



Australian Government

IP Australia

Teleworking in IP Australia

Who are we?

IP Australia supports and encourages innovation, investment and international competitiveness through the administration of Australia's intellectual property (IP) rights system.

IP Australia aims to deliver robust IP rights efficiently, satisfies customers in terms of timeliness and value for money and is recognised as one of the leading IP offices in the world.

Our teleworkers

Our teleworkers include employees based in Canberra but who work some of the time from home (Home Based Work) and employees who telework full time in locations away from Canberra (Outposted Work). Some people also telework on a short term or ad hoc basis. Over 50 per cent of our employees telework at some stage using one of these approaches.

Why telework?

IP Australia uses teleworking to attract and retain the very best employees. Our Patent Examiners in particular are highly educated in specialist disciplines and are recruited from all around Australia and internationally including the UK and Singapore. It takes us two years to train them in the legal and technical knowledge and skills they need to operate effectively. It takes us three years to recoup that investment.

We found that we were losing too many of these highly educated and trained employees – often as they moved back to where they had lived prior to recruitment. Our response was to extend our teleworking options for employees and to open a Patents Examination Centre in Melbourne - a traditional source of recruits.

Who can telework?

Home Based or Outposted teleworking in IP Australia is available to Patent and Trade Mark Examiners who are not in supervisory roles. The criteria for access are:

- A record of satisfactory job performance.
- Verifiable access to business grade broadband through the organisation's Virtual Private Network (VPN) provider at the employee's place of residence (for Outposted Workers).
- Achievement and maintenance of the productivity increases required of teleworkers.
- Satisfactory Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) assessments.
- Satisfaction of operational requirements.

Short term or ad hoc teleworking is generally available to IP Australia staff, subject to operational requirements.

There are no hard quotas that govern the number of employees who can telework.

Meeting the challenges of teleworking

Our various forms of teleworking have had their challenges which we have overcome within the limits of the technology available to us:

- Our Outposted Patent Examiners agree to and achieve a seven per cent increase in productivity above their office-based productivity in terms of patent applications processed, to cover costs and because they are not undertaking certain office-based administrative tasks.
- Access to reliable business grade broadband over our VPN is a limiting factor on who can telework. This impacts both urban and regional areas. In addition the need to negotiate with third parties to deliver the required service and differences between claimed and actual broadband speeds in some locations (a major factor when employees are buying or renting a house from which they intend to telework) lead to delays. To overcome these barriers IP Australia has developed the capability to more reliably assess whether an employee's current or proposed residence can access business grade broadband over the VPN.
- We facilitate communication between Outposted teleworkers and their team – web conferencing is used (but sometimes limited by available bandwidth) as is a short messaging system for informal updates. Outposted teleworkers also visit the office at least twice a year.
- We have upgraded our governance systems to make the process of approval for teleworking simple and streamlined, to ensure that assets are effectively managed and to satisfy IT and physical security and OH&S requirements.
- We are still limited in how we allocate work to teleworkers. While we are promoting electronic lodgment of applications for IP rights, a lot of source documents are still paper based. In addition data files associated with electronic lodgment are often very large and are difficult to access electronically by teleworkers.

The results achieved from teleworking

Despite the challenges, teleworking is a winner for IP Australia in terms of efficiency and productivity and being able to attract and retain highly educated and trained employees.

Home Based teleworking Patent Examiners have to achieve productivity increases of at least five per cent above their office-based productivity, as stipulated in their teleworking guidelines. For Outposted Patent Examiners this is at least seven per cent. Generally teleworkers are more productive than their office-based colleagues in terms of IP rights applications processed, although there are other office-based tasks they do not undertake. The business impact of this increase in productivity is to contain costs and fees (to users) and increase efficiency.

Employee separation rates have decreased since the introduction of outposted teleworking. From a level of 16.5 per cent in 2006 separation rates have decrease to 7.2 per cent in 2010. This retention of highly educated and trained employees has increased the capability of the organisation and reduced recruitment costs.

In addition there are a range of benefits that are less quantifiable:

- The flexibility for staff to achieve a better work life balance through teleworking appears to be a factor in successful recruiting of employees to the organisation
- There are environmental benefits as fewer employees make the daily commute to the office. Currently around 100 employees are not commuting on a daily basis, and
- A reduced need for additional office space in Canberra.

Teleworking will get even more effective

The interest in teleworking in IP Australia is increasing especially since the governance arrangements around access to teleworking have been made clearer, simpler and easier to access. We think that teleworking may grow by about 30 per cent in the next nine to 12 months.

One of the biggest opportunities will come from utilising the increased capacity that will be made available under the National Broadband Network (NBN):

- More employees will be able to telework as reliable high speed business grade broadband becomes available in regional areas.
- The uncertainty around actual broadband speeds, even in urban areas, will be removed.
- Work management will be made more efficient and productive as the very large data files associated with patent and trade mark applications can be securely accessed by teleworkers.
- Communications with managers and colleagues will be strengthened by, for example, reliable video conferencing.