Distance Work Arrangements:
The Workplace of the Future Is Now

Edited by John M. Kamensky
IBM Center for The Business of Government

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Special Report

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Distance work is already changing the paradigm for how we work. It allows employees to work virtually from anywhere in the world.

Foreword

On behalf of the IBM Center for The Business of Government, we are pleased to present this report, *Distance Work Arrangements: The Workplace of the Future Is Now,* edited by John M. Kamensky, with contributions by Emily G. Craig, Michaela Drust, Sheri I. Fields, and Lawrence M. Tobin.

Distance work arrangements—such as telework, remote work, and distributed teams— have been a growing trend in the workplace for more than a decade. For example, the federal government adopted the Telework Enhancement Act in 2010. And some private sector businesses have moved their operations completely online and maintain a virtual workforce that allows employees to work from anywhere in the world.

But the adoption of distance work arrangements was slow, and industry observers predicted that it would take years to make the change—until the pandemic hit, when virtually every organization pivoted to a new workplace—home. Federal, state, and local governments not only had to transition their workforces to work from home, but also had to change how they delivered services so they could be done remotely, such as using electronic signatures for contracts.

Initially, it was seen as a temporary stopgap measure. But within weeks, it became clear that the transition was likely to last for months, if not longer. And as managers and workers became more adept with the technology and tempo, organizations—both public and private—have become more open to distance work becoming the "new normal." For example, the vice chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force said recently: "It's changed the paradigm on how we're going to do work" and that he envisions one-third of its workforce remaining in a distance work arrangement after the pandemic subsidies.

Organizations not only invested in distance work technologies such as laptops and greater access to the internet, but they invested in developing new ways to manage in order to ensure continuity in order to get work done. These parallel investments result in new ways to manage—one's self, others, and teams.

Following are a series of essays by IBM colleagues as they observed the transition in the public and private sectors, and in their own lives. Most of these essays were first published in *Washington Technology,* which hosted a blog series on this topic between April and September 2020.

We hope you find their insights to be helpful guideposts and benchmarks as your organization and employees settle into a new workplace that is the future today.

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The Future of Work Is Suddenly Here: "Distance Work" Is Transforming the Workplace

By John M. Kamensky

The response across the economy and in government to COVID-19 has massively accelerated the future of work.

The lofty talk about the future of work—digital transformation, a remote workforce, distributed teams, telework—is suddenly a reality in both the public and private sectors. Long-standing resistance and silos have been knocked down by a crisis that threatens the very continuity of organizations.

And what does *real* distance work look like? At NASA, a team of engineers is orchestrating maneuvers of the Curiosity rover on Mars from their computers in their living rooms and bedrooms.

Not long ago, futurists were predicting that changing employee expectations, shifting labor dynamics, and new technology would reshape work and the workplace. But the reshaping was driven instead by the coronavirus. Still, the insights of futurists, such as Josh Bersin, are relevant to understand what organizational leaders will face in the weeks and months ahead. In a 2016 *Forbes* article, he identifies three transformational changes that we face:

- Personal—such as how our careers progress, how we stay current in our skills

- Organizational—such as the roles of people vs. machines and how organizations are set up

- Societal—such as how we educate and prepare people for work and how we help them transition as jobs change

These changes already happened years ago in some pockets of the government.

For example, in a recent op-ed for the *New York Times,* former general Stanley McChrystal and Chris Fussell wrote: "Fifteen years ago, in the throes of our fight against Al Qaeda, the Joint Special Operations Command, where both of us served, needed to do this exact thing. We pivoted from being a centrally located, thousands-strong enterprise to a network of small teams spread around the world. . . . 'Digital leadership' was not in the job description for our generation, but it became a critical skill for all of us to learn in the fast-moving and constantly changing fight."

Similarly, the Patent and Trademark Office began its transition to telework more than two decades ago, as one of the pioneers in the intensive use of telework in the government. Subsequently, it has touted the benefits of this approach as: increased employee satisfaction, work-life balance, and cost savings from reduced needs for office space. However, more importantly during the current pandemic, its webpage says that operations are expected to "continue as normal." In fact, they are helping their clients—patent attorneys and inventors—by easing some of the requirements they face in teleworking, as well.

A New Era of "Distance Work?"

Not long ago, the trends were towards open office, gig workers, and the increased use of automation in the workplace. In fact, telework was declining in many public and private organizations, especially in the federal government. But the response to the COVID pandemic is ripping up the playbook on how work gets done. Every organization faces new ways of working, and even though there are plans to return to office-based work, the new approaches involve distributed locations and collaboration that likely won't be temporary.

A decade-old law requires federal agencies to incorporate telework into their continuity of operations plans. However, less than half of federal employees are authorized to work remotely. Shawn Skelly, a commissioner on the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service, recently wrote: "The challenges the nation is [sic] experiencing now should be a wake-up call for policymakers and federal agency executives alike."

Separately, a telework advocate, Kate Lister, writes that expanding federal telework would save taxpayers an estimated $14 billion a year as a result of reduced real estate, absenteeism, and turnover, and increase productivity and continuity of operations.

Many private sector companies have moved to almost all online operations. This includes Automattic (the company behind WordPress, which powers 35 percent of all websites on the internet and has no offices) and IBM, which has moved virtually all of its global operations to a digital presence. It shifted from about 30 percent of its 350,000-person workforce being distance workers earlier this year to well over 90 percent in a three-week period.

What Is Reality on the Ground Today?
As federal agencies started shutting their doors and directing employees to work from home, they began grappling with concrete issues such as the resiliency and security of their IT systems, the availability of laptops, and connectivity.

Many were concerned short-term about their continuity of business operations, and in the longer term, the culture shifts required to motivate and manage a distributed workforce. These issues, much like those workplace futurist Bersin raised, include:

- Coping with the immediate response (e.g., increased challenge of balancing personal and work responsibilities with kids at home)

- Planning for recovery and rebuilding (e.g., increased costs for network demand, emotional costs)

- Optimizing for the future (i.e., creating a new normal. What worked that we should continue? What must be redesigned? How better to prepare for future unforeseen events?)

The approach the IRS has taken in addressing these issues probably is not atypical. *Federal News Network* chronicled its expanded use of telework during the COVID-19 crisis response effort. Commissioner Chuck Rettig told employees that they had the option of avoiding face-to-face contact with taxpayers. Empowering employees to choose gave them an unaccustomed freedom, and that freedom unnerved frontline supervisors.

According to *Federal News Network:* "Chad Hooper, president of the Professional Managers Association, which represents supervisors at the agency, '[We've] never in our careers been in a situation where employees have been empowered to that extent,' he said in an interview." In addition to this sudden culture shift in the middle of the 2020 tax filing season, employees found that working from home was some-time impossible because much of IRS's work is run on Windows 7 desktop comput-ers, which tie people to their desks.

The reality of working from home affects federal agencies differently. Law enforcement, regulatory, and national security agencies obviously are concerned about security and systems access issues. Benefits, healthcare, and statistical agencies are concerned about privacy issues as processes to make decisions about benefits, services, and information move massively online as well. One model for addressing these challenges comes from the U.S. intelligence community, which has managed to create ways for some of its employees to work from unclassified facilities (e.g., from home) by addressing technical and policy options.

This Is All Part of a Longer-Term Shift

Corporate telework advocate Lister recently told CNBC News: "The coronavirus is going to be a tipping point. We plodded along at about 10 percent growth a year for the last 10 years, but I foresee that this is going to really accelerate the trend."

In a similar vein, transformation consultant Khyati Nayak writes in *Federal Computer Week:* "The forced social experiment brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic is compelling the federal government to adapt culturally and technologically at a rapid pace. Federal workers have turned to government-approved technology such as Skype, WebEx, and Slack to meet, collaborate, and in many cases, just to commiserate . . . " and she concludes that this crisis creates an opportunity to transform the federal workforce.

What's Next?

Given this premise that distant work and distributed teams will be enduring— even with a "return to normal" strategy being discussed—the response to this pandemic may spark a permanent change in how government will work from now on. This change likely will occur along a spectrum of possibilities:

- How is the private sector pivoting to work from home?

- What's been the federal government's historical approach to telework over the past decade?

- What's happening in federal agencies today?

- What's happening in state and local governments today?

- Tips and tricks on how you and your team can work remotely effectively

How Is the Private Sector Pivoting to "Distance Work?"

By John M. Kamensky

As the coronavirus has disrupted society over the last few weeks, some of the distancing measures that once seemed drastic have become acceptable—in a few cases even preferable to the way things worked before.

Nowhere has this been truer than the workplace, where companies and employees have found remote operations far more feasible than expected.

University of Chicago researchers recently analyzed government employment and income data by industry and concluded that 34 percent of U.S. jobs can "plausibly be performed at home." Journalist Liz Farmer predicts that "the long-expressed resistance of companies and individual bosses to WFH (Working From Home) arrangements will decline markedly after they see how well the arrangement has worked."

But COVID-19 has also taught us that leading an entire organization through the transition to distance work in a matter of days or weeks can be wrenching, akin to passing through the five stages of grief. In an article about how corporations are adjusting to COVID-mandated remote working arrangements, Australian start-up accelerator Steve Glaveski sees a broad spectrum of adaptation beyond pre-COVID-19 practices:

- *No deliberate action.* This is where most companies were at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, with little to no capacity for widespread remote work.

- *Recreating the office online.* This is where most traditional organizations have landed. More effective companies offer access to e-tools, but without any redesign of how work gets done.

- *Adapting to the medium.* These companies are investing in better equipment (for example, they may provide employees a cash grant to improve their lighting for video calls). Their work favors text-based communication, with fewer meetings that have clear agendas and include only 'must have' participants.

- *Asynchronous communication.* These companies are structured more in line with how work gets done than where or when. They are typically global and recognize that presence does not equate to productivity.

- *Nirvana.* These companies field purely distributed teams that work better than in-person teams. There are a handful of companies like this, and most are in the tech industry.

Glaveski acknowledges that moving across this spectrum won't work for all industries, and he notes three common challenges to effective distance work that need to be addressed: team building and bonding, the value of informal office communication, and endpoint security.

How IBM Made the Transition

Fletcher Previn—IBM's chief information officer—recently offered a candid description of how he and his colleagues grappled with these challenges and others as they pivoted the organization's global workforce of 350,000 people to working from home over a four-week period this spring. Pre-COVID, Previn said, about 30 percent of IBM's global workforce predominantly worked from "other than a traditional office" (i.e., from a client site or home). This figure shifted to about 95 percent within a matter of days.

He explained that there were two key components to this transition—*technological* and *cultural.*

Previn says that the company benefited from having a longer-term internal IT strategy to enable workers to self-service. This began with mailing employees their mobile devices instead of delivering them in person, and creating an internal app store to distribute software. Those measures meant that all employee hardware and software could be delivered outside the office, making it easier to transition quickly to remote work.

IBM had also adopted a standardized set of tech tools to enable collaborative work across the globe through remote meetings, file sharing, remote access and cybersecurity (the company is shifting from a VPN-based to a zero-trust model). Over the past year, Previn created a common "tool box" that employees can access based on their job function (e.g., consultant, scientist, analyst):

- Slack for collaboration

- Box for document repository

- Trello for project management

- WebEx for meetings

- Mural for design thinking and whiteboarding

In terms of security, Previn says that his team detects a lot more cyberattacks and fraud attempts on home-based workers. In response, they've increased training to identify phishing and tightened endpoint controls on inbound emails and other traffic. In addition, they are using AI to look for unusual behavior based on a user identity, location and the device being used.

While the tech tools are a necessary prerequisite for working from home, Previn noted that there are also cultural issues. For example, traditional ways of balancing work and personal life need to be redefined as employees work in new settings with new routines. He advocated a model of small three-person teams interacting with each other and with other teams not only through scheduled meetings but spontaneous communications that help maintain human bonds and trust. Previn said he schedules virtual happy hours with his team to bring people together informally rather than just for agenda-driven meetings.

To help ease the cultural transition to distributed teams, IBM HR developed a series of training guides and online modules on how to lead remotely, and tips for remote workers and their managers.

Long-Term Benefits of the Transition

One factor that enabled IBM and many other companies to respond quickly to COVID was the longtime use of distance work tools to improve cross-organizational collaboration, even when the parties at both ends of the line sat in offices. A 2013 survey by McKinsey Consulting found multiple expected benefits to these measures, such as reduced travel costs and increased employee satisfaction. But the survey also discovered that there was faster access to internal experts and corporate knowledge when using collaborative tools. This implies that in both the private sector and government contexts, it's less important *where* you do knowledge-based work than it is *how* you do it—using collaborative tools in a team-based work environment.

In the last two months, the corporate world has gradually come to realize that it cannot wait to adapt these tools fully to an at-home workforce. Companies have shifted from a strategy of "do what is most urgent and feasible now and postpone everything else until we return to the office" to "we have to make everything work remotely because who knows how long this will last and we can't push things off any longer."

For most companies, that means mastering levels three and four of Glaveski's remote work hierarchy by embracing text-based communication, fewer meetings and asynchronous schedules.

And a few small tech companies have even reached the "nirvana" state that Glaveski describes. For example, Pipedrive, a new software company with staff in both the United States and Europe, responded to COVID-19 by becoming a completely virtual company inside of 24 hours, according to futurist Heather McGowen. And one tech company, Automattic (the company behind WordPress, which powers 35 percent of all websites on the internet), beat COVID-19 to the punch. It is 15 years old and has nearly 1,200 staff scattered across 75 countries—and no offices!

It is easy to think of the current disruption in workplace operations as a temporary shift that will reverse itself after the COVID-19 threat recedes. But as McGowan suggests in Forbes, this pandemic "might be the great catalyst for business transformation," producing changes in months that might have otherwise taken years to transpire.

"We're seeing changes that affect work, learning, and daily life," she writes, "changes that will become a new normal and that take place against a backdrop of several fundamental shifts."

For example, a slow evolution in corporate culture even before COVID-19 was giving employees greater autonomy and an increased role in meeting business goals. Companies are beginning to recognize culture, creativity and innovation as ingredients of success, and managers increasingly trust their people to "do the right thing." Corporations have started to consider employee welfare as a central goal in addition to profit. These trends too are bound to accelerate as social distancing continues, and will persist long after it ends.

What's Been Government's Experience with Distance Work Over the Past Decade?

By John M. Kamensky

While the coronavirus pandemic is the immediate driver of the sudden shift to working from home in governments across the country, the foundation for the transition to distance work actually began more than a decade ago. Here's the backstory.

The federal government had been seen as the leader in the use of distance work arrangements largely because of a 2010 law that codifies a federal commitment to the adoption of telework. The law requires all federal agencies to allow telework, designate a telework managing officer, and provide training to both employees and managers. It also requires agencies to incorporate telework into their continuity of operations plans. At the time, the rationale for adoption was to improve employee work-life balance.

Lessons from the 2010 Legislation on Telework

A 2011 IBM Center report by Dr. Scott Overmeyer looked at several federal agencies that were pioneers in the broad adoption of telework before the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 was passed.

He describes four hurdles to telework their managers faced in implementing a telework strategy, which are still relevant today:

- Technological
- Social
- Operational
- Managerial

Dr. Overmeyer then described how agencies, such as the Patent and Trademark Office and the Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA), addressed these issues and successfully implemented a telework initiative. He found initial resistance among managers around moving to telework because they could not see their employees. DISA, however, overcame this obstacle when the Washington, D.C. area was paralyzed by a snowstorm but the agency was able to continue operations without a hitch. DISA's Aaron Glover said at the time: "Telework is a key enable of the Continuity of Operations (COOP) program."

Prior to the coronavirus, the federal government had not widely embraced telework. The Office of Personnel Management's (OPM's) latest annual report on the implementation of the Telework Act reports that 42 percent of federal employees were classified as eligible to participate in a telework program, but only 22 percent actually participated.

Why the low participation rate? Interestingly, a 2010 article in *Washington Technology* identified four reasons federal managers resist the use of telework—and those reasons remained fresh right up until the coronavirus pandemic forced the shift: technological issues such as connectivity, an inability to be immediately available for impromptu meetings, the inability to convey intangible information or priorities, and distrust of some employees' work ethics.

Telework Guidance Updated

Since 2010, OPM and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) have issued a series of guidance around the use of telework. OPM's guidance focuses on "how to" topics via a one-stop website. OMB's early guidance focused on IT purchasing requirements and security requirements. After the coronavirus, however, its guidance consisted of increasingly urgent demands that agencies shift to telework: "Maximize telework across the nation for the federal workforce (including mandatory telework, if necessary) . . ."

However, not all federal jobs can easily convert to telework. For example, about 15 percent of the federal workforce is comprised of healthcare workers—doctors and nurses at veterans' hospitals. Also, many governmental functions are legitimately concerned about security and privacy of the work they do and data they collect and use. These include: law enforcement, regulatory oversight, benefits determination, national security, homeland security, and intelligence agencies. The Government Accountability Office tracks the implementation of telework and found that the number of positions that might be appropriate were not well-documented. The urgency of the shift to distance work arrangements as a result of the coronavirus, however, has begun to challenge many of these assumptions as agencies struggle to find ways to continue operations. There may be lessons from some of the unconventional pioneers of distance work, such as the military.

Pioneers at Working from a Distance

Distance work has been around for a number of years in the military and intelligence community, even with the concerns of security. They have used electronic collaborative tools to orchestrate work across distributed work teams, often located around the globe in different time zones. A 2016 Center for Strategic & International Studies report by Greg Treverton describes the use of virtual teams, distance work, and collaborative tools in the intelligence community.

That report describes cross-agency team arrangements where "only a handful work together or have even met face-to-face." These teams use MS SharePoint to host chats,

share files, and organize social networks. They use various collaborative tools, many based on widely available commercial technology:

- Intellipedia (like Wikipedia) is used for curating, reference, and research.

- Instant Messaging, chats, and blogs are used for managing.

- I-Space is used to discover other analysts.

- Intelink searches allow access to 180 million indexed documents.

Similarly, the military is also an advocate of distance work tools, as noted by former general Stanley McCrystal, who has described how he led military special operations halfway across the globe via videoconferencing calls more than a decade ago.

Distance Work Is Changing How Work Gets Done

The rapid shift to distance work as a result of the coronavirus is changing how work gets done in federal, state, and local governments. For example, at the federal level:

- The Board of Veterans' Appeals has accelerated its use of tele-hearings, when it used to only allow in-person hearings.

- The Veterans Benefits Administration suspended in-person medical exams for disability benefits to be conducted by VA doctors. It has largely shifted to the use of tele-health interviews and documentation from private doctors.

- Even Congress is making changes: the House of Representatives is allowing members to introduce bills and other floor documents electronically for the first time.

- Even more significantly, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has authorized broader use of telehealth visits to be reimbursed, and loosened privacy restrictions on sharing personal medical information on a temporary basis. If telehealth visits are made permanent, these kinds of changes could fundamentally transform how healthcare is delivered.

The shift to distance work arrangements also is driving changes in how work gets done at the state and local levels. This is causing them to rethink previous barriers to change—even if these changes are currently seen as temporary. For example:

- California state court hearings are going virtual for the first time. *Governing* quotes Alice Armitage, a law professor at UC Hastings in San Francisco: "This pandemic will open everyone's mind, and gets people to move out of their silos."

- About a dozen state legislatures, including New York, are making provisions to convene and vote remotely.

- Virtual public meetings are being allowed for local city councils in some states, according to *Governing*. This could expand the potential for citizen engagement opportunities.

Interestingly the four reasons federal managers raised a decade ago to resist the transition to distance work arrangements are still alive today, but it seems increasingly unlikely that things will go back to the way they were before the coronavirus pandemic, in part because managers have been forced by necessity to learn to manage differently in order to achieve mission results.

What's Happening Today with Federal Distance Work?

*By John M. Kamensky, Emily G. Craig,
and Michaela Drust*

More federal employees are working from home during the coronavirus crisis than ever before.

But will individual telework only be seen as a workaround until everyone returns to the office, or will agencies consciously decide to change how work will be done from now on, as distributed teams working from anywhere?

A recent *Washington Post* article cautions that even with a vaccine, the coronavirus likely will remain with us for the long haul and that coping with it will require long-term thinking. It quotes University of Chicago epidemiologist Dr. Sarah Cobey, saying: "The question is, how do we with live with it safely?" Similarly, Dr. Natalie Dean, a disease biostatistician at the University of Florida says that what we saw as normal prior to the coronavirus no longer exists and that we have to find different ways to adapt and work.

Pre-Pandemic Planning Made the Transition Easier

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, some federal agencies had instituted telework capacity as a component of their continuity of operations plans. As a result, they had the laptops, bandwidth, and security arrangements at the ready. Several agency chief information officers noted that prior technology investments were paying off, and that new, emergency funding from Congress was bridging any existing gaps.

For example, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) told *MeriTalk* that 58 percent of its 14,000 employees teleworked at least part-time before the coronavirus outbreak. By late April, 96 percent of its workforce teleworked fulltime. EPA credits its long-term modernization efforts for being able to ramp up quickly, even though it had to bolster its virtual private network and network capacities and buy more laptops for employees.

Similarly, other agencies also were able to manage the surge, according to *MeriTalk* —900,000 defense employees moved to telework; 100 percent of the National Science Foundation's staff moved; 95 percent of the staff at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and many more agencies.

Other agencies found they had to ramp up their capacity to operate outside the traditional office environment. The Department of Veterans Affairs, for example, quadrupled its telework capacity by mid-May, according to *Federal News Network.*

Agencies with a History of Distributed Work Didn't Lose a Beat

Agencies that had a long-standing culture of distributed work teams seemed to make the transition more smoothly. NASA has a history of bringing personnel and programs together across multiple geographically dispersed centers to deliver the space mission. Centers and headquarters had conducted remote work experiments to test system capacity and better understand the readiness of its culture and processes.

As NASA began its COVID-19 planning, it was under the pressure of a SpaceX scheduled launch from the historic pad 39-A at Cape Canaveral a scant few months away. (NASA and SpaceX successfully launched the Crew Dragon at the end of May.)

As the first U.S. cases of COVID-19 were reported, NASA senior leaders across the agency were deeply engaged in planning to work remotely. During mid-February, it conducted an agency-wide remote workday to test the ability of its VPN to handle the user volume. Within just few weeks of the test, personnel at headquarters and in multiple field centers were beginning to work remotely, and NASA estimates that approximately 90 percent of its federal personnel are currently teleworking.

While NASA initially made telework decisions on a center-by-center basis, they realized they were tackling a consistent set of issues such as visitor access and availability of cafeteria or onsite day care. Within three to four weeks, it established a response framework with multiple stages to communicate consistently. The framework allows different centers to be at different stages of distance work based on local conditions. After several weeks, the agency surveyed employees to understand the effectiveness of the remote work tools as well as the overall experience working remotely.

Senior NASA leaders continue to meet multiple times per week, dedicating a significant number of hours to planning as well as ongoing communication. Ranging from Q&A materials, town halls, videos, agencywide events and center-specific events, "we had to put our backs into it," says Jane Datta, NASA's chief human capital officer. "We wanted to do this right. People came first."

Some Agencies Found Themselves More Productive

To their surprise, several agencies found that they are just as, or more productive in a telework environment. Chief information officers for both the Departments of

Transportation (DOT) and Agriculture noted in *Federal Times* that productivity had not dropped. In fact, DOT CIO Ryan Cote said his agency had an absolute increase in productivity. A *Federal News Network* survey of 1,200 federal employees in early May found that "52 percent said they were more productive at home than the office, while another 40 percent said their productivity was about the same."

In addition, some agencies found remote video meetings more effective than in-person meetings. For example, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) chairs multiple large stakeholder groups to support policy development. One group, with more than a dozen members from the largest civilian agencies, had multiple-day in-person workshops scheduled to start three days after OPM moved to remote work. The OPM team shifted to a conference call and rapidly restructured the workshop to use online collaboration tools. It shifted to shorter working sessions, broken into multiple parts, and created more facilitation prompts to engage participants. The workshop had greater attendance from the agency participants, who were no longer facing the logistical obstacle of getting to OPM. The workshop results also improved with overall higher levels of contribution through discussion as well as an online chat feature.

Interestingly, the Social Security Administration, which was slow to embrace telework, found the backlog of pending cases for new benefits and appeals of benefit denials dropped 11 percent since the agency mandated full telework on March 23. There were similar productivity gains noted at the Veterans Benefits Administration.

Will Telework Become the Norm Instead of the Exception?

Given the positive experiences in some agencies, remote working practices may become the norm for some agencies. For example, the Department of Defense (DoD) says it will continue to implement teleworking flexibilities even after the worst of the crisis is behind us. According to *NextGov,* Defense Secretary Mark Esper said that "Pentagon officials who are able to telework can expect to do so for 'as long as necessary' and until the U.S. is 'beyond the coronavirus crisis.'" Esper also encouraged increased cyber vigilance and awareness for DoD employees as remote work has the potential to expose vulnerabilities in the agency's network.

For members of the intelligence community, the pandemic has demonstrated the need to rethink work arrangements for personnel who manage classified information. When faced with the challenge to swiftly institute telework, several intelligence agencies were unable to go 100 percent remote. They required some employees to work on-site in shifts to comply with social distancing guidelines. Subsequently, The Intelligence and National Security Alliance organized a working group to explore how the intelligence community can allow workers to safely access classified information on-site while also expanding telework opportunities. Furthermore, some intel agencies plan to re-evaluate how information is classified and what implication potential over-classification of some information may have on the ability to work remotely.

Looking ahead, certain segments of the federal government will likely reconsider how many employees need to be physically on-site to do their jobs and analyze how remote working capabilities may actually increase employee productivity and satisfaction. Despite the challenges ahead, it is evident that telework opportunities might become more accepted and embraced by the federal government, who had no choice but to adopt and adapt to remote work in order to protect the wellbeing of federal employees and contractors.

Distance Work—What's Happening at the State and Local Levels?

By John M. Kamensky, Emily G. Craig,
and Michaela Drust

The sudden shift to distance work arrangements in state and local governments may well continue long after the pandemic is over.

Not surprisingly, a survey administered at an early point in the coronavirus pandemic by the Center for State and Local Government Excellence found an uptick in the use of telework by states and localities. However, the big surprise from other reports is that this sudden shift has accelerated trends to move more work online, and that some jurisdictions may well continue use of distance work arrangements long after there is an all-clear to return to the office.

The survey—between late February and early April—reports an increase from 24 to 27 percent in the use of telework among states and localities over the prior year. It notes: "This practice is more common in state agencies (64 percent) than local jurisdictions (19 percent)." Its use probably increased dramatically as the pandemic spread and government groups such as the International City/County Management Association have urged local governments to prepare their workforce for "the possibility of long-term teleworking."

States Are Ahead of Local Governments in Use of Telework

States tend to be farther ahead than municipalities, given the nature of their work. Local governments have more "high-touch" services than state agencies—parks and recreation, sanitation, road maintenance, police and fire, e.g.—while states typically have more transactional services that could be done electronically, such as benefits and regulatory approvals.

Utah was one of the few states that advocated the use of telework prior to the coronavirus pandemic. It began piloting the use of distance work arrangements in 2018 and its experience and lessons learned made its transition to the maximum use of telework much easier than in other states.

After a successful pilot with 136 state employees last year, it expanded its effort to more than 2,500 (out of a total of about 28,000 employees). The goal at the time was to increase productivity and reduce auto emissions, as well as make state functions more disaster-resilient. When the pandemic struck, policies were in place, and associated infrastructure—such as cybersecurity protocols—had been developed. As a result, more employees were able to quickly transition to telework. And, when a 5.7 magnitude earthquake struck in mid-March during the pandemic, the digital infrastructure was in place and state employees were able to seamlessly continue to provide services to citizens.

Similarly, California moved quickly to the use of distance work arrangements and found it was working well. According to the *Sacramento Bee* in early June, "All workers are teleworking in some departments, Human Resources Department Director Eraina Ortega said in an email to agency secretaries and department directors. . . . 'Moving forward, the administration wants three-quarters of workers who are teleworking now to keep teleworking, either full time or part time, Ortega said in the email. . . . Ortega's guidance comes three weeks after [Gov. Gavin] Newsom laid the groundwork for a future in which state government greatly expands telework.'"

Some Local Governments Made Transition Seamlessly

With distance work guidelines already established for several counties in Southern California, the rapid onset of the pandemic did not threaten employees' abilities to fulfill work requirements. In fact, local governments in San Diego, Orange, and Sonoma counties were able to quickly pivot to almost full telework when given the order. While some mission-critical employees needed to be on-site at times, the majority of local government employees were able to quickly adapt, and even implemented new methods of communication and collaboration to ensure ample productivity.

In San Diego county, employees have begun using online tools such as Trello and Mural to track, prioritize, and delegate tasks and work to solve problems. The county's Health and Human Services agency is at the front lines of the pandemic setting up testing sites, developing contact-tracing protocols, aiding homeless populations, and coordinating the county's evolving response plan. For this and similar agencies, working remotely cannot hinder their ability to protect and maintain the wellbeing of their citizens.

Despite these successes, some local governments lacked sufficient technological infrastructure and the adoption of full remote work posed significant challenges. According to StateScoop, full telework has tested "supply chains on hardware assets like laptops, smartphones and tablets, as well as on software including virtual private network

licenses that employees would use to log into government servers." Additionally, "only 50 percent of local government tech officials said their organizations are ready to distribute laptops and mobile devices to employees who are ordered or decide to work from home during the ongoing coronavirus crisis."

Both States and Localities Used Distance Work to Change How They Work

According to *Governing:* "Despite some hurdles, government through remote work is performing better than expected. It will likely lead to permanent changes in everything from labor management and technology to physical footprints." It wasn't just teleworking—the way work was done changed, as well.

For example, real estate developers in Waukesha County, Wis., must get approval from a number of different government agencies for things like soil analysis, stormwater, road design and environmental permits. Pre-pandemic, that involved in-person meetings among developers and agency review officials to coordinate their efforts. But with the onset of the pandemic, developers now submit their plans electronically and they are then displayed and reviewed during video conferences. According to *Governing,* "This was designed initially as a workaround, with employees of the suburban Milwaukee region scattered by the coronavirus, but now this more efficient way of holding meetings will become standard. . . . "We will not go back," says Dale Shaver, director of parks and land use for Waukesha County. "This has changed the way we work forever."

Similarly, the New York State Department of Labor (NYSDOL) faced two significant challenges simultaneously with the onset of the pandemic: transitioning its workforce to remote work while simultaneously processing a dramatically increased volume of unemployment claims. NYSDOL was already running a pilot telecommuting program, and launched an Emergency Working Remotely program in mid-March.

The emergency program required employees to complete a series of trainings focused on the policy as well as the technology and security required for effective remote work.

At the same time, initial unemployment claims escalated dramatically, leading to a backlog in claims processing and delays in receiving benefits. Backlogs soared from 14,546 in mid-March to 399,015 by mid-April. In late March, the agency added hundreds of new staff, but it wasn't enough to keep up with call volume, new claims demand, and the ability to work through the backlog of prior claims.

In response, NYSDOL partnered with private industry to create a "tech surge" to resolve these challenges. Working with Google, it stood up a mobile-responsive application in the cloud to process initial claims. Using the new process, claimants could start, save, and return to finish an application. Claims processing staff would follow up with a phone call to collect missing or unclear evidence.

Private industry contractors also provided additional surge staff to process claims. For most states, several hundred new hires plus contractors would be a huge logistical challenge to onboard under the best of circumstances. Rather than try to intermingle contractors with one another or with state staff, NYSDOL defined the role and responsibilities for each, and established program managers as the key points of contact to assign work and communicate with the contractors.

The state had already developed expertise in using virtual machines, a capability that mirrors the functionality of a physical computer. Instead of issuing a new laptop with state-owned software to each contractor, the state provided virtual machines that could be imaged onto a contractor's computer. Contractors used the state-provided image to access the state's network and applications. The state phone system then routes unemployment claimant calls through the virtual machine to the contractors.

For internal team collaboration and communication, the contractor could switch to its own company's computer image and ran into fewer sharing barriers because they were primarily communicating with other workers at their own company. Once the state asked for help, this approach allowed its industry partner contractors to rapidly stand up resources from across the country to take new claims and help the state work through its claims backlog.

For Some, There's No Going Back

In assessing members' experiences, the International City/County Managers Association interviewed a number of managers about their experience with the sudden transition to distance work. Several felt the pandemic shifted their perspectives about the use of telework. For example, Scott Colby, assistant town manager of Windsor, Conn., commented: "I think that during this unique time, it has allowed us to see things in a different way in how we operate and do business."

Likewise, Weston, Mass., town manager Leon Gaumond told ICMA: "I think this [COVID-19] may cause most municipalities to explore ways of making all positions more remote during emergency situations. I think we will all spend some time when all is said and done looking at how each position thrived or suffered during this time and what we could put into motion to help the next time we have a pandemic/blizzard/ earthquake/zombie apocalypse."

Distance Work: Home Alone?

By John M. Kamensky, Emily G. Craig,
and Michaela Drust

Millions of Americans are in the midst of a large-scale experiment with distance work arrangements, in both the public and private sectors.

Dave Garrett, with the Project Management Institute, says that 73 percent of American professionals believe their companies will update their telework policies based on their experience during the pandemic. It is less clear what the trend will be in the public sector specifically, but it will likely be greater than the federal government's 22 percent pre-pandemic rate.

What does this dramatic shift in how and where we work mean for individual workers? What's working for them? What are some of the challenges and solutions? And what haven't we figured out yet about being effective in distance work arrangements? We'll explore these three questions at a personal level in this essay, and at an organizational and managerial level in a subsequent essay.

What's Working Well for Individuals Working from Home?

When the Office of Management and Budget directed agencies in mid-March to maximize telework work flexibility, some agencies found themselves unprepared and lagging. Others were able to swiftly shift successfully. However, agencies were not the only ones forced to adapt; their individual employees were too. For many, it was a pleasant surprise. Following are three outcomes of the telework experiment:

A more flexible lifestyle. Increasing remote work capabilities has allowed some federal employees to lead more flexible lives, a benefit that might not always be possible in on-site work settings. With many employees working from home with children, some agencies have implemented flexible work hours to allow employees the ability to care for their families and fit work into their schedule. For some families, this led to shiftwork. This increase in flexibility has improved employee productivity during designated work hours, ultimately leading to a boost in creativity. While creativity is often not a critical skill for all positions, it has the potential to reinvent solutions and develop fresh insights.

Schedule flexibility can optimize workers who are morning people versus night owls, as well. Jim Cortada, a former IBM Senior Research Fellow who pioneered corporate telework in the 1990s and now teaches at the University of Minnesota, found that with this flexibility, "employees put in as many hours (or more) as they did in offices and plants, often diverting time spent commuting now to work." The experiences of federal organizations that have implemented flexible hours have strongly paralleled this, meaning that both employees and agencies can benefit from flexible schedules if they do not threaten the mission.

More personal autonomy. Because individuals who traditionally work in an office setting are on their own, they face similar challenges as those who have been working in the gig economy —they have to be more self-managed and organize their time to be effective. Some find that a visual checklist helps self-motivation. But this also means they can:

* Organize their time how they want and have an opportunity to work in a quiet environment with fewer interruptions (for those who don't have young children to tutor or care for!).

* Avoid multi-tasking interruptions that are often a dynamic in an office setting.

* Take more responsibility for managing their own career paths and skill development.

* Have more control over their calendars to attend children's school events, run errands, etc.

Increased job satisfaction. A 2016 report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that remote work improved the retention rate of federal employees, meaning that increasing telework capabilities post-Covid could reduce overall hiring costs for federal agencies. Because the achievement of a more equitable work-life balance increases employee satisfaction and reduces burnout, continuing remote work practices could also appeal to a younger talent pool that strongly values flexibility in job prospects.

What Challenges Need to Be Overcome?

In some ways, gig workers have been pioneers for distance work arrangements. Alexandra Cote has been working remotely for three years and writes that it can be hard to get used to because there is a blur between work and home life. If not managed, this overlap can result in longer hours that can lead to burnout. Following are several other challenges that she and others have raised:

Social isolation. A 2018 study reports that 46 percent of people experience loneliness on a regular basis. And that's in general. Cote notes that remote workers are at an even higher risk of experiencing loneliness without meaningful interpersonal interactions with colleagues, especially if coworkers are in different time zones and have to communicate asynchronously. Countering this requires an active strategy on the part of remote workers to create informal links with colleagues via collaboration tools to overcome a sense of isolation.

Childcare. Ironically, the opposite of isolation is a challenge for those with children. Everyone's support system has been disrupted by stay-at-home orders, and these remote workers have no control over their situation. With no daycare and/or with children having online classes or requiring parental tutoring, juggling work commitments can be straining. The hope is that this dynamic will be temporary, and that distance work will be able to continue as childcare and schooling arrangements return to some semblance of normal.

Tech tools. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges that employees experienced at the onset of remote work was engagement in informal or incidental communication. Suddenly, the casual exchanges of information or informal brainstorming that are natural during in-person communication had to migrate online to maintain productivity. As a solution, employees turned to agency-provided tools like Slack and Zoom to facilitate collaboration and preserve sociality, and access to collaborative technologies is only improving. For Vince Stamper, a Navy civilian manager at a shipyard in Maine, remote work has actually allowed him to connect with his employees more than ever through virtual tools such as FaceTime.

What Haven't We Figured Out Yet?

What's not clear is how individuals and organizations can sustain a distant work environment in the long run. How do you onboard and share culture with new staff in a virtual world? It's easier to start with pre-existing in-person relationships and social infrastructure, and then move online. If you search "future of work after Covid," you'll find numerous links on how work has been irrevocably altered by this sudden, dramatic shift to working from home. While we have learned and innovated and overcome challenges, there are still important issues to be addressed. Following are three such issues:

Preserving and creating interpersonal ties. In a traditional, in-office, in-person environment, we develop both strong and weak interpersonal ties with colleagues. In the workplace, strong ties are usually in closely aligned workgroups that tend to have access to the same broad sets of information. Weak ties are the infrequent interactions and relationships that may develop randomly from seeing the same person often in the break room, on your floor, or in the parking garage.

The value of weak ties is that they bridge gaps and spread information between workgroups. As Aaron Renn notes in his online post at Governing, "knowledge doesn't just diffuse online, but through face-to-face contacts. This is how people hear the latest news, trends, and gossip."

Studies find that distance work arrangements make strong ties stronger, and weak ties weaker. But it is the weak ties that oftentimes create new ideas. Observers fear that the damage to an organization's culture may not show for a year or two, in terms of the quality of new ideas that are surfaced. This is because it is harder to build trust and cohesion virtually.

Renn also notes that even strong bonds are at risk as turnover naturally occurs. "It's one thing to start working remotely when your colleagues are people you formerly worked with in-person every day. It's quite another when it's a group of people you don't have pre-existing personal relationships with."

Staying aligned with organizational priorities. This is hard enough when managers see their teams every day, workers talk over cubicle walls, and leaders can have in-person town calls in multiple locations. It requires increased effort when workers are at home, and don't have easy follow-up opportunities when they meet with colleagues or managers. To overcome this challenge, Stanford academics Melissa Valentine and Jen Rhymer contemplate an organization with an ambitious level of transparency and trust:

- "Opening a single source of truth" that gives employees insight to strategy and priorities

- "Breaking down the barriers to sharing work" and shifting to the mindset of getting comfortable with work that isn't perfect and polished

- "Creating a rich public decision trail" to help employees understand how and why a decision was made

Supporting colleagues challenged by telework. Not every employee can easily transition to working from home. In addition to the availability of a suitable device that connects to the network, workers may face challenges – such as connectivity, security, and bandwidth—that employers cannot always solve for them.

Workers may have to compete for space, devices, or connectivity with other family members who are also at home. In addition, workers living in rural areas may have limited access to internet. Employers can help by subsidizing internet service and investing in collaboration applications that allow workers to work offline and periodically upload their output. Employers who don't offer these arrangements may find business-sensitive information stored in insecure locations, as creative employees try to find ways to get work done and share information with colleagues.

Working from home can also affect relationships and caregiving responsibilities, especially while children are out of school. The *New York Times* found a difference in how men and women perceived they are contributing to homeschooling their children compared with the amount of time actually spent homeschooling. A working paper authored by Daniel Carlson, Richard Petts and Joanna Pepin found that households sharing domestic responsibilities equally between parents were more likely to share the increased workload of homeschooling. In households that were less egalitarian, increased responsibilities tended to fall on women.

Working from home also presents special challenges to creating inclusive environments. Erving Goffman first introduced the term "covering" in the 1960s to describe how individuals would downplay a known difference such as gender, race, or disability to shift focus away from what makes them noticeably different. It is a practice that continues today. A Deloitte study reports 61 percent of survey respondents engage in covering. A recent *Harvard Business Review* article by Laura Morgan Roberts and Courtney L. McCluney offers excellent insight into how distance work may increase the sense of vulnerability for Black workers, which needs to be understood by coworkers.

In sum, there are advantages, challenges, and unresolved issues related to an individual worker's use of distance work arrangements. However, these same issues also affect agency leaders and managers, and how an agency's culture is sustained or changed. That will be the topic of the next essay in this series on distance work in today's government.

Six Challenges Managers of Remote Teams Must Master

By John M. Kamensky and Michaela Drust

Managers have to learn new ways to lead.

Early in the pandemic, Congress appropriated $46 billion to agencies to support technology upgrades for cloud and telework capabilities. However, the challenges facing federal agency transitions to a distance work environment may not be technology driven.

Some federal agencies were skeptical of telework before the pandemic and have had to overcome cultural barriers to continue their work. The Secret Service, for example, was reluctant to move to a cloud platform, but did so in order to enable collaboration tools to keep its employees connected. Employees at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission can't print sensitive documents at home for review. And many IRS employees were idled because their software at work was too old to make the transition to telework.

The coronavirus pandemic has prescribed a new meaning to the traditional concept of a "team." Instead of a group gathered around a table to discuss and solve problems, teams are now a collection of geographically isolated individuals who communicate virtually and lack in-person interaction. For government agencies that lacked remote work opportunities prior to the pandemic, the implementation of full telework provided teams with new challenges. Some teams were able to embrace these obstacles and overcome them, increasing their strength in the process.

Here are six challenges that managers of remote teams have to master in either the public or private sectors:

Challenge 1: Maintaining Individual and Team Productivity

Technology plays a significant role in bridging the physical distance between teams. With functionalities for video calls, group chats, and document sharing, tools such as Slack and Microsoft Teams have allowed team members to work productively and improve collaboration. In many cases, these tools provide the instantaneous communication that is natural in the office and facilitate the co-creation of knowledge by providing storage for documents, discussions, and meeting recordings. In a remote work environment, these tools are the glue that hold teams together and ensure that they stay cognitively connected.

Challenge 2: Ensuring there is "tech equity" within the team

To be productive, though, managers have to ensure their team members have the connectivity, equipment, security and training they need to do their jobs. Not all employees live in locations that have good connectivity, or their home equipment may not support higher bandwidth needs for video conferencing, so managers need to find ways to compensate for that—as well as being flexible with regard to schedules that can balance work with child care responsibilities. In the corporate world, there is often a parallel investment in continuous learning systems. Some are beginning to explore the use of augmented and virtual reality tools to improve communication and collaboration.

Challenge 3: Developing new work routines as a team

Because our individual work-life and home-life habits are different, developing new work routines as a team will take time. However, both managers and team members have to embrace going virtual as a different way of doing work. This includes going paperless, practicing with the new tech tools so everyone is "work ready," and ensuring team members are "contactable" during defined work hours. In addition, meetings and workshops need to be organized in advance—clear objectives, pre-reads, agenda, breaks, defined next steps—and have a facilitator.

New work routines also mean that team members have to more intentionally make their work more visible to colleagues via the use of common sharing platforms such as Trello. Platforms allow you to see what everyone is doing in a joint project. This gives people autonomy to work on their corner of the project and allows people see the bigger picture and how their individual contribution fits. Managers have to be more intentional about making this happen.

Challenge 4: Learning to manage differently

Glenn Dirks of Teletrips, Inc., says, "Managing in itself doesn't really change that much. Managers just have to accept their responsibilities for being a good manager—which for me means defining the work that has to be done, assigning the work to the right people, setting clear performance goals, and then holding people accountable for getting it done. . . . In short, the more you go 'virtual,' the more the quality of management matters."

It's hard to manage distributed work teams because you can't easily reach out to colleagues, make informal taskings, or undertake non-verbal socialization to develop and maintain a reservoir of implicit trust among team members. One solution is structured daily check-ins, such as short video meetings (no longer than 10 minutes) among team members. Feedback becomes the life of the team (Do you understand? What do you need to be successful? How can I help?)

Challenge 5: Building relationships and trust

Distance work involves a culture change for managers: they have to trust their workers to do the right thing and empower them with the information, training, and tools to do it. This requires managers to unlearn the traditional philosophies of command and control, embrace collaboration with their subordinates, and discard traditional concepts of manager-directed work on a day-to-day basis.

While it may be difficult for some managers to shift their managerial style away from their in-office approach, greater manager-employee trust is integral to promoting employee health and wellbeing, especially in a pandemic where employees might require flexible work hours to care for children or parents. "If our employees do not feel safe and protected, they ultimately cannot be productive," said George Scott, deputy inspector general at NASA. Federal organizations that have built a foundation of trust during remote work have been able to successfully maintain productivity and develop and promote organizational culture.

Challenge 6: Developing and promoting organizational culture

Culture is about decisions and values about how we work; how we talk to customers; how we talk with each other, and how much time we spend at work. It is assumed that teammates who work in proximity with one another will naturally and inevitably develop a culture of their own. However, there are three important ingredients for building culture for a remote workforce: teams, tools, and process.

Organizations that are effective at distance work found that building a remote work culture doesn't start with tools, it starts with principles, such as focusing on customers, doing work that matters, and empowering team members to do their work. these principles should ground day-to-day work.

As a result, remote teams face the challenge of building a social cohesiveness from the ground up. People in a remote team need to be okay that their workplace will be less social than co-located ones are; they have to create their own social support system. A remote team needs to develop substitutes for the informal interactions that typically happen in an office environment.

In a distance work environment, the same tools that keep people productive can also be leveraged as "virtual watercoolers" that encourage informal conversation and chatting. These tools therefore can help create and foster an organizational culture that bonds colleagues together, albeit from afar. Events, such as virtual happy hours, also enable comradery and give team members the chance to connect in a more casual atmosphere to balance the formality of the virtual office.

Beyond distance work

Ironically, what may be more difficult than managing in a distance team working environment is working in a "split" environment where some team members are in the office and others are off-site. Will the implicit expectation be "office first" or "distance first?" Where is the manager working? Developing and maintaining effective management techniques and communication cues in a split-work setting may be the next challenge facing organizations and managers in a post-pandemic work world.

Distance Work—A Three Generation Perspective

John M. Kamensky, Sheri I. Fields, and Michaela Drust

What's it been like for workers stranded at home the past six months?

There is a bipartisan legislative push to continue maximum telework at least through the end of the pandemic. However, a recent survey found that one-third of U.S. workers want to be able to permanently work remotely at least a couple days a week after the pandemic is over.

The authors of this essay span the three main generations in the workplace today. We each reflect on what that experience has been for us.

John M. Kamensky

Senior Fellow with the IBM Center for The Business of Government

I'm a Boomer who has been in the workforce for more than 40 years—about half in the government and half in the private sector. Until the coronavirus stay-at-home order came to my office on March 13th, I'd always worked in a traditional office setting. After five months of working from home, I still miss it, but am adjusting to distance work. I envision that I'll continue to do so for a number of months, indefinitely, and when I return to the office, I'll be splitting time between traditional office work and distance work. I see that as the new normal.

I'm fortunate to have a home office. Yes, it's in the basement and near the air conditioner, washing machine and dryer, and I have to negotiate with my wife for quiet times for meetings, especially when taping a TV interview or moderating a call with several hundred participants. But at least I don't have a toddler climbing on my lap, like some of my colleagues!

Working at IBM, I always had the option and the technology to work from home before, but never took advantage of it. I liked the separation between work and home. So, for the first few weeks, I felt disoriented and had trouble setting priorities and felt overwhelmed.

However, IBM being a global company, there was always the dynamic of working with colleagues around the U.S. or in other countries that I'd never met before, so there already was a corporate ethos around working in, and managing, distributed teams.

I'm part of a small team. We meet via video at least three times a week and stay in contact more informally via Slack. There are optional meetings offered for our larger division (about 3,000 people), and other specialized communities, and the head of the company (about 350,000) holds regular touch call videos about the broader picture. So, I feel connected, much like when I was in an office setting.

In addition, our company offers transition training for distance work and offers tutoring on various productivity tools such as Trello and Mural. I'd not used many of these tools before and found that investing time in the training and using the tools have made me more productive—which I wasn't expecting. For example, I find video meetings to be just as, or more, productive than in person, and—ironically—found that all-video rather than split video/in-person meetings, are more inclusive.

While I look forward to returning to the office someday, I am now productive in my home office, which I didn't think was possible, before the pandemic.

Sheri I. Fields

Senior Managing Consultant in IBM's Talent and Transformation practice

I'm a Gen Xer who has been in the workforce for 22 years—with most of that time working in public sector. The notion of working from home has always been frowned upon by most of the clients with whom I've worked. Predominately, working with DoD clients mean a traditional office or colocation with the client on base or a government installation. When COVID-19 was elevated to a global pandemic on March 11th, the possibility of stay-at-home orders became an unavoidable conversation to have with the client. Notwithstanding the fact that our onsite staff comprised of most of the resources in the building and would leave the building desolate, there were an onslaught of safety concerns associated with poor ventilation and the possibilities of easy transmission.

At IBM, we've always had the technological resources to perform our roles remotely. Effective on March 18th, the client agreed to remote work. Thankfully, I'd always kept a home office reserved for the late nights often required to finish my workday. Once settled in our home spaces, the focus shifted to ensuring that the client saw our online presence. We met daily, checked in with the client frequently and continued to exceed performance. Our clients were delighted with our seamless transition and performance.

Personally, I was drowning. With two children, ages 8 and 12, and husband all at home now it became paramount to establish boundaries and schedules. Initially, I had the false hope that working from home daily was temporary and likely to last just a few weeks at the most. When the pronouncement of school closures was proclaimed, I was devasted. Not because I didn't want to keep my children safe, but because the social environment and their world was horridly disrupted and would not be restored for the foreseeable future. To assist in educating them while my husband and I worked, we searched for sitters, in-home care assists, and au pairs unsuccessfully. Luckily, I was able to take a week off and work with both children to create a new normal schedule that involved online tools, workbooks, and even screen time. Additionally, we developed a system of colored post-its to denote when interruptions were okay, not okay unless an emergency, and when we could all work together. We have fared well.

The pandemic has forced us to integrate work and family without the demarcation of listening to a podcast to destress while driving from work to pick up a child. It has also afforded my family an opportunity to reclaim the closeness we've always wanted and had only for short periods of time. While I look forward to returning back to the office on a limited basis, I have appreciated the time that we've played family games, laughed hysterically at Ellen's Game of Games, and battled with our Nerf guns outside.

Michaela Drust

*Business Transformation Consultant in IBM's
Enterprise Strategy practice*

I'm a Millennial who has been in the workforce for 2.5 years—half of which has been in public sector consulting. Prior to the pandemic, I spent 45 hours per week on client-site in a traditional office and was not allowed to work remotely. While my generation values telework and flexibility in the workspace, the past five months have taught me that I personally need a balance of both.

I work every day from my tiny apartment's kitchen island, making it both my home office and dining space. I miss the work-life separation that I had while on client-site, but I also enjoy the ability to make my own coffee every morning and lunch every afternoon. I find myself working longer hours and having trouble turning work "off" at the end of the day since there is no need to rush to catch the Metro or make a yoga class. Quarantine has taught me that I took the structure of normalcy for granted and has challenged me to develop a more sustainable structure for myself.

At IBM, we rely on tools, such as Slack, to communicate and socialize. The DoD clients that I work with, however, did not have any similar platforms in-place at the beginning of the pandemic. To address the communication gap, the organization quickly adopted and implemented Microsoft Teams to provide employees with virtual meeting, chat, file sharing, and collaboration capabilities. At first, several colleagues continued to send emails and make phone calls to reach each other, rather than instant messaging on Teams. This was a perfect demonstration of how the federal government has been historically slow to technologically evolve in comparison to the private sector. I've been very impressed with how far our clients have come in the past months and how they've started to see the value in using remote collaboration tools.

Still, nothing beats face-to-face communication. I was very fortunate to develop strong client-relationships before shifting into a remote work environment; this has been integral to my particular role's ability to successfully function remotely. I often wonder what it would be like to join a project during these times and have to learn the organizational culture and build client relationships and trust from afar. For a new consultant just joining the workforce, I can imagine that this could be quite overwhelming.

As a Millennial, my generation values flexible work policies and work-from-home opportunities. Yet, I miss the office, my clients, and my colleagues. It is hard to not burnout when the daily routine lacks in-person social interaction and stimulation. I look forward to daily client calls, check-ins, and staff meetings—anything that makes me feel connected to others. The pandemic has challenged me to rethink not only how we socialize and interact, but how we work and collaborate. While I look forward to returning to the office in limited capacity, I'm moved by the efforts that both IBMers and clients have made to take care of each other in this "new normal." For example, rather than doing small birthday parties in the office, we send cupcakes to people's apartments or homes to surprise them and remind them that we can still celebrate each other.

Post Pandemic Planning—Should the U.S. Go Back to the Office After COVID-19?

By Lawrence M. Tobin

The human factors to consider before returning to work after COVID-19

It's been six months since a national emergency was declared as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This past week, the U.S. passed the grim threshold of 200,000 pandemic-related deaths out of nearly 7 million reported cases, and experts are predicting that it may be mid-2021 or even 2022 before a semblance of normal life will return.

This has led to most large organizations—public and private—implementing distance work strategies to avoid close-quarter work practices, with mixed results concerning productivity and overall mental well-being of employees. Some companies and government agencies are considering keeping this new lifestyle after the pandemic ends, but a question arises: should they keep the new normal or revert to the old ways of working once the pandemic come to an end?

Challenges and Benefits to Distance Work Arrangements

There are many challenges associated with managing remotely that many companies are facing for the first time, and many ways of mitigating risks associated with this new normal. One of the key challenges in remote working lays in leadership and motivating employees to perform from home as though they were at an office, perhaps without the resources most office settings can offer. The ability for collaboration among coworkers is now dependent on technology to connect versus the ability to walk to an office and get

an answer. When promotions or new opportunities for employees arise, there could be a lack of understanding regarding the amount of work it takes to perform a task, since no longer can a supervisor see an employee working—they have to now judge based purely on the outputs of previous work. When the pandemic comes to an end, companies and governments will have to weigh more than just the cost savings of reducing office space, but also the second and third order of effects of missing daily interactions.

Working from home can have many benefits for both employer and employee, as well as many limitations. Benefits include flexibility for employees' daily schedules, lack of commute, and cost savings associated with them. Limitations can be quality technological solutions, response timeliness, and security issues, both from a proprietary solution perspective and, especially when working with the government, ability to work in a classified environment.

Jobs That Can't Be Done from Home

There are many types of jobs that exist which cannot be performed from home. First responders, as an example, are still needed to be physically at work. Without their diligence and bravery, society would not function. The United States military spends most of its time training to perform its mission defending the United States from enemies, foreign and domestic. Can the military perform its mission from a telework environment? Will the military adjust its training strategy once the COVID-19 pandemic is over?

The answer to the military problem is that it is very complicated. A recent poll suggests that only about half of the soldiers in the U.S. military believe that enough is being done to protect them during this current pandemic. Unfortunately, the threats in the world that the U.S. military is training to protect the United States from do not rest, even during the pandemic, and so there will always be risks associated with maintaining readiness. With careful thought and consideration for social distancing protocols, including mandatory mask usage and as much outdoor training as possible, most training can be accomplished with minimal risk during the pandemic, and afterwards the military may convert some administrative positions to distance work. The U.S. Air Force is already considering permanently leaving home about a third of their force after the pandemic is over, which is a direct result of lessons learned in the past several months.

A major problem for the government is how to safely continue to plan for contingency operations. At a strategic level, plans for how the military will posture itself for the future are highly sensitive, and nearly impossible to accomplish from a telework environment due to the nature of the information required to ensure security. Additionally, the military prides itself on its appearance and physical abilities, and teleworking solutions would put more personal responsibility of maintaining fitness on the individual service member. Once the pandemic ends, the military will have a particularly challenging decision to make about the return to 'normal.'

When considering how to operate after the pandemic ends, a decision matrix—one that weighs all the pros and cons of returning to normalcy—is a widely accepted method. A planned, impartial, and structured framework that balances as many concerns with benefits as is practical to come to an informed decision.

The key to informing the decision matrix is the answer to a simple question: how do they measure success of its employees? Is it productivity alone? Are all employees treated equally regarding responsibility? Maybe some people really enjoy working from

home and can maintain productivity, while others cannot. If the option to come back to the office exists, do you bring in only those who must, and save office space of those who do not? It's a careful line to walk, because it has the potential to create an air of favoritism or encourage competition in a way that may not be productive. These are but a few things to think about when considering permanent changes to how an organization operates, even when the national emergency is over. As an example, the military could consider leaving their considerable administrative support workforce at home (in and out processing, finance, etc.), but continue operating as normal otherwise regarding training and deployments.

Next Steps for Leaders and Employees

It will be tempting for companies or government agencies to decide to reduce their infrastructure footprint to save money, based on the idea that productivity didn't drop during the pandemic. The decision must instead come down to leadership ability and clear expectations for employees.

For leaders at all levels, but particularly those leaders who have employees that directly report to them, there are many challenges. Very frequently there are last minute deadlines that require overtime or other additional efforts, and the ability for a leader to get their employees to crash through the night remotely might pose problems. Sometimes hard decisions must be made, and delays will ensue while trying to get team consensus without careful planning ahead of time. Some leaders will excel at this, while others will not.

Employees face similar issues, but from a different perspective. If an employee can complete 100 percent of their job from their new home office, and a last-minute task comes to their supervisor, is it appropriate for the supervisor to call the employee during off hours to get a task done? In a normal environment, work is done in an office, and while sometimes employees will get called back in, there are strings attached to that request: maybe they have children they need to watch or are currently out of the area. If they can do work from home at any time, where is the line drawn between being at work and spending time with their family? Additionally, what leeway should an employee receive because they now work from home, but also are trying to take care of raising a child? Should they have to provide proof of childcare to telework or is it acceptable, assuming their work gets completed? It is important to consider all the dynamics that working from home brings into the workplace from an employee perspective.

Conclusion

For any company or government agency to succeed in the new workplace, the key to success will be through its employees. Avoiding rigid, non-adaptive leadership will be key to determining if a company or government organization can change more permanently after the pandemic and should be weighed heavily against any cost savings or non-human factors. Each company or government organization will have to figure out what changes to make when the nation returns to the normal, and there is no one solution for everyone. Ensuring a thorough review of all relevant factors, from moral to revenue to leadership, will help make any post-pandemic transition a success.

Disclaimer: The ideas and opinions presented in this essay are those of the author and do not represent an official statement by the U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Army, or other government entity.

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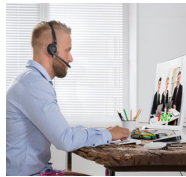lawrence.tobin@ibm.com

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