



Transforming the Workplace

Long-term adoption of remote work will drive technology modernization and new management policies

More than a year after state and local government agencies shifted employees to remote work, their biggest workforce challenge may be just starting.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in March 2020, agencies scrambled to expand secure connectivity and acquire mobile devices, but most state and local CIOs say their organizations transitioned relatively easily to working from home on an emergency basis. Now, with COVID-19 cases in the U.S. dropping dramatically and economies reopening, public agencies face a more complicated issue: figuring out where and how state and local government employees will work going forward.

“We’ve been through a giant social experiment in the last 15 months, and we’re heading into an even bigger one,” said Lee Rainie, director of internet and technology research for the Pew Research Center, during the NASCIO Midyear Conference in May.¹

Permanent Changes

Center for Digital Government (CDG) research indicates the pandemic will permanently alter the nature of work for public employees.

A 2020 CDG national survey found almost 75 percent of respondents anticipate hybrid work — where employees work from home at least on a part-time basis — will be their long-term model. The trend is particularly strong at the state level where just 16 percent of respondents anticipate returning to a fully in-person work environment.

In California, for example, multiple state agencies expect large percentages of their workforces to continue working remotely at some level post-pandemic. CalPERS, the state’s massive public employee retirement system, expects about half of its workforce to continue working remotely on either a full-time or part-time basis after the pandemic subsides, says CEO Marcie Frost.²

Other California state agencies are moving even more aggressively. Covered California, which operates the state’s health insurance exchange, anticipates 10 to 20 percent of its staff will stay fully remote, while perhaps another 50 percent could have part-time remote schedules. And FI\$Cal, a department created in 2016 to operate California’s statewide financial information system, has permanently moved 90 percent of its staff to remote work.³

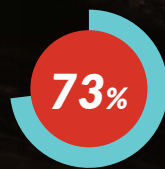
New Challenges

Transitioning to a permanent hybrid work model presents new technology and management challenges for government leaders.

Technology modernization, which was kickstarted during the pandemic response, must continue. Cloud-based systems capable of supporting the new work-from-anywhere model will be critical, as will digital document and signature capabilities that eliminate paper processes. In addition, agencies must keep strengthening virtual collaboration platforms to provide equal engagement and advancement opportunities for in-office and remote workers.

Because large numbers of employees will never return to the office full time, agencies anticipate reducing their physical footprint, but remaining office space will need upgrades. Brick-and-mortar locations will likely become shared spaces where employees can reserve desks or meeting rooms. These facilities will require better audio and video systems to support seamless collaboration between in-person and remote staff. Agencies will also need reservation and scheduling systems to manage shared office spaces.

Remote Work Opportunities and Challenges



of employees want flexible remote work options to be permanent



of leaders say they are considering redesigning office space for hybrid work



of remote workers plan to relocate this year



of employees feel overworked



of employees feel exhausted

Source: Microsoft 2021 Work Trend Index, which surveyed more than 30,000 public and private sector employees in 31 countries.

Finally, results from a recent Microsoft workforce survey – which covered public and private sector organizations – indicates employers must do more to support remote workers' basic technology needs. More than 40 percent of employees said they lack essential office supplies at home, and one in 10 don't have an adequate internet connection to do their job, according to the survey. More than 46 percent said their employer does not help them with remote work expenses.⁴

Even more critical are the policy changes agencies must implement as they lead remote and hybrid workforces into the future. That transition will be a significant one for managers and supervisors in state and local government, where remote work was rare before the pandemic.

"You need to give tools to your managers, because this is very different than watching people at their desks from 8 to 5," says Russell Fong, chief administrative officer for the California State Controller's Office. "All the things we've taught managers throughout their careers are different than what you want to do in today's environment."⁵

Agencies will need to develop key performance indicators for programs and

processes, and they will need to implement effective processes for measuring the output or performance of individual employees.

Work/life balance is another concern. The new model for work blurs traditional lines between home and office, and many employees are feeling the strain. The Microsoft survey found 54 percent of respondents feel overworked and 39 percent feel exhausted.⁶

Overcoming issues like these was a frequent topic of discussion at the NASCIO Midyear Conference where state CIOs expressed concerns about workplace culture.

"I'm not concerned from a technology perspective," explained Texas Department of Information Resources Executive Director Amanda Crawford, "but from a

logistical and management perspective how we're able to keep cohesive teams."⁷

Becoming a Better Employer

Navigating the shift to permanent remote and hybrid work demands that agencies take a fresh look at the technologies and policies related to supporting and managing their workforces. But these changes will bring significant benefits.

Digitizing and automating processes will make agencies more productive and efficient. So will giving employees tools that let them work seamlessly from home, in the office or anywhere else. In addition, new flexibility around remote work, as well as moving toward performance-based management techniques – instead of management by attendance – ultimately could make government a better and more desirable place to work.

¹ State CIOs Look to Future With Digital Services, Hybrid Work. <https://www.govtech.com/pcio/state-cios-look-to-future-with-digital-services-hybrid-work>

² Navigating the Future of Work. <https://papers.govtech.com/Navigating-the-Future-of-Work-138778.html>

³ Ibid.

⁴ The Next Great Disruption Is Hybrid Work – Are We Ready? <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/hybrid-work>

⁵ Navigating the Future of Work. <https://papers.govtech.com/Navigating-the-Future-of-Work-138778.html>

⁶ The Next Great Disruption Is Hybrid Work – Are We Ready? <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/hybrid-work>

⁷ State CIOs Look to Future With Digital Services, Hybrid Work. <https://www.govtech.com/pcio/state-cios-look-to-future-with-digital-services-hybrid-work>