



FEATURE

COVID-19 and the virtualization of government

Responding, recovering, and preparing to thrive in the future of work

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FROM THE DELOITTE CENTER FOR GOVERNMENT INSIGHTS

For government agencies, COVID-19 has made the future of work a current workplace reality. Learn steps leaders can take now to embrace the transition and get ready for what's coming next.

THE SUDDEN AND involuntary transition to remote work caused by COVID-19 hasn't been perfectly smooth for government agencies. Some are finding they lack the infrastructure to handle so many people working from home. They've discouraged streaming music to free up bandwidth.¹ They're experimenting with shift-based working hours to adhere to social distancing practices, while security experts worry about the increased attack surface with sensitive government information being accessed at home.²

The disruption over the past month has been real, and in many cases, the response has been fast. But once the pandemic is over, the transition from remote back to the physical office won't be easy either—and not just because of the potential for ongoing social distancing measures in the months to come. In March, when the US Social Security Administration enacted the second phase of a program to close a decades-old telework program and reintegrate employees into full-time, office-based work, employees resisted the change more than expected.³ They had simply grown comfortable, and happy, working from home.

And they were not alone: In a 2018 survey, 76 percent of public and private sector employees indicated they would be more loyal to their employers if they had flexible work options.⁴ Just avoiding commutes alone reduced stress and gave employees more time.⁵ And in a 2014 survey of US internet users, two-thirds of respondents indicated that they are actually more productive when they work remotely.⁶ The Office of Personnel Management's

2018 Report on the status of telework in the federal government found that 63 percent of respondents believed telework improved their performance.⁷

As organizations in both the public and private sector continue to have employees work at home in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, they may be undergoing a transition that they can't take back easily. Workflows will likely have to adapt, and workforces will settle in to a different kind of life balance. When it's safe to return to the office, employees may not be returning to the same work. In some cases, the nature of their jobs and the expectations may have changed. Remote work might not just be a short-term inconvenience. It appears that we may be on the cusp of a long-term transformation. COVID-19 has accelerated the timeline for the future of work—it's here now, and it's altering most aspects of how we work, where we work, and what we need to work effectively and collaboratively together.

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What does that mean for government agencies? It means teams should consider the need to adapt to

the new normal today. Leaders and policymakers, meanwhile, need to prepare for the “next normal” tomorrow, gathering the data they need to understand what works well virtually and what doesn’t, so they can make intentional choices that enhance and sustain the employee experience at the same time.

Responding now: Virtual work in a COVID-19 world

Government agencies are wrestling with a host of complications in today’s transition, and many are tactical and technological. Too many people on the same VPN slows down access.⁸ Cyber threats are on the rise and more people working remotely can expose vulnerabilities that hackers can exploit.⁹ The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency is producing an interim Trusted Internet Connection policy to deal specifically with telework.¹⁰ The Department of Defense alone will spend US\$300 million to upgrade its technical infrastructure.¹¹

But continuity of operations is not just about the technology—it’s about the people behind the screens who have to work with machines, as well as other humans, to get things done. There are nuances of the “new normal” to pay attention to as we adapt fast to our virtual world today and learn to collaborate, manage, and deliver our work.

GOALS, TASKS, AND TIMELINES—AND THE SKILLS YOU NEED TO ACHIEVE THEM—ARE CHANGING

Today, the question is not which work can be done virtually. It’s how agency leaders can best manage the virtual version of almost all work. Managers in government agencies are navigating an unprecedented challenge—learning how to manage virtually, while learning how their teams’ work will

get done differently, virtually. Already, federal workforces are realizing that people working from mobile or remote platforms need new cybersecurity practices and training.¹² Even giving presentations and engaging with an audience becomes a new skill in a virtual environment.

For both managers of teams and team members, be aware that some goals may be harder to achieve. It might seem obvious, but it can’t be overstated: Some tasks that you need to do during this time may become more complex. Timelines may need to change to accommodate the challenges of remote collaboration, or to accommodate the need to have physical access to data or systems; agencies may have to set up shift schedules to adhere to social distancing practices.

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Already, the DoD has classified its workforce according to three tiers of remote access needs, to minimize the number of people coming into the office to access classified information.¹³ “Essential” employees with jobs that are not possible to do remotely have required new safety precautions and sanitary standards. In many of these agencies, HR is becoming the de facto command center to support the consistency of the essential employee experience, manage their needs, and provide contingency plans in case employees who handle mission-critical work become ill.

Taking a realistic look at the impacts of this shift—and the impacts of the pandemic, which may have changed a team’s priorities—is critical. Establishing avenues for open, honest, and proactive communication about goals, boundaries, and work-life fit has become more important now than ever. This should start with agency leaders,

and then cascade down to functional, team, and individual levels.

EMBRACING AUTHENTICITY IN THE “WORKPLACE” HAS BECOME EVEN MORE IMPERATIVE

In a time of uncertainty, it is human nature to rely on each other for support—and sometimes it’s harder to support each other in a virtual environment. It’s everyone’s job to keep morale high and focus on building and maintaining a virtual culture that is as strong (or stronger!) than what began in-person. Some qualities and activities that build naturally in-person, such as trust, understanding, and unstructured interactions, may require deliberate development in a remote environment.

Leaders can use this COVID-19 workplace experience as an opportunity to check in with colleagues on how they are feeling. They should make time for virtual “hallway conversations” or “coffee chats.” Consider innovative ways to connect team members and foster trust, such as two-way virtual mentoring pairs. Encourage one another to join videoconferences “as is” and treat them like regular meetings, not as if you’re on TV.

Recovering tomorrow: Once we get used to this, then what?

Most leaders are likely too busy with these immediate changes to consider how virtualization today will impact us tomorrow, but now is exactly the time to think about it. We don’t expect that the end of the pandemic will bring us all back into our offices to “business as usual,” as if nothing had happened. A “yellow light” to return to work, with some ongoing social distancing and uncertainty about future waves of outbreak, is much more

likely than an all-clear green one. Regardless, this change will probably occur right around the time everyone has gotten used to working from home, and appreciates some of the flexibility and work-life fit it may offer.

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But this could be a blessing in disguise. As noted earlier, blanket policy decisions to “go remote” or “go back to the office” often backfire. Some organizations, both public and private, have made these decisions based on policy alone and ultimately reverse them due to unforeseen consequences. These organizations have downplayed the importance of workplace “fit for purpose”—designing what the workplace (and not just the physical space) should look like to suit the work that needs to be done, rather than the reverse.

Intentional design—rather than a one-workplace-fits-all approach—can pay dividends. A 2019 study that looked specifically at the differences in how virtual teams performed on a variety of tasks showed that remote teams can outperform traditional teams if their work is designed correctly.¹⁴ It found, for example, that “virtual teams benefited from high levels of task interdependence because it required them to interact with each other more frequently and gain an understanding of one another, such as by asking questions or seeking feedback.”¹⁵

The uncertainty around COVID-19 presents an opportunity for agency leaders to be proactive, and not just about expanding the use of collaboration tools or enhancing IT infrastructure and capacity. It’s an opportunity to engage in

real-time learning about how you're working today, and data-backed decision-making about how you want to work in the future. Leaders can take into account a host of considerations and priorities, from the mission criticality of work to employee preferences to physical space considerations and public health guidelines.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT WORK WORKS—AND WHAT DOESN'T—IS CRITICAL

Right now, agency leaders can establish mechanisms to capture and aggregate data on which tasks are being performed the same, better, or worse than before the transition to virtualization, across jobs, teams, and functions. This data needs to come from leaders and managers, and also from teams: What challenges are they facing? What's better and worse about working from home? Which tasks are truly mission-critical? How can the work be deconstructed to get granular about those truly mission-critical activities? Starting to gather data now will not only help agencies improve over the next few months, it will also help establish the building blocks for the right strategy in the months and years to come.

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Leaders can establish and employ metrics to track productivity and outcomes as much as it makes sense to, but they shouldn't discount the importance of employee perspective, preferences, and experience. Staying authentic means recognizing the limits of data. They can encourage

employees to capture their thoughts on the work-from-home experience via anonymous surveys, interviews, focus groups, or using unique tools, such as journaling.

When New York City employed state-of-the-art machine learning and data analytics to predict likely building code violations, the team also incorporated a more traditional tool: experience. They included inputs from building inspectors who had performed the task firsthand and knew the neighborhoods.¹⁶ Their combined effort improved the rate at which inspectors found violations from 13 percent to 70 percent.¹⁷

IF YOU BUILD THE STRATEGY, EMPLOYEES WILL COME (BACK TO THE WORKPLACE)

After the data has been gathered, leaders can do rapid scenario planning and build a post-COVID workplace strategy that accounts for the considerations and factors we've discussed in this article. This should start with defining the "workplace" as more than just the physical office location. Now more than ever, the workplace is the combination of where people work along with the culture, collaboration tools, and proximity choices needed to enable the most productive work and the best workforce experience.

In the post-COVID world, the strategy to return to the workplace may vary because of variations in workplaces themselves. If done right, government agencies will

likely have more data than ever to understand this ... from the external environment and ongoing public health considerations, to employee preferences, to the prioritization of work tasks and the space considerations that may result. Leaders should avoid bringing everyone back to work at the

same time without thinking through how to do it thoughtfully and strategically. Reintegration should factor in the work, the people, and the mission and goals altogether.

Preparing to thrive: Looking forward to the future of work

Agency leaders can use the forced situation of having to work at home in response to COVID-19 as an opportunity to get better for the future. By assessing, prioritizing, and developing strategies in real time to match work activities to the optimal workplaces, leaders can help improve and rethink the work of government agencies for years to come. This, in turn, will help elevate the human experience to the level that everyone is seeking ...

to not just survive, but thrive. Today, as agencies rapidly “virtualize,” they can also learn from the bumps in the road, so that when teams come back together in person, they know how to work together, better.

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ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE NOW

- **Be flexible:** Understand that goals, timelines, and skills may need to change to accommodate the challenges of remote collaboration, or to accommodate needs for physical access to data or systems.
- **Embrace authenticity:** Make time for virtual “hallway conversations” or “coffee chats” to build relationships and support each other. Consider innovative ways to connect team members and foster trust, such as two-way virtual mentoring pairs. Encourage one another to join video conferences “as is” and treat them like regular meetings, not as if you’re on TV.
- **Collect data to understand what works:** Establish mechanisms to capture and aggregate data on what work is being performed the same, better, or worse than it was before the transition to virtualization—across jobs, teams, and functions. This will not only help you continuously improve over the next few months, it will also help you establish the building blocks for the right strategy in the months and years to come.
- **Strategize for the future:** Do some rapid scenario planning and build a post-COVID workplace strategy that takes into account the new “workplace.” Now more than ever, the workplace is the combination of where you work along with the culture, collaboration tools, and proximity choices needed to enable the most productive work and the best workforce experience.

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