Government Business Council

Communication Challenges in Federal Telework

A Candid Survey of Federal Employees

August 2014

Purpose

Since the passing of the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, federal agencies have expanded telework programs with hopes of reducing costs, increasing resiliency during severe weather and emergencies, and improving the quality of work-life balance for federal employees.

As agencies look to support and manage an unprecedented number of telework employees, it is more important than ever that telecommunication technologies help facilitate and maintain levels of productivity and collaboration. To better understand federal teleworkers' experience with telework and mobile technologies, Government Business Council (GBC) and Verizon Wireless undertook an in-depth research study.

Methodology

To assess the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of federal employees regarding telework and mobility, GBC deployed a survey to a sample of *Government Executive* and *Nextgov* online and print subscribers in August 2014. The pool of respondents includes those from more than 23 federal civilian agencies, including GS-11 through -15 grade levels and members of the Senior Executive Service. All 358 respondents represented have experience teleworking in their current position and/or currently have colleagues who telework at least some of the time.

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Executive Summary

Federal leaders desire greater flexibility with telework

Two-thirds of survey respondents indicate that they would telework more frequently if given the option. However, preferences vary depending on respondents' supervisory status: while 74% of non-managers would like to telework more often, only 56% of those who oversee at least one direct report selected the same option.

Colleague relationship concerns, communication issues hinder the telework experience

More than three-fourths of respondents cite concerns about teleworking, led by the negative perception of teleworkers and impact on colleague relationships. Communication while teleworking also needs improvement, according to more than 1 in 3 respondents, but the program is even more acute for specific respondent groups. 51 percent of those who telework only during special circumstances and half of those who supervise teleworkers cite a need for improved communication.

Telework technologies can be more effectively employed to better facilitate communication

Teleworkers currently rely mainly on traditional communication methods to stay in touch, including email (96%), one-to-one phone calls (89%), and conference calls (77%). Less than one-fourth of teleworkers report the use of more advanced tools like video calls or live collaboration tools. This trend applies to mobile app use as well, with only 30% using mission-specific apps.

In looking to improve these tools, and thus improve the telework experience, agencies will need to address key challenges raised by respondents, including the lack of personal interaction, mobile and WiFi service issues, and quality of technology. Furthermore, despite the rise of BYOD programs in government, a significant majority (64%) of respondents say they would prefer to telework using an agency-issued device.

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Respondent Profile

All respondents have experience teleworking or interacting with teleworkers

Experience with telework in current job

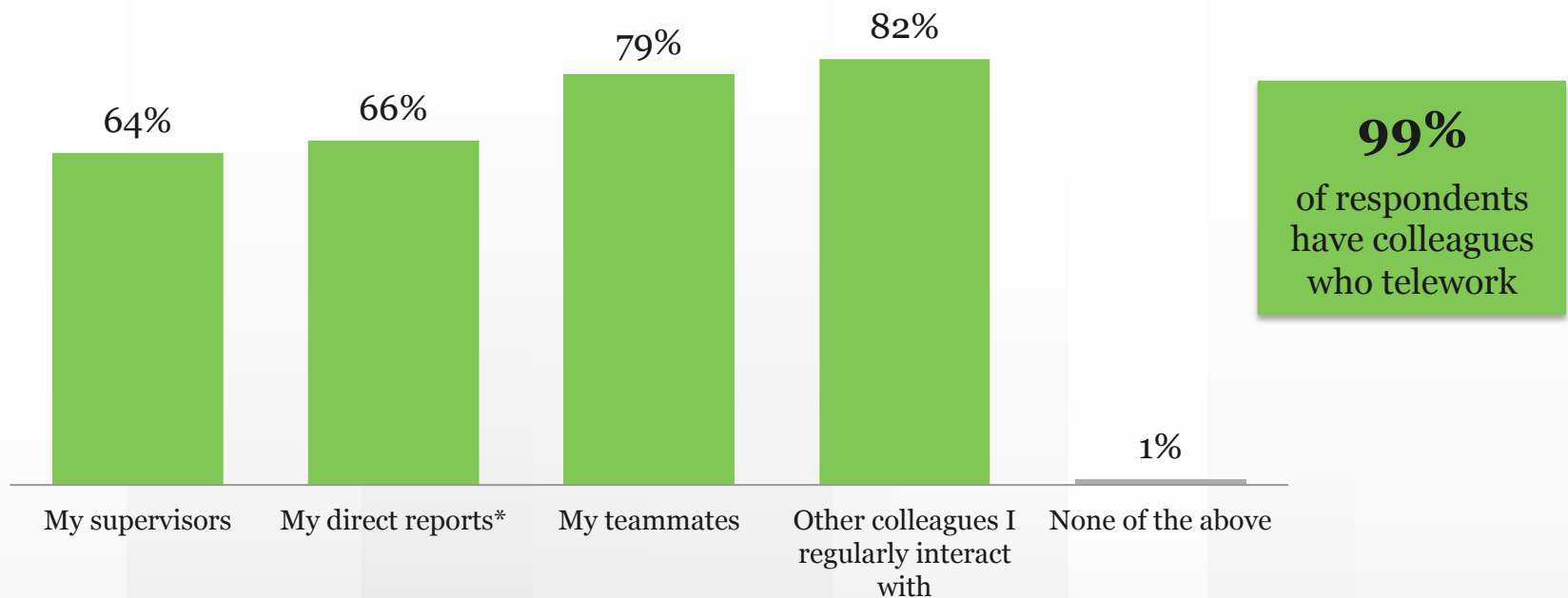| Category	Percentage
I telework full time	8%
I telework regularly on a scheduled basis (e.g., every other Friday)	50%
I telework occasionally (e.g., illness, completing work at home)	24%
I telework only during special circumstances (e.g., OPM snow days)	10%
I have never teleworked but have colleagues who telework	8%
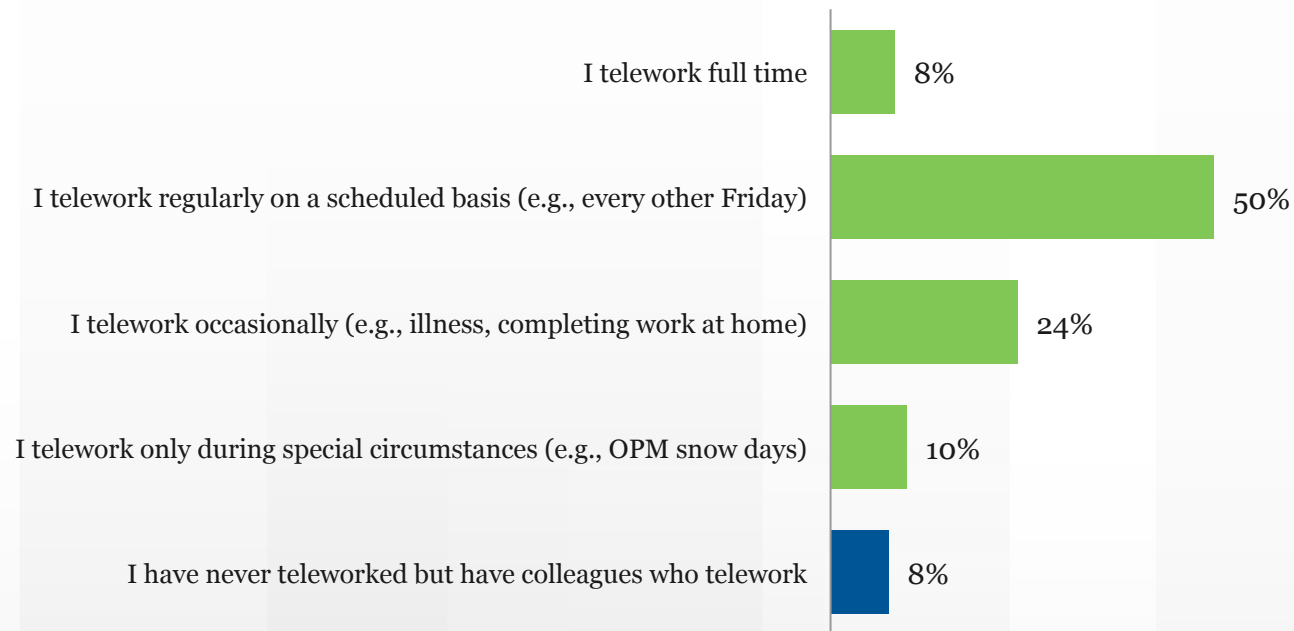
Percentage of respondents, n=358
Note: 17 respondents selected "Telework is not possible given the duties of my job," while another 26 respondents selected "I have never teleworked" AND reported not having colleagues who telework. Neither of these groups are included in this survey report.

Nearly all respondents work with colleagues who telework

In your department/agency, which of the following individuals telework at least some of the time?

64% — My supervisors
66% — My direct reports*
79% — My teammates
82% — Other colleagues I regularly interact with
1% — None of the above

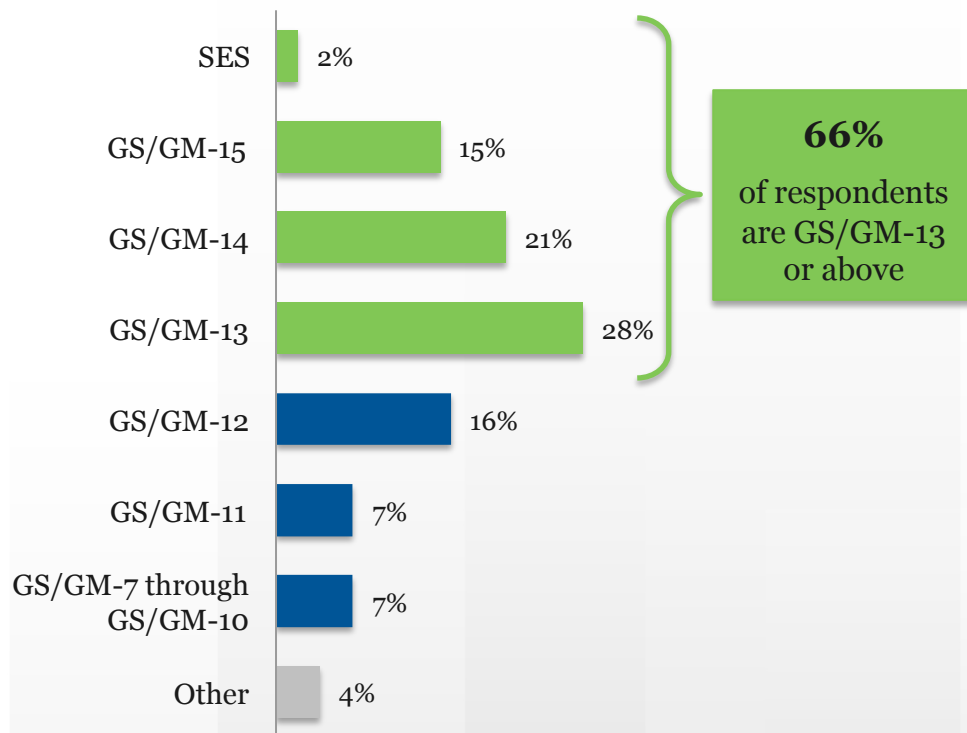**99%** of respondents have colleagues who telework

Percentage of respondents, n=358, respondents were asked to select all that apply
Note: "My direct reports" only applies to the 39% of respondents who indicated overseeing at least one direct report (see slide 7)
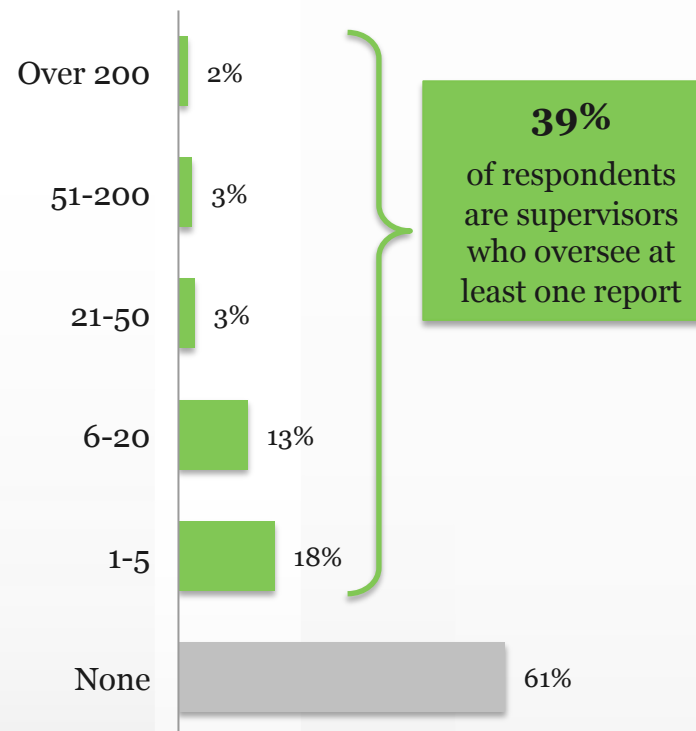
Survey respondents are largely senior federal leaders

Job Grade

Category	Percentage
SES	2%
GS/GM-15	15%
GS/GM-14	21%
GS/GM-13	28%
GS/GM-12	16%
GS/GM-11	7%
GS/GM-7 through GS/GM-10	7%
Other	4%

66% of respondents are GS/GM-13 or above

Reports/Oversees

Category	Percentage
Over 200	2%
51-200	3%
21-50	3%
6-20	13%
1-5	18%
None	61%

39% of respondents are supervisors who oversee at least one report

Percentage of respondents, n=352 and 340, respectively

Program/project management is the most common job function

Job Function

Job Function	Percentage
Program/project management	20%
Administrative/office services	11%
Human resources	10%
Finance	8%
Technical/scientific	7%
Acquisition/procurement	6%
Information technology	4%
Policy research/analysis	4%
Legal	4%
Agency leadership	4%
Facilities, fleet, and real estate management	2%
Communications/public relations	2%
Other	18%

Percentage of respondents, n=344

Most Represented Agencies

Department of Agriculture

Department of the Treasury

Department of Health and Human Services

Department of Homeland Security

Department of Veterans Affairs

General Services Administration

Department of the Interior

Department of Transportation

Department of Labor

Department of Commerce

National Aeronautics and Space Administration

Department of Housing and Urban Development

Social Security Administration

Environmental Protection Agency

Department of Justice

Office of Personnel Management

Department of Energy

Department of State

Government Accountability Office

Small Business Administration

Department of Education

Nuclear Regulatory Commission

Other Independent Agency

Agencies listed in order of frequency

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Research Findings

i.

## Federal Telework Today

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Telework is on the rise across federal agencies

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) defines **telework** as "a work arrangement that allows an employee to perform work, during any part of regular, paid hours, at an approved alternative worksite (e.g., home, telework center)."

In addition, OPM lays out requirements for all federal executive agencies, including:

▶ Establishing telework policies for eligible employees, including written agreements between all teleworkers and their supervisors

▶ Determining the telework eligibility of all employees and notifying employees of their status

▶ Creating technology and security policies and ensuring that all teleworkers comply with these requirements

Federal Telework: Participation and Eligibility
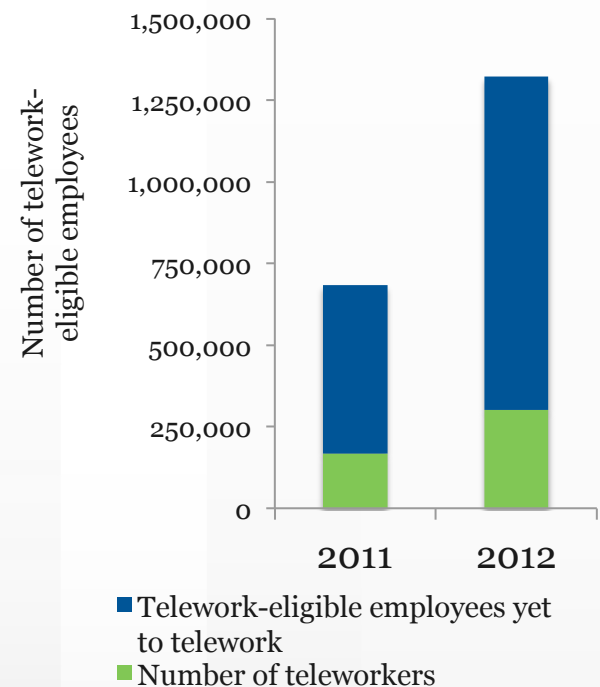
Sources: OPM 2013 Status of Telework in the Federal Government Report to Congress, OPM Guide to Telework in the Federal Government

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Federal employees want to telework more frequently than they currently do

If given the option, would you choose to telework more frequently than you currently do?
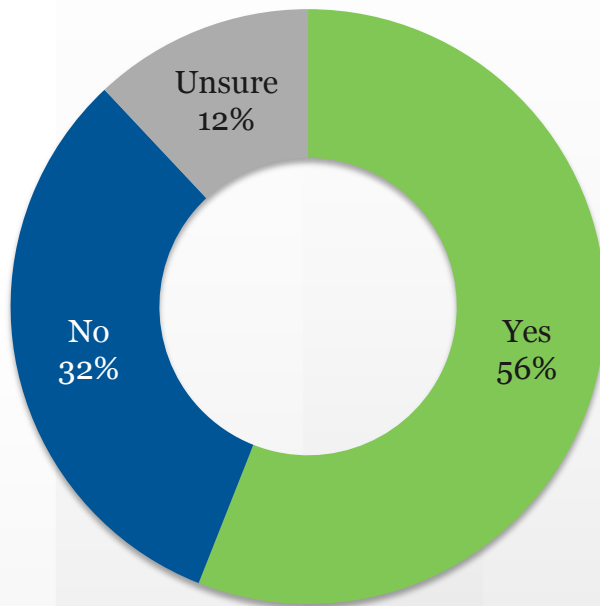

Unsure
12%

No
21%

Yes
67%
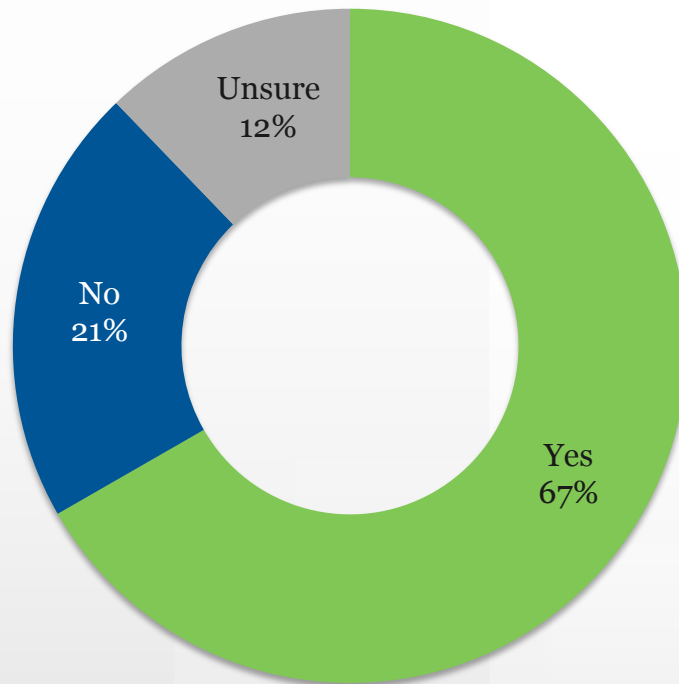
Percentage of respondents who do not currently telework fulltime, n=327
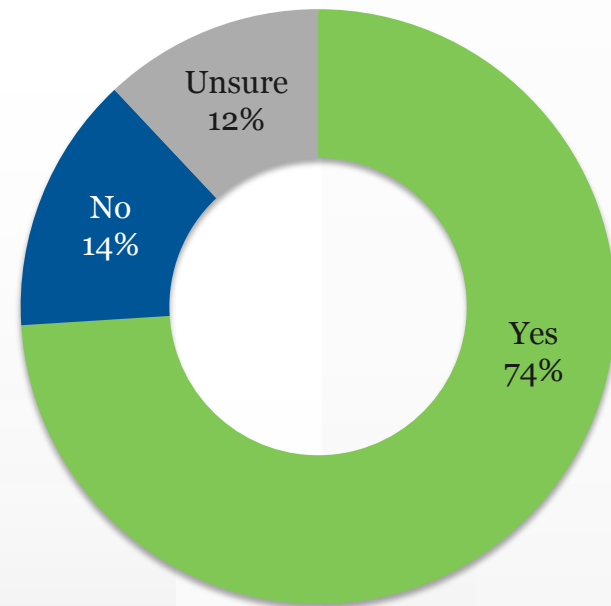
Managers are less likely to want to telework more frequently

If given the option, would you choose to telework more frequently than you currently do?

Managers

Unsure 12%
No 32%
Yes 56%

Non-managers

Unsure 12%
No 14%
Yes 74%

Percentage of managers (those who oversee at least one direct report), n=125
Percentage of non-managers, n=186
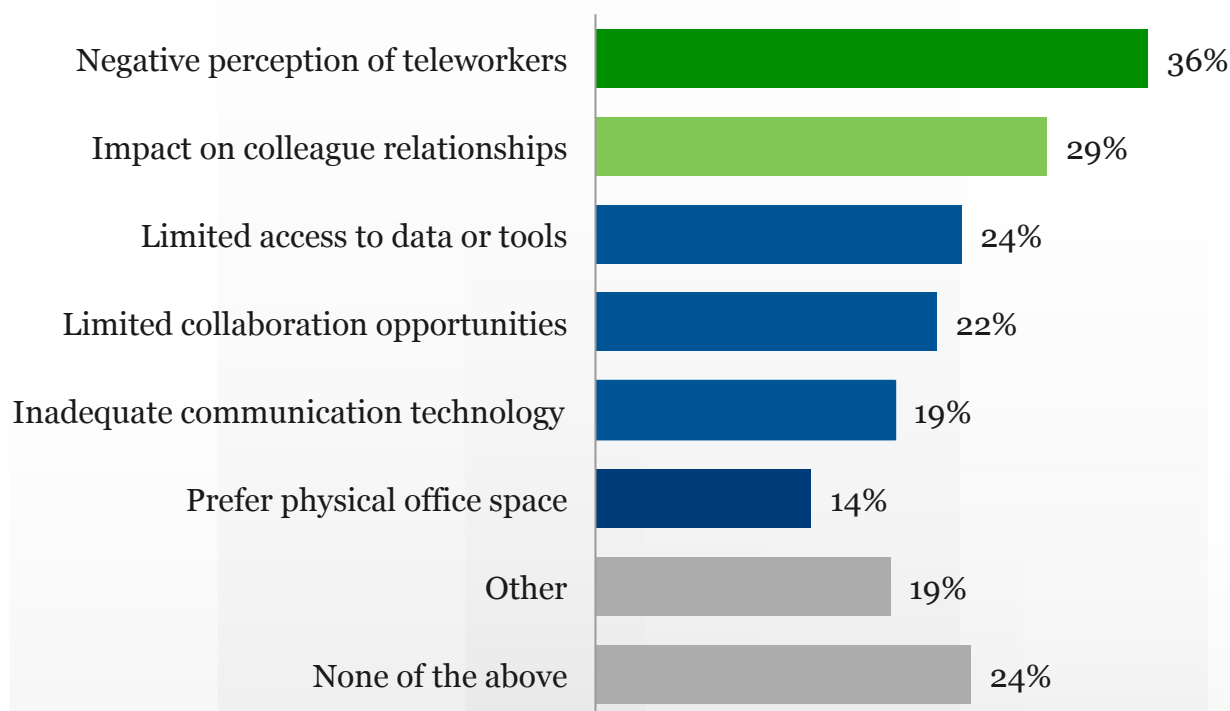
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Respondents told us…

" Being flexible and embracing telework shows trust and confidence in your employees and can help build morale. "

" Telework is a great incentive to employees and with the right tools, equipment, and performance measures, there is no reason why managers have to limit telework for their employees. "

Sample of open-ended responses

The interpersonal effects of teleworking are most concerning to federal employees

Concerns about teleworking

Concern	Percentage
Negative perception of teleworkers	36%
Impact on colleague relationships	29%
Limited access to data or tools	24%
Limited collaboration opportunities	22%
Inadequate communication technology	19%
Prefer physical office space	14%
Other	19%
None of the above	24%

76%

of respondents cite concerns about teleworking

"Other" includes: effect on teambuilding, difficult to supervise direct reports, limited ability to train/learn from others, and impact on promotions/career growth
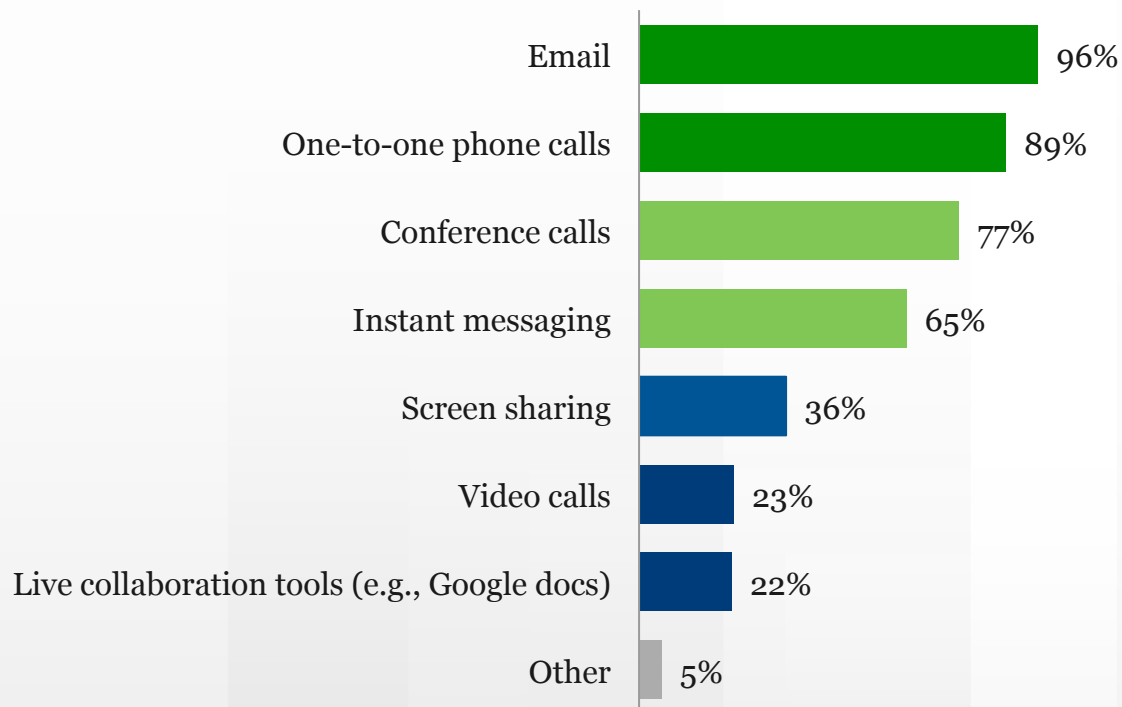
Percentage of respondents, n=357
Respondents were asked to select all that apply

ii.

Telework Communication Issues

Teleworkers have yet to fully adopt newer telecommunications tools

Communication methods teleworkers use to stay in touch

Method	Percentage
Email	96%
One-to-one phone calls	89%
Conference calls	77%
Instant messaging	65%
Screen sharing	36%
Video calls	23%
Live collaboration tools (e.g., Google docs)	22%
Other	5%

More than 1 in 3 respondents say telework communication needs improvement

Communication while teleworking needs to be improved in my department/agency

Strongly agree
14%

Agree
25%

Disagree
32%

Strongly disagree
17%

Don't know
12%
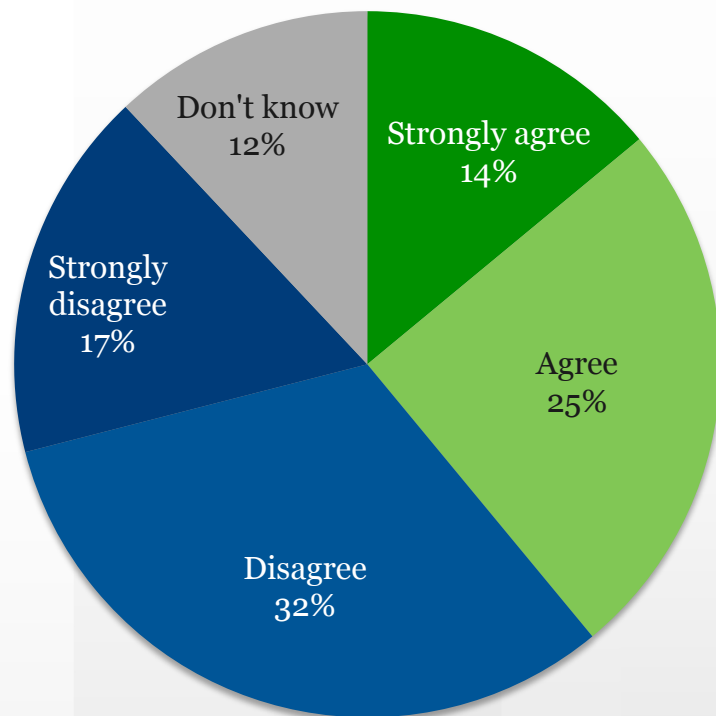
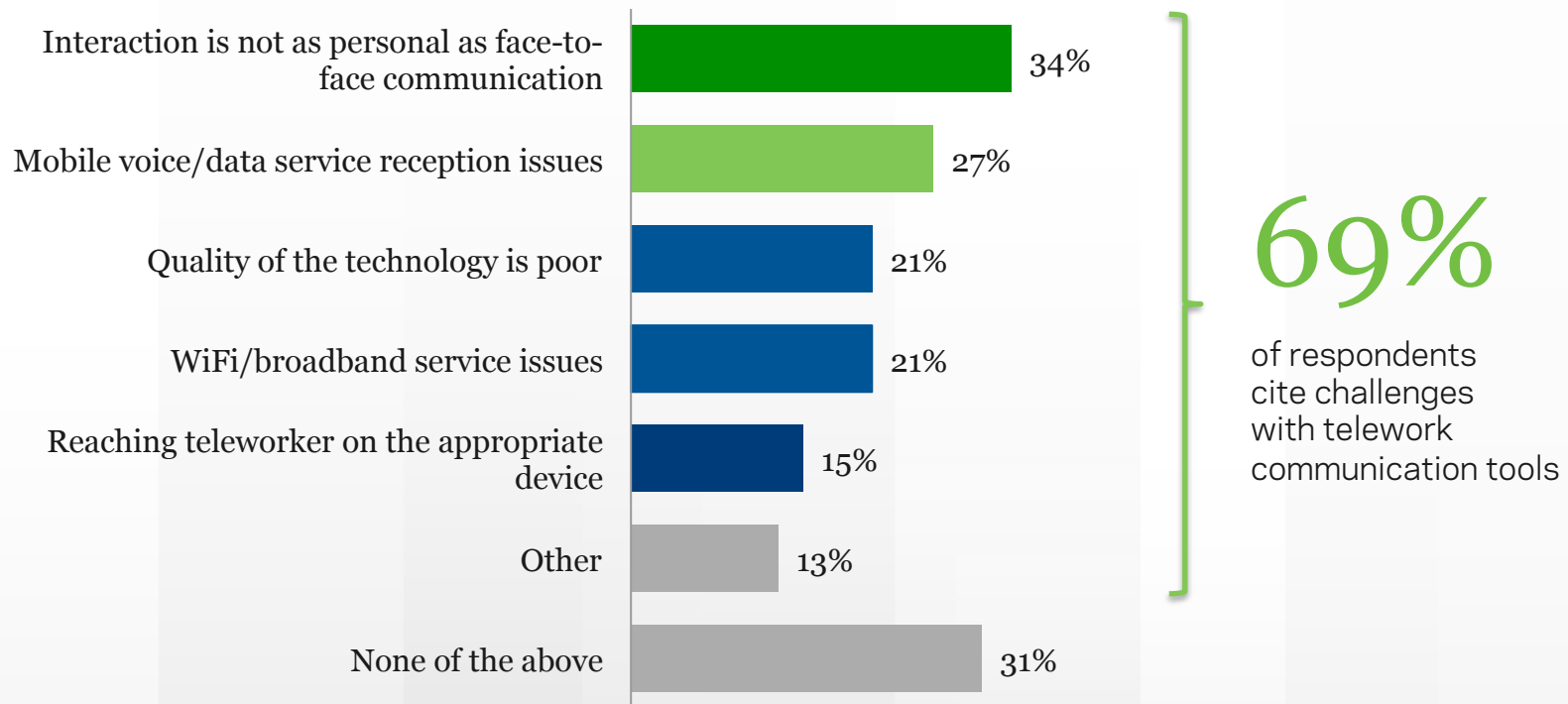**39%** of all respondents agree or strongly agree, including:

51%
n= 120
of respondents telework occasionally or only during special circumstances

50%
n= 121
of supervisors who oversee employees who telework

Percentage of all respondents, n=353

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Over two-thirds of respondents experience challenges with telework communication tools

Challenges with telework communication tools

Challenge	Percentage
Interaction is not as personal as face-to-face communication	34%
Mobile voice/data service reception issues	27%
Quality of the technology is poor	21%
WiFi/broadband service issues	21%
Reaching teleworker on the appropriate device	15%
Other	13%
None of the above	31%

69%
of respondents cite challenges with telework communication tools

Percentage of respondents, n=348
Respondents were asked to select all that apply

Respondents offer ways to improve telework communication

" Expand the availability and use of interactive online communication tools such as video chat and screen sharing applications. "

" Encourage a culture that embraces teleworking responsibly – with clear expectations. "

" Dedicate training and outreach to inform employees of the resources and tools available relating to geographically separated workers and work locations. "
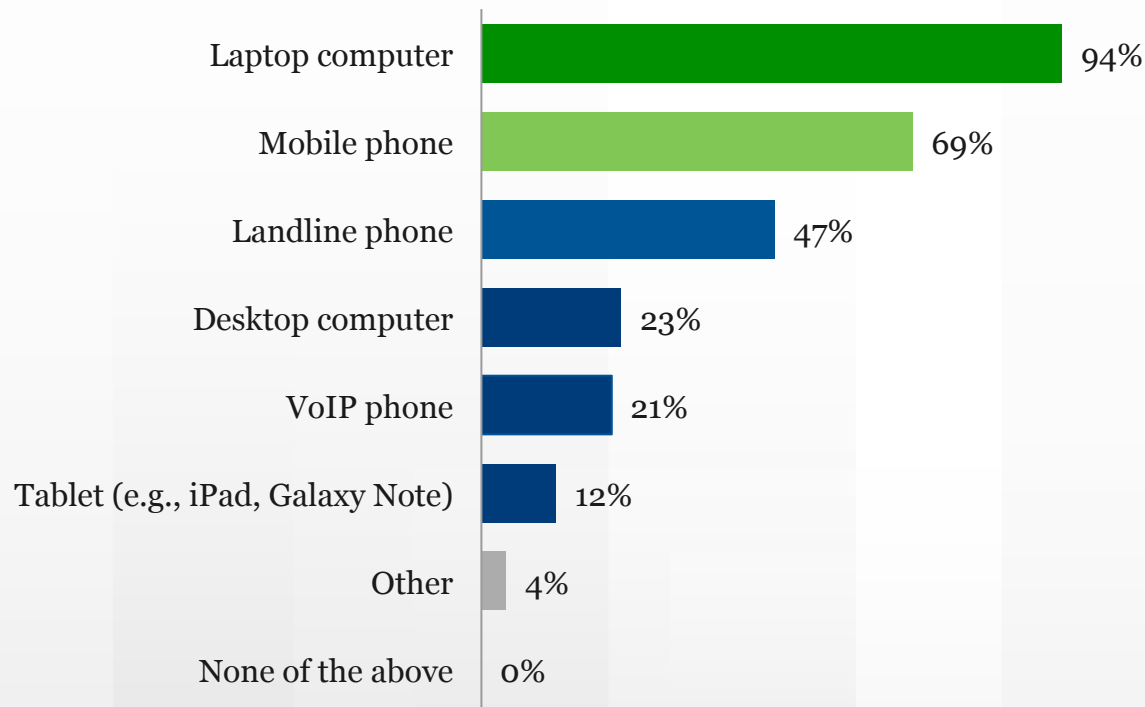
Sample of open-ended responses

iii.

Improving Telework Through Technology

Agencies must enable teleworkers to use a wide variety of devices

Devices used for work-related purposes

Device	Percentage
Laptop computer	94%
Mobile phone	69%
Landline phone	47%
Desktop computer	23%
VoIP phone	21%
Tablet (e.g., iPad, Galaxy Note)	12%
Other	4%
None of the above	0%

Percentage of respondents who telework at least some of the time, n=324
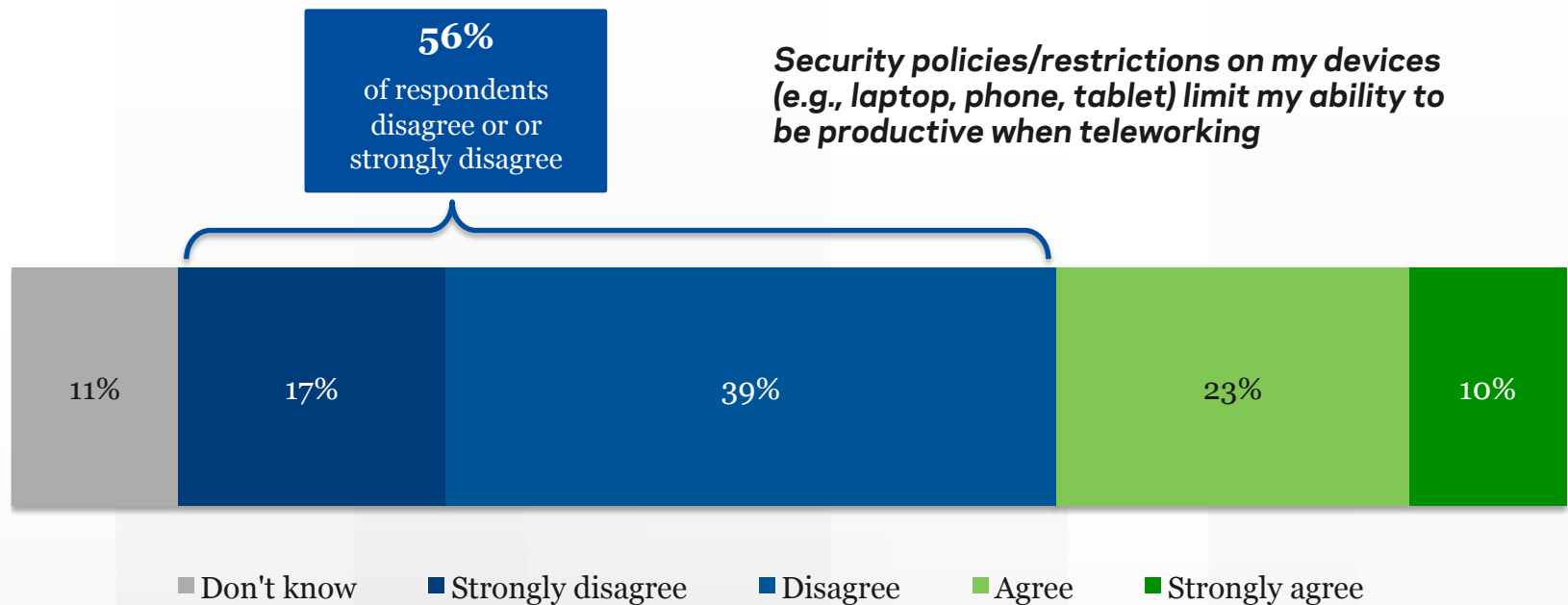Respondents were asked to select all that apply

Teleworkers mainly use commodity mobile apps, rather than more advanced tools

Types of mobile apps used while teleworking

App	Percentage
Email	82%
Calendar	58%
Texting and Messaging	49%
Contacts	39%
Apps specific to department/agency mission	30%
Document management	27%
Live collaboration apps	22%
News apps	8%
Expense/finance	6%
Other	7%
None of the above	15%

Percentage of respondents who telework at least some of the time, n=325
Respondents were asked to select all that apply

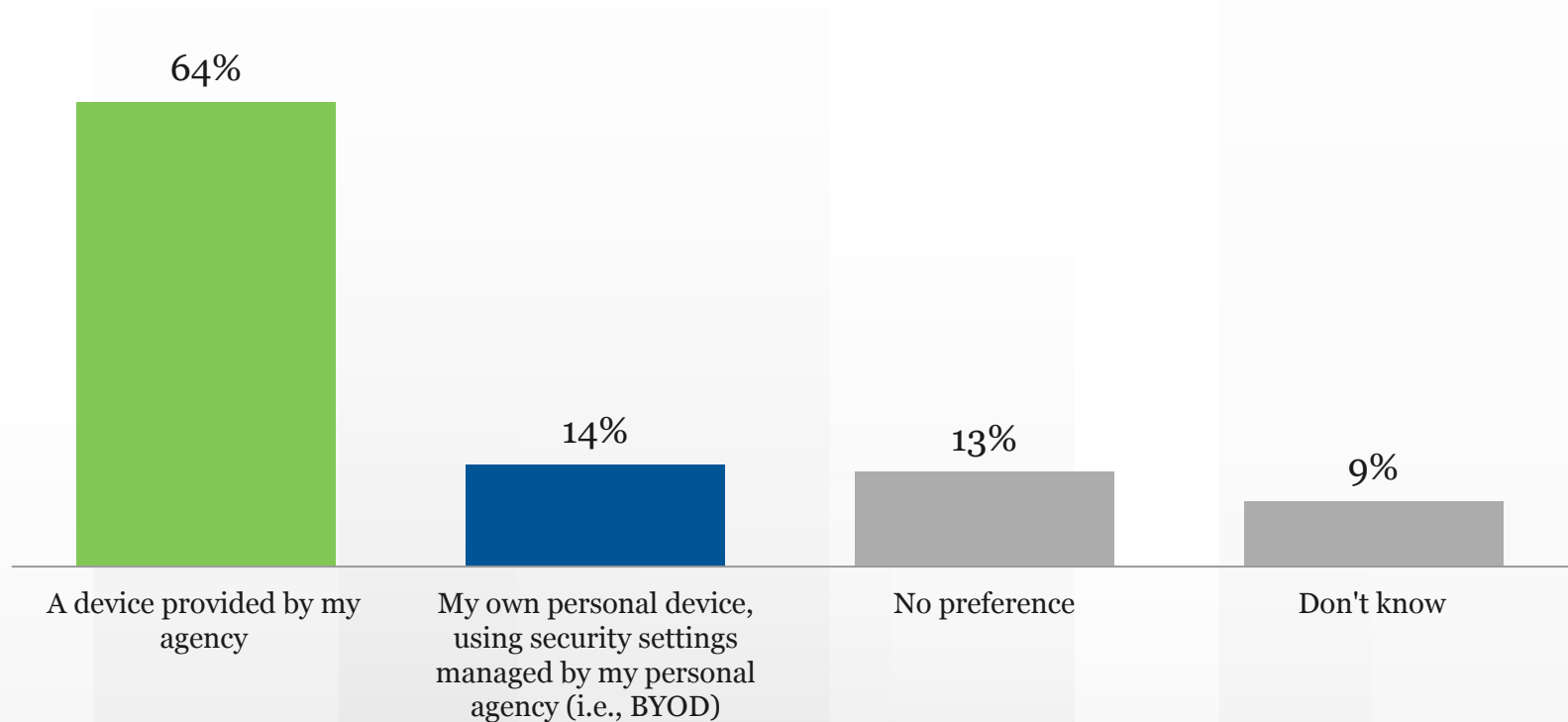# Despite widespread mobile use, security policies do not limit teleworker productivity

56% of respondents disagree or or strongly disagree

Security policies/restrictions on my devices (e.g., laptop, phone, tablet) limit my ability to be productive when teleworking

11%	17%	39%	23%	10%

■ Don't know   ■ Strongly disagree   ■ Disagree   ■ Agree   ■ Strongly agree

Percentage of respondents who telework at least some of the time, n=326

Federal employees prefer agency-furnished devices over BYOD setups when teleworking

When it comes to using a mobile device for teleworking, I would prefer...

- 64% — A device provided by my agency
- 14% — My own personal device, using security settings managed by my personal agency (i.e., BYOD)
- 13% — No preference
- 9% — Don't know

Percentage of all respondents, n=351

One survey respondent told us...

" My agency relies on the individual to supply the technology to telework. If agencies are serious about telework, and if they continue to rely on video conferencing and other technology, they will have to make that technology available, not rely on the employees to furnish it. "

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Final Considerations

When considering how to enhance federal telework...

Acknowledge differing perceptions about telework

Opinions on telework vary depending on telework frequency and supervisory status. For example, those who telework are less likely to believe that communication needs to be improved than those who frequently telework. Managers overseeing teleworkers are also likely to view the arrangement differently than those without direct teleworking reports.

Ensure teleworkers have the technology needed to be effective

Though many federal employees may never become full time or regular teleworkers, those who work remotely for any reason should be able to communicate as effectively as when in the traditional workplace. Unfortunately, this is not currently the case; many respondents indicate that their telework experience is impacted by basic technological issues such as mobile service reception issues or internet access. Given that teleworkers appear to prefer agency-furnished devices over BYOD setups, agencies may be able to mitigate and even prevent these challenges by investing in higher-quality devices and more reliable services for their users.

Bridge the gap between face-to-face and telework communication

To address employee concerns that interactions with teleworkers are not as personal, agencies could do well to incorporate more interactive tools like video calls, live collaboration, and screen sharing. Adopting these technologies can help colleagues move beyond email and traditional phone calls, which can limit the ability to grow collegial relationships. In addition to prioritizing the greater use of communication tools, managers can focus on making good use of the time employees do spend together in the office.

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