term Goal #1: Reduce Austin traffic congestion and its environmental impact

Austin's traffic is rated the 18th worst in the United States according to the most recent INRIX US Traffic Hotspot Study and has 1,727 traffic hotspots (Pishue, 2017). To counteract the traffic problem, Mayor Adler would like to see traffic reduced by 20%. The mayor is calling on local employers to think outside the box when it comes to commuting during peak morning and afternoon hours. AISD is answering that call.

It is difficult to assess if AISD telecommuting noticeably improved Austin traffic. AISD employee telecommuter numbers are relatively small compared with numbers for the Austin commuter population. Factors other than the number of cars on the road contribute to traffic congestion (e.g., infrastructure problems such as highway layout, road construction, and the availability of mass transit options). However, AISD can

participate in the effort to decrease Austin's traffic congestion. Although Austin traffic might be inevitably bad for now, the good news is that by offering the option to telecommute, employees are able to avoid it. To date these two telecommuting pilots helped to avoid approximately 12,000 to 13,000 hours in peak traffic. That is the equivalent of about a year and half of time, or the working hours of seven FTEs for a year. Instead of battling Austin traffic, those hours were spent working, with family, walking dogs, exercising, cooking, and so on. Numerous comments from both groups expressed satisfaction with reduced time commuting and sitting in traffic.

While it seems obvious that telecommuting would be good for the environment because it reduces time in cars, the overall environmental impact is complicated to determine because it includes numerous factors such as the length of commute, traffic congestion, outside temperatures, relative efficiency of the vehicle, and home and office energy usage. If the goal is to reduce carbon emissions, the solution is more multifaceted than just having people work from home. However, assuming the OAA

Would telecommuting decrease traffic congestion in Austin?

AISD telecommuting is a small part of a larger traffic congestion puzzle. We can, however, expect our employees to experience much less time in that congestion. So far, the telecommuting pilots have resulted in approximately 12,000 fewer hours in traffic.



respondents did not drive into the office on their 1 day of telecommuting during the 8-week pilot, the respondents would have spent 400 fewer hours in transit. Most of these hours would have been during peak traffic times, under normal working conditions. The impact on the environment of that small decrease would reduce carbon

Would telecommuting decrease carbon emissions?
Total carbon emission is a complicated issue involving numerous factors (e.g., the length of commute, traffic congestion, outside temperatures, relative vehicle efficiency, home and office energy usage).

waste by 11 metric tons, or the equivalent of taking 2.2 cars off the road for a year (Palmer, 2010). Unfortunately, survey results from the pilot showed that many OAA employees did drive in to the office at some point in the day, usually because of complications with technology or to be present for a meeting.

Long-Term Goal #2: Increase job satisfaction, and eventually, retention

At the outset of the OAA pilot, 95% of respondents were interested in telecommuting; they anticipated less time in traffic and more time with family, pets, and at the gym. Did telecommuting actually enhance job satisfaction over time? After the 8-week pilot, average job fulfillment increased from 4.2 to 4.7 on a 5-point scale, with 5 being strong satisfaction. The biggest increases were in *satisfaction with life/work balance* (from 3.9 to 4.7) and *professional autonomy* (from 4.1 to 4.7). The only area to show a decrease was satisfaction with the “ability to communicate and/or collaborate with one’s colleagues.” This makes sense considering that staff were in the process of figuring out how to remotely communicate and collaborate (Figure 3).

“I am interested in the reduction of my weekly commute time. I may actually be able to exercise and improve the environment at the same time! I am relieved to be able to control the temperature of my work space at least one day a week. I look forward to using my lunch hour in a more productive way. That and the reduced commute time will improve my quality of life. I hope that the option of telecommuting will lead to more flexible work schedules, which will make AISD a more attractive place to work.”

Figure 3
Change in satisfaction from pre- to post-survey showed increases in every area for OAA respondents, except the “ability to communicate and collaborate with colleagues”




Source. OOA Pilot Telecommuting Surveys.

We noted similar changes in pre- to post-survey responses from MIS staff after telecommuting full time for 7 months. Overall job satisfaction was improved by telecommuting, with more positive impact reported in questions related to individual experience than to professional camaraderie (e.g., such as connection to department or district, level of support from direct supervisor, and ability to communicate and collaborate with colleagues) (Figure 4).

Telecommuting seems to increase job satisfaction, not because people prefer to work by themselves, but because it gives employees more control over their time. The conversations about where we work and about how we spend our time are

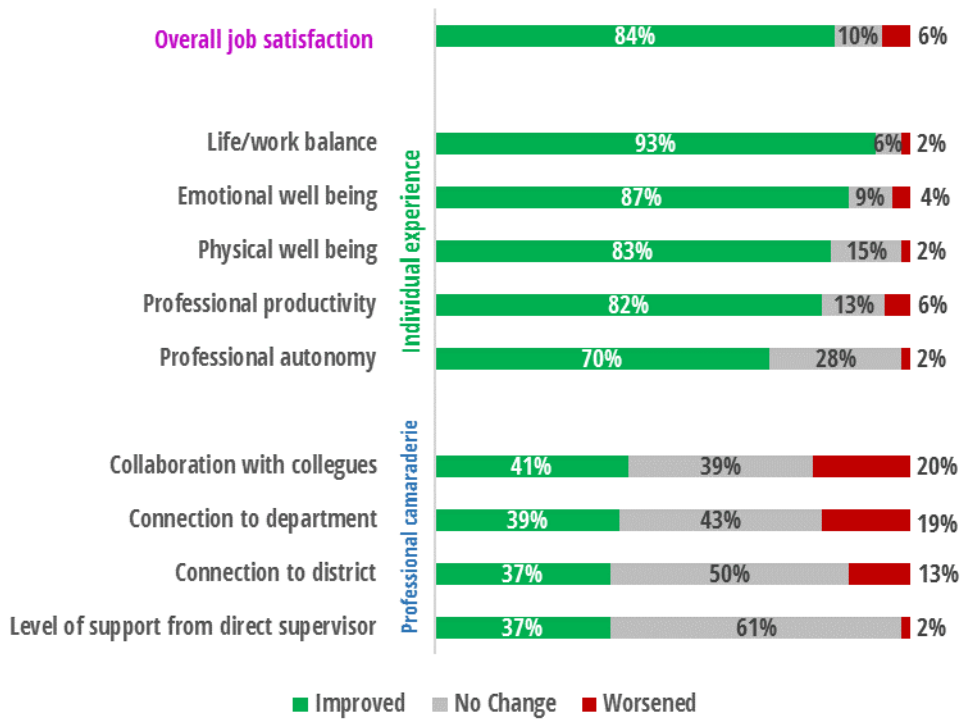
Would telecommuting ultimately reduce district costs?

While the pilot was too short to answer this question, it is likely that increased staff retention would result in long-term cost savings.



interlaced. We asked MIS employees to reflect on the relative importance of having control over different aspects of their work on a scale from 0 to 10. While having some control over the place of work was ranked as important (6.6), both the ability to control the time of work (6.8) and the nature of work (7.8) were deemed more important.

Figure 4
Eighty-four percent of MIS respondents felt that telecommuting improved their overall job satisfaction, with more reporting improvement in their individual experience than in professional camaraderie.



Source. MIS Telecommuting Survey.

The OAA pilot was implemented differently than MIS telecommuting: OAA employees were allowed to telecommute 1 day per week, but were required to keep the same hours as a regular office day while MIS staff telecommuted daily. Across OAA departments surveyed (i.e., Accountability/PIEMS, District and Campus Accountability, Office of Program Evaluation, System-Wide Testing), there were narrative comments related to work flexibility. Comments reflected some confusion by staff about the type and amount of autonomy regarding their work schedule, and they repeatedly voiced interests in additional work flexibility. However, the concept of work flexibility varied (e.g., flex-time, flexible begin and end times, choice of telecommuting day, hybrid work from home and from office days).

Finally, although overall job satisfaction improved for a vast majority of respondents in both groups, certain personal traits were associated with varying degrees of improvement. Personal experiences of job satisfaction varied based on department and type of work: System-wide testing saw the greatest positive change in overall job fulfillment (i.e., gains from 3.4 to 5.0) while District and Campus Accountability showed the least positive change on job fulfillment (from 4.1 to 4.5). Personal reactions to the pilot also varied with commute time. People with longer commutes tended to view the pilot more favorably and recorded less negative impact on professional camaraderie. Likewise, employees who had worked in their department between 1 and 5 years saw the pilot more favorably than did those that had worked in the department less than 1 year or more than 5 years.



Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, the OAA and MIS surveys showed that telecommuting added great personal value and job satisfaction for the employees who piloted this innovative work-style. After seven months of telecommuting, 84% of MIS respondents reported that telecommuting had improved their overall job satisfaction, and when asked about the future of the initiative after their summer pilot, 79% of OAA respondents recommended telecommuting increase beyond 1 day per week. Because these overwhelmingly positive findings were consistent across both survey groups, and across the different disaggregations by employee characteristics, we strongly recommend the district continue to refine the implementation of telecommuting to be a more “effective, agile and responsive organization.”

Recommendations to refine future implementation include the following:

- The district should consider telecommuting policies in conversation with different conceptions of flexible working schedules, as appropriate to the job duties. Findings from both surveys suggest that flexibility is important to staff. MIS employees indicated that while having the ability to influence their place of work was important, having influence over their schedule of work and the nature of their work were more important.
- The district should prioritize developing policies that address financial responsibility for telecommuting (e.g. internet speed at home) in a way that leaves employees clear about their options, and empowered in their choices. Feedback from both groups indicate the financial implications of telecommuting are not completely clear at this point.
- New skills are needed to be successful at remote collaboration; the district should be proactive in addressing this need if telecommuting is continued. Findings from both surveys suggest that work remains to be done in the area of fostering collaboration between colleagues remotely and that more support is needed in this area. Remote collaboration might be supported with actions such as structured team check-ins and district training in technology that supports collaboration.
- As any new staff group begins to telecommute, the district should provide a set of technological tools, guidelines, and resources to support the logistical needs of telecommuting for that particular group. This might include a list of recommended software that best support video-conferencing, instant messaging, and remote access to shared digital materials and work phone line. The district also should share the advice and best practices of those who have already established routines for managing the new challenges that telecommuting presents.
- Deliberate planning of one's work flow is recommended, to best match the unique advantages and challenges presented by working at home. Participants from both groups indicated that it was often easier to focus at home and that telecommuting was conducive to deep, undisturbed work flow. Therefore, it is important to be strategic in matching the type of work with the environment.

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AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Holly Williams, Ph.D.
Melissa Andrews, M.A.
Shaun Hutchins, Ph.D.

Department of Research and Evaluation



1111 West 6th Street, Suite D-350 | Austin, TX 78703-5338
512.414.1724 | fax: 512.414.1707
www.austinisd.org/dre | Twitter: @AISD_DRE

January 2018

Publication 17.09i