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Allan: Hello and welcome to today’s webinar course on telework management. This is course number four in a six-part series. Today we’re going to be talking about employee best practices, “What’s in It For Me?” And today we are pleased to have with us our panel from our last course, and I will share those panelists with you in a moment. Just before we do that, for those of you who would like to access the closed captioning that is occurring simultaneously with the presentation today, you can do so by going to the link on the bottom here. And that link is going to allow you to see every word that is said by our panelists today, in real time, as they say it. So please take advantage of that if you would like to. And while we’re... I’m just going to leave that up for a moment and introduce our panelists. Everyone probably knows by now Mika Cross, who is the program director for Workforce Wellness & Flexibility at USDA, and also the main presenter of this series, the person who has really put it together and is leading it. And Mika has been part of every one of these so far, and we really are pleased to have Mika with us. Joining Mika today, like last time, is Kate North. And Kate is with e-Work.com, and they have a very generous offer that we’re going to share with you at the end of the webinar today. Kate is a VP there and works remotely, as is Mika and Rebecca, so we’ll share that information with you. It’s a course that you can take that augments what you’re going to learn today and in this series. And finally, Rebecca Ayers is manager for Performance Management Solutions at OPM, the Office for Personnel Management, also a teleworker and also with tremendous experience in both being a teleworker and leading teams of teleworkers. So we have a great panel today. I am going to turn it over now to Mika Cross to take it away from here. Mika?

Mika: Thank you so much, Allan. I appreciate you hosting us again for our “Let’s Talk Telework” series and glad that all of you on the line today can be with us today. I did want to call your attention to a new series that we are launching with USDA’s own talented Susan Shockey, that will be starting next Thursday. And this is part of a financial wellbeing series that we’re leading. So next week happens to be America Saves Week, and we invite all of you to take part at this free learning webinar on “Managing Monet in Tough Times”, I think something that we can all benefit from. I just wanted to call your attention to that.

But, as for today – next slide, Allan – we’re going to be talking about best practices for the teleworkers. Being effective at work, especially when teleworking, really does, of course, help make the case for increased adoption of telework. But, as you demonstrate the benefit of your work arrangement and you keep connected and relevant and on good terms with the people who really matter most to you at your work – your supervisors, your coworkers, your customers and, of course, other stakeholders – you really demonstrate the value of the program overall. And today our panelists will be happy to share with you best practices for the teleworker. So good, solid tips and ideas that you can put into practice so that you can be your best on the job wherever you might work from. You’ll note today that, throughout today’s session, we’ll be covering four main themes. Basically how to get started with your supervisors, so fast around making the pitch and adjusting fire and getting an agreement approved for the first time if you are a first time teleworker, how to keep your focus on the work and, of course, remaining connected through the use of technology, and other organizational tips to mitigate distractions and help keep you on task while you’re teleworking. Of course, last but not least, personal accountability, which is my favorite. So how will you demonstrate accountability, accessibility, and availability to those who count the most in your work relationships?
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Before we get started, we really want to hear from you on the line today. So, Allan, if you could put up our first audience poll. And so, for those of you who are with us today, we’d like you to answer the question so we get a sense of who’s in our audience. Do you currently telework? So either you telework on a regular schedule, one or more days for pay period. Perhaps you telework on occasion or maybe not at all.

Allan: OK. While we’re waiting, Mika, just a reminder that you do have the ability to participate today in the polls. Obviously, we have some scenarios too that will ask for you to participate in, but we’d like to hear your questions and comments, so you have a question box. Just type your question or comment in there and we will try to fill those questions or comments during the polls and scenarios today and, if we have a little bit of time at the end of the session, we’ll handle some more at that time. So thank you.

Mika: Thank you, Allan. So, when we’re looking at, as far as our audience participation in telework? OK< great. So we have quite a number of you who either telework only on occasion or do not yet telework at all. But I think this session is really going to benefit everyone, even if you are on a frequent, regularly scheduled telework agreement thus far. And the next question we’d like to ask – Allan, if you’d be so kind to put up our next audience poll for the viewers today – is whether or not those of you on the line feel that you have ever been effectively trained on how to work in a remote, distributed work environment. So if you could indicate the answers to that question, we’d be most grateful.

Allan: OK.

Mika: And the reason why that’s important is because we do realize that telework training is a component of the requirements for the Telework Enhancement Act 2010. But effective training and whether or not you feel like you’re taking away skills that really can be adopted at your work location is kind of another story, for many agencies across the federal government are looking at ways to really customize training, build-in scenario-based case studies and help navigate through the process of effective telework. So it’s good to see your answers here on the poll. It’s interesting that 65% of you feel like you still kind of need this. Absolutely, this training today will help bridge that gap. Thank you so much, Allan.

So, as I mentioned today, we will be helping you navigate many of the ways to make your telework arrangement work to help you demonstrate success and value to the organization, your supervisor and, of course, your key stakeholders. And we can go on to the next slide.

But it really all comes down to the first conversation that you’ll have with your supervisor, the one who ultimately approves your agreement. The ultimate knowledge that not everyone in the firm advocates telework. It’s a new way of working. So working remotely and managing those that do requires a new set of skills and how we work independently and together, as part of a team. Even for those who don’t telework, you’re still considered part of that distributed team and even those who don’t choose to telework need the skills to be able to connect with their team together. When you first start thinking about how to approach and present a new arrangement, it really is key to keep in mind the “how” and not the “why”. So, for instance, how you’ll meet the needs of your job, the collateral duties that you may have assigned in the organization altogether. Thinking through things about what could be the impact if you are not physically present and how you’ll remain flexible and
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adaptive to the work needs as those change frequently as well. So how do you think through instances where you may be required to crowd in to the office on a regular day? And those are the sorts of things that we’ll be exploring together with our panel of experts today.

Allan: OK.

Mika: So I think it’s a perfect segway for us to move in to our very first scenario. And so, Allan, if you can bring that up for us, I would be grateful. So you see here the scenario. Let’s pretend that you’re a new supervisor and you’re preparing to request for a new telework agreement with your supervisor. Which of the following considerations would be most appropriate to discuss when proposing this desired agreement? So you and your supervisor, let’s say you and your partner have just had your first child and you want to work closer from home. Or you bring up the fact that your work is largely portable and knowledge-based. You travel quite a bit and have no problem staying connected and accountable for your work and the work of your team. Some of your other colleagues in supervisor positions are also teleworking, so really you should be allowed to as well. And, of course, you and your team are well trained and well equipped to work from anywhere when needed. You’re a demonstrated high performer and able to talk to your performance objectives and the performance goals of your team in a result-focused manner. You’d be happy to propose a 90-180 day trial period whereby both you and your leadership team can evaluate the success of your telework arrangement at any time. Finally, there’s a lot of telework training available, including last sessions course for supervisors on TMGovU that you can learn quickly and offer up to your supervisor who will be making the decision. So I’d like you, on the line today, to think through what you would say is your most compelling reason for proposing telework while I invite our panelist to think through and share some of their top tips and thoughts around the same scenario.

Allan: OK. And, when we switch to this, you won’t see the scenarios written out, as you do here, but just think of these and treat the last one as 5, if you would. I’ll show you, I’ll launch it now and then we can switch to our panelists. OK, so here we go.

Mika: Great. Thank you so much. So I’m going to turn now, while you’re looking and thinking through those scenarios and those answers, I’m going to turn it to Rebecca and the to Kate on their thoughts about this particular situation and what kind of recommendations have for a first time new supervisor who wants to propose telework. So, Rebecca, thoughts on that?

Rebecca: Sure. I’ll go ahead and jump in. I really like all of the answers because I think they all have some validity to some degree, whether all of them are appropriate to speak to your supervisor about, but there are certainly things that I think each of us can relate to when reasonable when thinking about proposing telework to our supervisor. So, thinking through this, I had the good fortune of obviously seeing some of these questions beforehand. If I were a new supervisor and I wanted to request telework, and I think there’s some things that you an individual need to think through first and then, after you’ve had a time to think through these things, then turn around and present it to your supervisor. So the first thing that I would recommend is definitely, like Mika already stated, think about the mission of your organization and the work that you do. And then the type of work that you do and whether or not that work is remotable or whether or not it makes sense to be able to work offsite. So what is the work at hand in terms of just sheerly accomplishing those activities? And then I think it’s important to think about customers. And these can be internal
customers that other colleagues from your agency whom you service or could even be external, the American public whom you service. And what sort of expectation are there in terms of your responsiveness to your interaction with your customers? So think about the work, think about the customers. And I think you’ve also got to think about technology. And so I really like that number 4 response as well, because do you actually have the technology to work remotely? And even something as simple as you have the capability to, for example, forge your office phone to a mobile phone? So, when individuals call you and you’re working remotely that day that is a seamless interaction. So they don’t know whether you’re actually sitting in the office or at home. And so sometimes even just thinking through simple technology like that, it helps whether or not you can actually telework. I think the other thing that the individual, the new supervisor, should think about is your own leadership ability and how you manage other people. It’s important to think through this because you’re going to put yourself in a little bit of an environment than what many of us have traditionally seen or grown up in at this point. So you want to think through what type of autonomy do you give or feel comfortable with and then work to others? Are you more of a hands-on or hands-off person? How much do you need to interact with your new employee? And then the think about your employees and their ability to function with you in or out of the office and the level of interaction they need from you. So think about this new relationship that you’re starting with your employees and how your working remotely may impact that. And then also think about, if you’re requesting to telework, what are your expectations for your new employees to telework. Is this something that you’re going to also offer to them? And then think through some of the things that I’ve already mentioned about the level of interaction and the type of work at hand.

And then I think the last thing that you want to think about is what are some key indicators of success. So, if you’re sitting down with your supervisor, saying, “Hey, maybe let’s do a 90-100 trial period,” here are some key things that I know we can track to see whether or not it’s actually working out. And some of those metrics could be something like responsiveness to your customers or delivering on the services or that seamless interaction. And so these are ways that you can measure how successful... that you are on the days when you’re teleworking or when your staff is teleworking. So, just to recap, you’ve got to think about your mission work, you’ve got to think about the customers, those that you serve, you want to think about the technology at hand, your own leadership abilities and stuff you need to be responsible for others and whether or not telework is going to enhance that or you can manage that work remotely, and then what are the indicators of success. And I think once you’ve thought through this, those are the kinds of items that you would come to speak to your supervisor about in terms of setting up a telework agreement and making a decision whether or not you should add telework to your work schedule.

Mika: I really love those tips. Thank you so much, Rebecca. And you know this, of course, coming from OPM, that, across the government, we hear common challenges and cultural barriers, too, especially for our supervisors who wish to participate, because at the end of the day supervisors are just employees as well. So, if they’re eligible to participate, they may want to participate as well and even can be more effective managers for teleworkers if they start teleworking themselves. We’ve seen that in our research, in our OPM reports, and even in indicators on the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. So, Kate, thinking through some of other cultural issues in coming from private industry and your expertise in that ground in training folks on how to set up effective remote work
arrangements, what would you say to supervisors who are requesting telework for the first time and can you talk through some of the tops around that specific scenario?

Kate: Sure. I just love this scenario because it’s just a wonderful way and a tremendous opportunity to really build this culture of distributed work. Because not only are they having to manage up to their manager and to be able to ask for permission to be able to telework, but also what a fabulous opportunity to actually lead a team right from the very beginning, knowing that they are going to be distributed and to be that mentor to them. So I just think it’s a great scenario. If we look at it, this particular person is already well trained, well equipped and a high performer and, if we think about wanting them to be able to bring on people in their own team, we would want to have those same kinds of traits and characteristics. One of the key things that we know, where managers get comfortable, is when an employee approaches them about teleworks to be able to really have some confidence that that employee as given some consideration. Does their job make the requirements as if to support the mission as like we have talked about? Are they in good standing? Are they high performers? And I think, Mika, one of the most important things is that people really understand the work that they’re responsible for, and they’ve been able to really bring that into ways in which it can be measured. So, as this new supervisor, I would really recommend as one of the key things is to start thinking about the work of the team, the work of the individual. Are there clear goals, set expectations, so that that person can be measured by a result, not on line of sight that we’re on time, but on result? And I think, if that can become a culture of accountability and trust, really it can set that team off in a very strong manner. The other thing that I think that is really important is to be able to demonstrate great communication skills, and I know we’re going to be talking about that, but, as a new supervisor, really looking at how do they keep their team connected and engaged, how do they emanate their own presence so that, regardless if you’re face to face, that the team knows how to come together, they know the work at hand, they know what each other’s working on, they established this agreement around how they’re going to be able to communicate, make decisions and some of those good things. So really the opportunity to demonstrate some of those skills. And this all comes by leveraging and using the technology tools that have been put in place. So those are a couple of key things. Measuring, making sure that the work is clear and that there’s settings of clear expectations and communication utilizing the technology.

Mika: Thank you so much for sharing that. Wonderful tips. And so, as we’re moving on, we’ve heard from experts now around some of their thoughts that specific scenario. But, again, most important is to focus on the work and the impact on your work relationships, ensuring that you stay focused, and again, on the “how” you’ll make it work, not the “why” that you’re requesting it in the first place. And, when meeting on parlor with your performance objectives, expectations and how you’ll meet your goals and possibly through telework how you may exceed them is a really key point. One thing that I always recommend to new teleworkers, when you propose a new agreement, is, if talking terms at a timeframe of days, not much. For some reason, in my experience, it just seems less binding to go to genuinely out willing to give it a chance, but still a little bit reluctant, so when you propose a period of trial telework arrangement for maybe 90-180 days, as you saw in the scenario, versus 3-6 months, sometimes it’s a little better received.
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Let’s go ahead and move on, Allan, if we could, to the next slide. And this really centers around results and performance and accountability because they just on telework adoption is truly how employees can leverage the arrangement to focus in on the work. So less about telework, more about the work. And although traditionally people use to look at telework as a means to and isolation, now today, as we all know, its technology and remote mobility, access tools, teleworkers are really more accessible than ever before. Sometimes, we’ll find teleworkers mention that they’re way more productive when they’re working in a different environment versus in the traditional office, and we find that, in some of our survey indicators as well, across government. The key here really is to stay laser focused on results and performance. And. When you can do that and demonstrate an impact on your work in a positive way, it reflects positively on not just you, but also the work arrangement something imperative, you’ll need to talk to your supervisor, of core, is your telework schedule. Next slide, Allan. So, Rebecca, can you talk us through some of your best pointers around managing a schedule for teleworking and maybe some of those specifics to a new teleworker or perhaps even a teleworker who’s looking at maybe expanding their current telework schedule?

Rebecca: Sure. So, when managing your schedule, you really should sit down and talk to your supervisor first and covers these points that you have here, in this slide. So some of the things that you might want to clarify with your supervisor, once you’ve come to an agreement about telework, is your telework days or your telework schedule or things like “Can you substitute your telework days?” So, for instance, if your telework day falls on a holiday, can you telework the day after instead? Or, if your supervisor requires you to be in the office in your telework day, can you telework the day after? Can you substitute if, for example, you’re feeling under the weather or you have a doctor’s appointment? When, in point can you change around your telework day or in the week or the month or the pay period or however your telework arrangement is set? Or can you substitute your telework days for no reason? I think the answers on this really depend on your supervisor and their need to understand where you are at any time. For example, I am pretty lax both with my employees and my supervisors with me in terms of the days I telework because, for me, it’s just a matter of the work getting done and not necessarily where they are and the reason why they’re teleworking. But, for other supervisors, that isn’t the truth, and so you want to make sure that you have this conversation with your supervisor. So, if your supervisor does allow, for example, substitutions, do they require any sort of preapproval or notification? In other words, do you need to contact them a week before you substitute, you receive approval, or can you notify them a couple of days beforehand via email? So just setting up lines of communication, clarification, when that substitution can occur. And, likewise, also, do you have to telework on your scheduled day? So, for instance, if you feel like you need some social interaction or you’ve got to come in and use the printer or there was just a meeting that you thought it would be better if you were in person, is it OK to show up on the day that everyone is expecting you to telework? So clarify that with your supervisor. I can’t foresee if your supervisor wouldn’t want you to come in, but it’s good to know. And then, if you do come on that day, can you substitute your day? So these are just things to think about in managing your schedule and setting up the time that you will telework and just making it clear what the expectations are. So are substitutions allowed? What sort of notification does your supervisor need for the days? Do you have to telework on your scheduled telework day? Or what about – I love this one – what about employees being required to come in the office on the scheduled telework day? Often times, their work activities or for business reasons, where you just
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need to be in the office that day in order to attend a meeting or accomplish a particular work activity. And I like to remind people one of the things we say – and I’m not sure what my other panelists are going to say – telework is really a privilege, it’s not a right. It’s something that we’re able to do because of the technology and because of our work. But, at the end of the day, it depends on the type of work that you do, the business of your organization and whether or not it makes sense that you’re in a particular location over another location. And so we have to be flexible and remember that when we’re planning our work out. And then what is expected of me if I am considered telework-ready? And I don’t want to take too much in this, because I know that there’s guidance that OPM is giving clearly on their website, but this really falls on a case-by-case basis, depending on your own life circumstance, as well as the technology setup that you have, as well as the telework situation, be it emergency or weather related in terms of your telework readiness and whether or not you’re required or approved to telework under those circumstances. But these are all things that you should be able to clarify with your supervisor before you even step into a telework situation or sign a telework agreement.

Mika: I definitely agree. And some of the things that you talked through really do resonate for our workforce, at USDA, and I know that probably across government. And so a couple of things I just wanted to tag on to your conversation, and then we’ll move over to Kate about managing expectations, but really, err on the side of overcommunicating rather than undercommunicating. It keeps you visible, it keeps you accountable and, if your supervisor is saying, “You’re giving me too much information,” that’s better than not enough. And so things like are you needing to combine use of approved leave with some instances of telework. If your agency allows it, sure you can. But really the key there is to communicate with your supervisor in advance as much as possible and in advance as possible and to keep those lines of communication and transparency open. And some of these tips that Rebecca is covering are tips that we covered in the “Supervisory Best Practice” webinar session last time, but really we’re trying to pay release for you because, if you’re not getting the clarity that you need to understand, “Are you telework-ready?” What does that mean, if I am telework-ready? What happens if there’s an instance when I cannot telework on a day I’m expected to? Then it’s your responsibility, as an employee, as a teleworker, to get the clarification that you need. And I’m sure that your agency or departmental telework program manager or telework managing official will be able to help give you those policy guidelines if you’re not getting your clarity from your supervisor. And lastly, before we move on to managing expectations, I just want to mention that telework is, especially with the passing of the new legislation and the new OPM dismissal and closure guidelines, we are all struggling with this new way of working. And how does it resonate with our culture? And what if our policy can’t catch up to it? The key here, again, is communication and clarity. And so, as Rebecca mentioned, the privilege versus the right, it really is the responsibility of the employee and the teleworker to make this a success, just as it is the responsibility of the supervisor. So, with that said, let’s move on to talk about managing expectations.

Mobility can give us all the ability to take work with us. Anywhere, any time. Next slide, please, Allan. But this can leave teleworkers vulnerable to feeling like they have to be on all the time. In fact, some organizations, especially in the private sector, have put out in place, that no official email messages or communication to be sent out after business hours because police could potentially interpret it as a direct mandate to continue working. It’s an interesting concept. And I’d love to hear
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from Kate as we look forward to talking about managing availability, on any thoughts that you have, Kate, from industry best practices or just general tips for the teleworker about managing availability, to scheduling and being reachable, but still kind of thinking about the lines between work and personal time.

Kate: Sure. Oh, yes. I think it’s such an important one because I think, I looked at this slide here, “Managing expectations”. First of all, again, getting clear around what are people expecting from you. So, really making that visible. And I think that’s too full, I know, from personal experience in leading a global distributed team, that the more we can make our own work visible, the better the team can also work. Because so little of the work that we do is just isolated just around what we’re doing, so being able to have people being able to understand where you are in the work that you’re leading can help with the broader team dynamic. So let’s say you’re working on a project and you run into an issue that was uncontrollable and it’s been delayed. Being able to quickly communicate that as it’s happening becomes really important so that the rest of the team that may be dependent on that work can recalibrate towards it, or maybe others you can ask for help in terms of being able to get that work moving forward. So, when you are going to be working more remotely, the work has a tendency to need to become more visible, so, again, thinking about how do you keep your work visible. And some of the ways in which teams have done that is that they’ve leveraged different types of technology. I know, with our team, we’re a completely virtual work organization and so we use what’s called smart sheet, where it shows the different types of work that we’re all leading, kind of where we are, red, yellow, green, around how we are doing to date, and we really try to keep that available. As well as calendars. When are people taking off holidays? As Mika just said, we’re working 24/7, then need to be able to honor the downtime is equally as important, and people not feeling it, that they’re going to feel committed to checking back in with the team is important.

Another key thing that can be really helpful, that we stress in our training and I use it with the team that I lead, is just being able to get quick updates, just a flash report. “Here’s what I’m working on.” So that if people don’t have the ability to go in and quickly check online to see what’s going on, that maybe you can take the first 5 minutes of a team call and just hear the top three things that I’m working on. But keeping, again, people aware of what you’re working on and when that begins to change, and also when you need help. The other thing is around availability is your schedule is very transparent. And I think that that can be a really wonderful way to build trust as a team, but it can also appear to be... it would have to be on all the time because you’re afraid, if somebody calls and you’re not available, they’ll think that you’re cleaning the house of off playing golf. So I think being able to communicate your hours and your time on a macro and also on a micro level. So, for example, developing kind of that routine around how you’re going to be working, what are the hours that you work. I have seen and I have tried to use this a couple of times, is being able, even out of office, being able to say, instead of saying, “I’m out of office,” saying, “I’m going to be tied up in meetings for the first part of the day, but I’ll be available later on,” so that people will know when you’re going to be available. And certainly there’s all sorts of great technology that allows for people to see presence. Instant messaging and Skype, green means “I’m available, give me a call”. So it’s some of those kinds of things and tools that, by making that work visible and your schedule visible, can be great. And then truly being reachable. Letting people know how to reach you can be a really important component, whether or not it’s a cell phone number, a home number, if you’re transferring your calls, but just be reachable because, especially in those early stages, if you’re not
there and they can’t find you, oftentimes teams will jump up the letter of inference and feel like “Oh, no. they’re not there. They’re not working.” So, the more you communicate, the more you’re going to be able to build trust with your team. So those are just a few things.

Mika: Wonderful tips, Kate. Those are absolutely fabulous. Did you have anything else to add around the managing availability topic?

Kate: Yes. The managing availability is, I think, part of it is that we want to make sure that people know what the others are working on, that keeping your schedule, if you can work towards a routine so people can feel comfortable around when they will be able to reach you. My assistant does a great job. We’ve got kind of some set hours for her, but, if something comes up, she’ll just ping me so that I’ll know when she will be working, if it’s going to be later on during the day or in the evening, so that I’ll know how to be able to reach her and know that the work will be moving forward. So I think, again, the key piece with availability is to be able to make sure that people know when to reach you, how to reach you, and to be available for people.

Mika: All really good tips. It’s funny, I did a webinar last year with some of our USDA folks and I had somebody try and – I did a bit of a poll question and asked, “How many people are fans of telework? Is there anyone that hates to telework?” – and someone actually said yes. And I asked the question “Why?” but it was really interesting. So they this example where they felt like their manager was so much scrutinizing their availability and accessibility to the point that he didn’t feel comfortable using the restroom while he was teleworking. And so part of this issue, I just found it so interesting and I thought, “That’s a really important thing to tackle, that’s a topic you need to address and confront.” Because, for fear of being assumed of not working if you just simply used the restroom, certainly that’s not under scrutiny when you’re in a traditional office, “Listen, you’re taking so many frequent breaks” that they’re wondering the same thing, but again, it’s back to that accountability, transparency, clarity and communication. And so thank you so much for sharing that.

When we reference to telework arrangements in today’s current environment, what we’re really talking about, of course, is workplace mobility in a modern workplace environment. And that comes in a variety of forms. So people could be working everywhere. It’s convenient, they can take their work with them, and some agency policies actually require a specific designation or location in a home that a telework certifies, while others focus less on the “where” and, again, more on the “how”. So let’s move on to the next slide to discuss the importance of the work space and how that can either affect your telework agreement or arrangement, rather, or not. So what I’d like to hear from both Rebecca and Kate on this topic is what are your thoughts about space? Does it truly matter where exactly a teleworker chooses to work from? How do you feel about those who offer advice that they need to get up and get dressed the same and exact way as if you’re heading to work, etc.? And thoughts about those kind of issues. Let’s start with Rebecca and then we’ll move over to Kate.

Rebecca: So I’ve been teleworking full time over the last 7 years. I actually don’t have an option of an office to go into. We don’t even have... an open design to have an office in the state of North Carolina. So, in the last 7 years, I’ve actually, in my house, have an established office, a particular room that is devoted to all my equipment and materials and other things. And I tend not to work in other rooms of my house because, at the end of the day, I like to walk away from my work and have
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the rest of my life. So, ultimately, I think it is a personal decision on where you telework, as long as you’re mindful about distractions, whether or not it’s appropriately suited to ensure that you are not following bad habits, for example, working from the couch, being hunched over your last couple of days will eventually cause back problems, comfortable as it is. Removing yourself from distractions. Don’t work where the TV is or, for some people, it may be working in the kitchen, if you don’t like working in a dirty environment, having the distraction of cleaning it or changing it. You want to avoid distractions and then, obviously, if you have other members in your household, you don’t want to work in a place where they will be a distraction as well. And the same thing goes in terms of working outside of your home. If you choose to go to a coffee shop or if you choose to work in the park or work outside because it’s a really pretty day, I think you’ve got to, again, be mindful of the work at hand. If you plan to be on meetings, you definitely don’t want to call in from a noisy restaurant or coffee house and things that you can adequately participate in that meeting. So just be mindful of the environment in which you work best. Some people can work with a lot of people around, other people want to able to go into a room and shut the door and have absolute quiet. You just want to think through what works best in your situation and then the type of work that you’re trying to accomplish. So those are my initial thoughts. I can turn it over to Kate.

Mika: Yeah, thanks.

Kate: Yeah, sure. I echo those completely, Rebecca. I think, when you were saying that one of the things that kind of came to mind for me was just know thyself. How do I work? And I just wanted to share with everybody a glimpse of my day yesterday. And one of the things I’ve not had, a corporate office, even though I was in Corporate America for 20+ years, I’ve not had a dedicated office for 15. And how I’ve managed my days, what I do is like, Sunday night, I’ll start thinking about the next week ahead. What do I need to do and where will be the best place based upon what I need to do to get that done. So let me just share with you a little bit about yesterday. I do a lot of work internationally, so I had some early morning calls with Europe, where I needed to do a video conference, I needed to be able to have a quiet environment, like Rebecca had talked about. And in the top left hand corner you can see my home office. Fortunately, I have the ability to have a dedicated space. I’ve got an ergonomic table. I’m short, so I’ve got it down low so I can be comfortable. I’ve got an ergonomic chair and I’ve got the kind of equipment and I’ve got a good high-speed protected internet device, but I’ve also been surrounded by things that I love and inspire me. I live in Colorado, so we’re crazy about cowboys and cowgirls, so I’ve got art and I’ve got a view and I really love having my dog around. Those are all things that put me into a good state, especially if I’m going to be doing concentrated work and I’m going to be in flow. So, yesterday morning, I had to do some conference calls, I needed to turn my camera on, I even did my hair, but I also needed to be able to concentrate, so kind of being able to be in an environment that I can control. Well then I had a hop in the car, but it was the same time that I did a conference call, in order to be able to get to an appointment for an interview. And so, thinking about why do I need to have a car, I’m surprised of actually how much work I get done. I was sharing with Mika earlier that I’ve actually had to purchase a car that’s got an electrical outlet in it because I’m finding that many of my devices need to keep up with me when I’m going to be working on the go. And I’ve really tried to honor and be very safe. I don’t ever do texting or things that would be distracting while I’m driving. But then I knew that I needed to come in and I’m interviewing for a graphic designer, and so I wanted to be able to meet face to face and to be able to establish a good relationship, so I knew that sometimes a
first time meeting, to be face to face, to be in an informal setting, could really be helpful. And then, towards the end of my day, I needed to be able to use some equipment that I didn’t have at my house, and I belong to a wonderful co-working place called Durango Space that allows for us to get a membership. You can pop in, you can work different hours, and they’ve got really great color printers and scanners and sorts of things that I don’t have in my home office. It’s also a place where I can meet other people in my community and get good ideas and bounce ideas off so I don’t feel isolated. So the thing is, I think, for everyone, is to think about what it is you need to do, where’s the best place to do it. If it’s going to be virtual, do you know how to set up virtual meetings? Are you in good command of your technology tools? Do you feel comfortable turning on the camera? Some people love it, some people hate it, but find those ways that allow you to be able to do your work and stay connected. And to be able to honor that time and where you are going to be able to focus and kind of keep it more specific to concentrated work.

So the other thing I just wanted to kind of share is, in setting up a home office, I think there are some things to keep in mind and, oftentimes, we get so excited about the ability to have the freedom to work from home that we need to make sure that we’ve got some good guidelines and boundaries with those that we may share the space with. So, whether or not it’s going to be a roommate or other family members, letting them know that you’re working from home doesn’t mean that you get a honey do list. It really means that you’re going to be focusing at home and you need to be able to a place that work can be done and that it can be honored and that you’re not distracted. And, Mika, I think a lot of times, initially, starting now, people sometimes, if they’ve always gone to work, the idea of showering and getting dressed and walking our one door, at the end of the back door, gives them that sense of ritual and traditions, so back to that tagline of “know thyself”, can be a good way to think about what you need to do to really segment your time that you are working at home so that it can be honored and you can be tremendously effective.

Mika: That’s really great. Especially for those who are just getting started and I’m sure, as they into a comfortable telework agreement and arrangement and get more comfortable with figuring out a routine for themselves, figuring out how they stay on task and how they’d be their best, like you said, “know thyself”, I think that can probably evolve. It’s interesting, we all get questions about, “Can you have dependents in the hall while you’re teleworking? What if a dog barks? What if someone hears the laundry going?” When my youngest son was much younger, he was in a part time daycare arrangement and I had a mother’s helper. Well, my home office happens to be in a corner nook of my bedroom. In fact, if you go on YouTube, you can google “USDA telework crib”, there was this funny little home video that I did for the mobile work exchange, they had a contest a couple of year ago, back in 2011, but don’t judge me on my video skills, but you’ll see my office setup. It’s a great, little corner nook, it has a nice little window, I look on my cul-de-sac, I would work from there routinely every time that I telework because my door had a lock on it and my mother’s helper knew that she was to keep my youngest occupied, away from my home office. If they needed anything, they would actually text me, just as if I were in a traditional office, and that was our routine. Well now, as my children are getting older, they’re both in elementary school, I can kind of take my laptop around where it makes sense for me to work from when I’m teleworking, where I’m comfortable from, of course, keeping in mind that there are ergonomic issues that could center around, as Rebecca said, teleworking from the couch too much. But it’s still interesting how my own
work routine evolved as I learned to telework more frequently. So thank you both for sharing those tips.

We’re going to more now into how to stay connected. So tips and resources around how we’re going to meet the best of this telework arrangement. The time we spend working is such a large part of our day and our life overall that it’s really essential we talked to the importance of why staying connected is so important for teleworkers. If not addressed, we can feel isolated and left out of the team, it could lead to common misperceptions that they’re not considered for projects or other high-level assignments or even rewards in the same way that their in-office mates are considered. So, as we move to the next slide, Allan, Kate, can you talk us through some of the important things to consider for teleworkers on how they can stay connected and relevant?

Kate: Yes. In fact, Allan, if you can go back, I just want to hit upon some of those points there because they really are important. And I think the first one is really to take the initiative. I think sometimes people get to be a little paranoid when they’re working remotely, that they may feel being left out or you’ve sent an email and you’ve not heard back or perhaps you’ve misunderstood something or maybe there’s some conflict. Take the initiative. Don’t let it fester. Let’s deal with these things as they come up. I really do think that the skill of inquiry is really important, when you’re really thinking about open-ended questions that you can share because, when you’re working remotely, you don’t have the ability to get the visual cueing that you would when you’re face to face. And so, by deepening your own listening skills and being able to think about how you would phrase to get people to share more information with you can be really important. So I think, oftentimes, we just think, “I sent an email, my work’s done.” If you’re not getting the kind of response, pick up the phone, it’s a good old-fashioned way of just being able to stay connected there. And right along the line of that, counter to that, is really know when it’s time to visit the office. Oftentimes – I know we’re going to talk a little bit about it, it’s really aside those teams, norms and protocols – but this is where your emotional intelligence kick in, and letting people know when you’re going to be in the office can be a really good way of being able to utilize that day to reestablish some of those relationships. There’s a great story of one of the clients that we’ve worked with that was trying to really assess what’s happening in their work environment. And they were running what they call social network analysis, like “Who do you work with?” And so it’s a simple survey and it gives this crazy diagram around who you work with and how the organization is structured. And, based upon the number of connections that you have with a given person, the bigger the bubble you are in this graph, and there was one bubble in this graph that was just so much bigger than everyone else and, when they were trying to figure out who that was, they realized that that person did not even reside in the same state as all of their other colleagues. This person was a young woman that knew that, when she came into the office, when she actually came in, I think once a month, that she would spend her time really building credible relationships, sharing with people what she was working on, learning what they were being able to do. So building that social network, you cannot underscore that enough. And that doesn’t always have to be face to face, you can participate on plugs and a lot of other kinds of things.

And my final point is just how do you become a really consistent contributor. Emanate your presence. When you’re on a webinar, like this, I hope you’re not multitasking. I hope that you’re fully present and engaged with this because it’s the gift you get, but it’s also the gift that you give back.
And you can oftentimes feel when people are not fully connected. And so, by being able to participate in those conversations, ask questions, maybe volunteer for different types of things, is a great way to show your commitment to the team, but also stay connected.

Mika: all really good tips. Thanks, Kate. As we move on to the next two slides about maintaining accessibility through technology, I really want Rebecca to talk us through a little bit about how to maintain accessibility, and then some of the technology tripping points that we can all experience. And then we’ll run into our next scenario. So, Rebecca?

Rebecca: Sure. So I love all of the types and ways in which you can maintain accessibility listed here, on this slide, in terms of instant messaging, teleconferencing, document sharing, scheduling and other availability tools. One of the things I want to mention is not all these tools are as useful as some of the others, so it’s important to analyze with your team members, your colleagues that you work with, if there’s any technology that would be useful to help you communicate more when everyone’s off teleworking or you’re working distributed. And then, if you find a tool that is useful, then to go get a business case and see if your agency can access or give you access to that tool. I know one of the big challenges that we have in the federal government is we love to have meetings, we love to have in-person meetings. And a lot of people see this as a tripping point to telework and to allowing people to work remotely. And I will tell you, most meetings can be done virtually if you have the right tools. I know, from experience, almost all the people I work with are in another state, so I will rarely request an in-person meeting. What you need to do is you need to make sure that you have the technology, some sort of web-enabled... like WebEx or Live Meeting, systems that you can use so you can have a conference line and then either video capabilities or document-sharing capabilities. So there is technology out there and you’ll probably be surprised to find that your agency already has access to that technology. So it’s a matter of giving it at your desk or at your fingertips so that you can use.

Now, while technology is a grand thing and it certainly helps close the distance gaps and helps enhance communication, technology can also have some downsides to it. And so some of our technology tripping points are these listed here, the first being that uneven distribution of knowledge of those working on a project can cause issues. And this may be caused by like geographic proximity or a common culture or individuals who work together more, and so what happens is that some information gets shared with some and not others. This happens both within the office environment, but particularly in the virtual environment, where you do have people who are there when the information is sent out or is disseminated either orally or people don’t think to follow up or it’s an information via email or other ways. And so we do have an uneven distribution of knowledge. The other thing that can happen is mistrust between team members through technology. Mistrust is often caused by, for example, time lags and email responses. Your other team members may jump to conclusions about why they aren’t receiving what they consider to be a timely response, and they send an email, and so the teleworker who doesn’t sent an email back right away or doesn’t answer a phone call, the colleague or the other person calling may assume that that individual is out walking the dog or watching TV. They must be doing something other than work because, if they were truly working, they would be at their desk and would be responding the emails and answering the phone calls. And so their mistrust can arise. There can also be misunderstanding the communication. I think everybody should know that notions can be misinterpreted in an email,
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and a thing like sarcasm aren’t always easily interpreted in email or other technology forms of
communication. And so we want to be careful in using technology and what we communicate and
try to be as clear as possible, understanding that misunderstandings can arise. People can also relax
their inhibitions when they work virtually because their environment is less formal in the office, and
so the lack of that formal environment might lead then to say inappropriate things that they
wouldn’t normally say in an office environment or that they might not normally say face to face.
Because certainly that distance enables a little more to say thing that we wouldn’t say otherwise. Or,
for example, just use poor grammar or even using text slang within an email. Forgetting that, even
though you’re not at the office, you still want to perform your work, perform your interactions in a
formal way, as if you were in an office. And then, finally, using the wrong tool for the wrong task.
Sometimes a phone call is better than sending an email, depending on the sensitivity of the issue
that’s being addressed or the work that’s being done. A research shows that reaching consensus in
decision making is more difficult and takes longer virtually. So we’ve got to be active in picking the
phone and using a video conference call or using technology to help us make decisions and come to
consensus when our work requires it. But we have to remember that, while technology is great,
there are some shortcomings to them and I hope you guys had an opportunity to sort of jot these
down and remember them as you step into telework positions. And I think that leads us right into
our next scenario.

Mika: Yeah, exactly. This is a segue right into the next scenario. So, essentially, we’re giving you a
scenario, for those of you on the line, where we all can probably empathize with this. At 7:30, you’re
turning on your computer to start teleworking, you experience trouble connecting to the network.
You tried several times, you call the help desk to find out, but it’s down for the next few hours and it
won’t be accessible to teleworkers. So what happened it it’s important for you to connect to the
network but, because you need to access files on the shared drive, you really can’t continue
teleworking unless you have something else planned. Let’s ask the audience this scenario while our
panelists quickly talk through some of the issues around this scenario. So here’s the options for you.
Now work’s down, do you clean your house and resume work after the network’s available? Do you
request to work on your professional developed activities in lieu of your normal daily duties, such as
reading online courses and things like that, that can be accomplished off the network? Or do you go
into the office to work with your supervisor to request leave or work with your supervisor to request
leave or a change in your work schedule so that you can accommodate the hours you’re unable to
accomplish due to the network issues? So let’s turn to our panelists, Rebecca and Kate, to think
through just a few quick answers and tips to this particular scenario. Rebecca?

Rebecca: Sure, I’ll jump in. this happens time and time again. In fact, just last week, you may or may
not, we had this huge storm come up the East Coast and we had ice here, in North Carolina, and I
lost my power for several hours during the day, so I was dead in the water for telework. So I really
appreciate this scenario and understanding what are expectations here. So, first and foremost, this is
something you should discuss with your supervisor before you ever even start telework. So what is
the policy, what should you do before you even get to this situation? Is the expectation that you
come into the office if you’re capable of doing that? Is the expectation that you need to take leave?
This should be decided a person by person, agency by agency basis to deal with this situation. The
other thing I’ll mention is this does happen also in the office. There’s many times, working in our
headquarters, where the system has gone down and email has gone down. And, in those
circumstances, what do you do? You switch over to other types of activities. So, naturally, that should be a similar response in the telework environment. And I like to tell people, we experienced with a lot when we first started teleworking, a number of years ago, with the access to our headquarters system, we’d come and go. And it was just new technology, we were figuring out how to telework. And so we got in a habit of being able to save work locally or identify other work activities that we could do if, in case, the network did go down, we weren’t able to log on to email, we weren’t able to get access to certain files. So you’ve got to do some contingency planning and you’ve got to speak to your supervisor about expectations, what to do when the situation arises.

Kate: I think that says it all.

Mika: Yeah. And so we have a few minutes left and I apologize, we have so much wonderful content, so I want to be able to talk through the concept of shared responsibility, as well. So I really liked that we covered last week with supervisors regarding office norm. At USDA, again, we really emphasize this concept of shared responsibility through accountability, open communication, using official time for official duties, and being transparent. But let’s talk just a few minutes, if we could – next slide, Allan – about team norms and office protocols. I’d like to start with Kate and then we’ll move over to Rebecca, and then close up the session. So, Kate, your top tips for the teleworker.

Kate: OK. Well, this team protocol part I think is really one of the most important parts because, if done right, then it will allow for people to really be clear around how they’re going to agree to work together, and they can take out some of the issues that teams oftentimes face in regards to lack of trust, etc. so one of the key things that I think is really important, before teams actually talk about how do we agree to behave together, is to understand what “good” means. Oftentimes, because we are moving into this new way of working that many of us have not been mentored before, and we’ve been given these devices for a while and we’ve been operating, but do we know if that’s really the best way? And that’s where I’d really encourage people to spend time with this training and the other types of training that’s available to you so that you can understand what “good” looks like so that, when you come back and you talk about what, as a team, how do we agree to behave, you’ve got some context around what “good” looks like and you can make the right decisions. But, oftentimes, the key part is really around, again, keeping that work visible. So how are we going to keep the work visible? What kind of tools are we going to use to keep up to date what everybody is working on? Meetings and communication. How often are we going to meet? Are we going to do that face to face on occasions or is that going to be the normal and we’re going to have a great way of being able to recognize us people that are calling in virtually? I’ve had some of my clients that have put faces of their members that were not available on chairs so that they’ve still got some kind of virtual presence around it. What are the key things that really comes up more and more frequently, as around the ability to make decisions? What’s the team norm? What are the agreements around how we’ll make decisions? Will everybody need to be there? How do we communicate this in advance so that people can participate in making those decisions if they’re not going to be able to be on a certain call? And then being able to understand how will we celebrate? How will we recognize great achievements? Those pieces are also really important components of it. So this are just some of those considerations.

Mika: Rebecca, anything to add?
Rebecca: No. just get together and talk about it. All the things that Kate mentioned.

Mika: Absolutely. Such great points. And we’re coming to the end of our session, so I’d like to invite those of you on the line there, those of you who have to jump off, to come back to the slide deck, come back to the archived on-demand course when it’s available and think through this scenario. Maybe even come back and play this as an office team. Access this course and the other sessions throughout the “Let’s Talk Telework” series and view them as a community, so that you can talk about some of these issues before they become problems. This is a great scenario here, so we invite you to do that as a team when you have time and can come back and access the course. With that, Allan wants to close this out for the session, we also have some wonderful resources for you to test out that Kate has offered up.

Allan: OK. Thank you very much, Mika. Thank you very much, Rebecca and Kate, as well, and yes, it’s very important, I think, to close by this free offer. So we see here that you can go to e-work.com and you can have access to a course for people who telework for, I think, two weeks, Kate—

Kate: Yes.

Allan: And we encourage you to really take advantage of that. And you will be getting the slides, everybody will be getting the slides, we’ll give you instructions to do that, so you can come back and visit that scenario. You’ll also have these links to get to get to e-Work if you haven’t jotted them down. And we hope that you will also join us for our next course, the fifth in the six-part series, which is on March 6th, and is on the topic of the tools and technology. So don’t miss that. If you’ve registered for this one, you’re registered for that one, so you will receive reminders. We look forward to seeing you then. Thank you all for attending and thanks especially to our presenters, Kate, Rebecca, and Mika. Bye for now.