



EMPLOYER PROFILE

SMECO PLUGS INTO TELEWORKING: EMPLOYERS, EMPLOYEES, AND CUSTOMERS WIN

Pictured Above: A SMECO worker's home office setup. SMECO supplies employees with the tools they need to work from home.

When a debilitating storm hits the region, electricity outages are a given. With that comes a deluge of customer calls to the Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative (SMECO), where a handful of employees are available all hours of the day and night from the convenience of their own homes.

Thanks to SMECO's telework policy, eligible employees are able to work from home up to three days a week. During major storms, it's not only an advantage for both customers and SMECO, it's an absolute necessity. "If we are having outages and we need to get our people on the phones," says Senior Vice President Joe Trentacosta, "when they work from home, we can get them on the phones within a matter of minutes."

Not long ago, SMECO activated its Emergency Response Plan when the winds from Winter Storm Stella caused power outages that lasted for two straight days. This was an all hands on deck scenario with teleworkers responding to calls around the clock. A few years before that, Southern Maryland was hit with up to 32 inches of snow overnight, paralyzing the region.

"We physically couldn't get people into the office," recalls Joe about "Snowmageddon". The employees who teleworked during the course of the storm put in 12+ hour days to keep up with the call demand.

It wasn't always this way though. Back in 2007 when the program first started, there was only one teleworker, and the administrators and executives were concerned that productivity would drop. Much to their delight, they found that the number of calls fielded by the teleworker remained unchanged. "That gave us great comfort," explained Joe. It was a strong indication that they could benefit from having more teleworkers onboard.

Needing to accommodate more teleworkers, SMECO began providing them with a "thin client", an 8" x 6" black box that allows employees to securely connect to SMECO's network, without the need for local data storage or user applications. This means, reduced maintenance, improved security and most importantly, an optimized working environment.

In addition, "our teleworkers get a reimbursement for their monthly expenses, including their phone and internet service," says Vice President of Customer Care Rose Pickeral. "It's a recruitment tool," she continued. Prospects and existing employees appreciate it from a work-life balance perspective.

Southern Maryland is a relatively rural area, with little access to transit, resulting in high drive-alone behavior. Despite this lack of public transportation, SMECO took advantage of an option that was available to them right then and there. Teleworking can be setup in as little as three months.

As a result of SMECO's telework program, employees have reduced an estimated 378,000 of vehicle miles traveled, saving nearly 15,750 gallons of gasoline.

"One of the big benefits of our telework policy is that part-timers are eligible. Recruitment is better because they see that as an advantage."

-Rose Pickeral
Vice President of Customer Care, SMECO