FEATURE

# Reimagining government's workforce experience

Building on the momentum of COVID-19 disruption

Bruce Chew, Jennifer Rome, Amrita Datar, Caitlin Goodrich, and Lisa Danzig

THE DELOITTE CENTER FOR GOVERNMENT INSIGHTS

In response to COVID-19, governments demonstrated a remarkable ability to transform how their employees work. Will these changes be temporary, or can they transform the entire workforce experience?

## Crisis and opportunity: Two sides of the same coin

On May 30, 2020, for the first time in history, NASA launched a human commercial space flight in partnership with SpaceX. While that is a feat in itself, what's truly remarkable is doing it smack in the middle of a global pandemic, with most of the agency teleworking.[1] "When I think about all of the challenges overcome—from design and testing, to paper reviews, to working from home during a pandemic and balancing family demands with this critical mission—I am simply amazed at what the NASA and SpaceX teams have accomplished together," said Kathy Lueders, NASA's Commercial Crew Program manager, after the historic launch.[2]

It is common for government and its workforce to be labeled inflexible. But in response to COVID-19, government at all levels demonstrated a remarkable ability to rapidly and radically transform the way work gets done by millions of its employees. Prior to the pandemic, just 22% of federal employees teleworked for even a single day in 2018, the most recent year for which data is available. Yet virtually overnight, over 75% began working remotely at various agencies and continue to do so effectively.[3] The question is whether this experience will be a temporary shift or a catalyst for change.
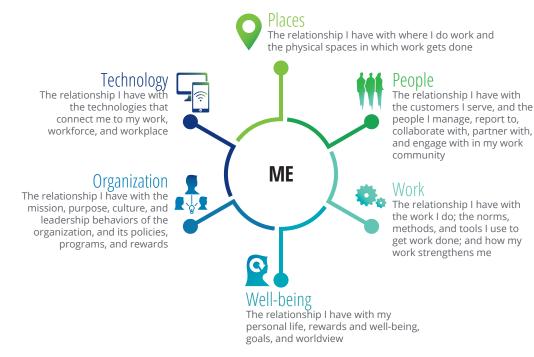
**In response to COVID-19, government at all levels demonstrated a remarkable ability to rapidly and radically transform the way work gets done by millions of its employees.**

Many agency leaders are looking beyond returning to the former status quo and evaluating the potential to transform work and the workforce experience and achieve their mission more effectively. The impetus for this change stems from a combination of factors:

- The close relationship between high-performing organizations and proactive management of workforce experience[4]

- Lessons from the current "new model of work" during COVID-19, including greater demand for enhanced agency resilience and agility

- Desire for greater flexibility as expressed by employees[5]

- Increased competition for talent as organizations shift to more flexible work and are more competitive in accommodating different talent needs

- Renewed calls for greater diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace—combating implicit bias and discrimination, flexibility for working parents and caregivers, etc.

In response to these forces, some government leaders are reimagining both traditional notions of the employee life cycle (from recruitment to separation) as well as enhancements to employee engagement. In July 2020, US Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) secretary

Robert Wilkie reflected on potential benefits of the pandemic's impact to work. He talked about continued telework for department workers, which could be further enabled by the expansion of online services, including new types of telehealth facilities potentially located in retail or grocery stores, and continued expansion of electronic health records and IT infrastructure. He also mentioned new legislation to allow higher pay for certain skills and shorter onboarding processes, saying, "That was something that we wanted and, in addition to us reforming the way we hire, I think it's going to make the VA much healthier." The department has added over 18,000 hires (more than half nurses) in just seven weeks.[6]

This type of holistic, multidimensional change is what is meant by transforming the workforce experience. It goes beyond the work and the workplace to encompass the relationships employees have with people (other employees, customers, and other stakeholders), technology, the organization, and their own well-being (figure 1). Further, "workforce" is intended to include not just full-time employees but also part-time employees, contractors, consultants, gig workers, and crowdsourced talent.[7]

Many of the orthodoxies we have come to accept as the norms of work are being challenged by current events (figure 2). Virtually every aspect of the workforce experience has the potential to be reshaped.[8]

FIGURE 1

## The relationships that define workforce experience

Workforce experience is impacted by six core relational attributes.



**Places**
The relationship I have with where I do work and the physical spaces in which work gets done

**People**
The relationship I have with the customers I serve, and the people I manage, report to, collaborate with, partner with, and engage with in my work community

**Technology**
The relationship I have with the technologies that connect me to my work, workforce, and workplace

**ME**

**Organization**
The relationship I have with the mission, purpose, culture, and leadership behaviors of the organization, and its policies, programs, and rewards

**Work**
The relationship I have with the work I do; the norms, methods, and tools I use to get work done; and how my work strengthens me

**Well-being**
The relationship I have with my personal life, rewards and well-being, goals, and worldview

Source: Deloitte analysis.

FIGURE 2

## Challenging orthodoxies

| | Orthodoxy | Challenging the orthodoxy |
|---|---|---|
| 01 | "Line-of-sight" supervision is essential | Telecommuting becomes the norm; "in office" work and meetings, the exception |
| 02 | Health and safety aren't key issues for most public work | Health and safety are central to a positive employee experience |
| 03 | Recruiting and hiring employees is a lengthy, in-person process | Virtual, AI-driven recruiting can find the right talent quickly |
| 04 | Intelligence employees must work in a secured facility | Back-office and even some intelligence work are performed remotely |
| 05 | People don't work as hard from home | People often report being more productive when working from home |
| 06 | We must recruit staff locally or pay to relocate them | Remote work can increase access to candidates across the country, providing an opportunity to expand recruiting efforts |
| 07 | Shared facilities reduce overhead costs | Remote or blended work can reduce costs associated with space |

Source: Adapted from William D. Eggers, Pankaj Kishnani, and Shruthi Krishnamoorthy, *Transforming government post–COVID-19: How flipping orthodoxies can reinvent government operating models*, Deloitte Insights, June 15, 2020.

The willingness of leaders, legislators, employees, unions, and citizens to consider and adapt to these challenges—whether relaxing and passing regulations, or fast-tracking hiring—is higher now as events and responses are in flux. As governments move from responding to the pandemic through to recovery and on to a new steady state, that willingness may fade.[9] There is a window of opportunity *now*. Organizations are capitalizing on this moment to dramatically change how they operate. Not doing so could mean being less competitive to attract and retain the highest talent.
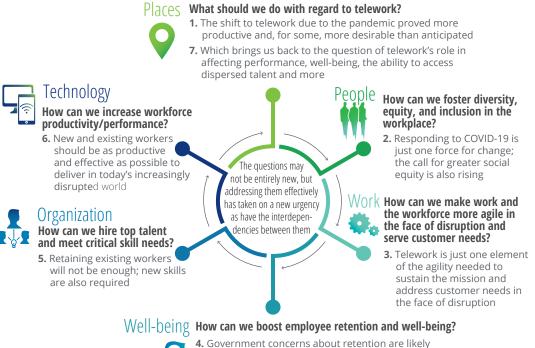
## The many facets of workforce experience

The burning issue for many leaders today is, "How should we treat telework?" But telework is only *one* of many important workforce experience issues that should be addressed. The examples shown in figure 3 and discussed below are not exhaustive, but they illustrate the range of issues that are as much about mission success as employee engagement. In each case, agencies may find they have more options and opportunities for action than traditional orthodoxies might suggest.

FIGURE 3

## Exploring the range of issues to be addressed

While the future role of telework may be at the forefront, a variety of questions regarding various dimensions—work, people, organization, technology, well-being, and workplaces—need to be addressed.

**Places**

**What should we do with regard to telework?**

**1.** The shift to telework due to the pandemic proved more productive and, for some, more desirable than anticipated

**7.** Which brings us back to the question of telework's role in affecting performance, well-being, the ability to access dispersed talent and more

**Technology**

**How can we increase workforce productivity/performance?**

**6.** New and existing workers should be as productive and effective as possible to deliver in today's increasingly disrupted world

**People**

**How can we foster diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace?**

**2.** Responding to COVID-19 is just one force for change; the call for greater social equity is also rising

The questions may not be entirely new, but addressing them effectively has taken on a new urgency as have the interdependencies between them

**Organization**

**How can we hire top talent and meet critical skill needs?**

**5.** Retaining existing workers will not be enough; new skills are also required

**Work**

**How can we make work and the workforce more agile in the face of disruption and serve customer needs?**

**3.** Telework is just one element of the agility needed to sustain the mission and address customer needs in the face of disruption

**Well-being**

**How can we boost employee retention and well-being?**

**4.** Government concerns about retention are likely to be exacerbated by recent forces and are bringing greater focus on well-being, which must incorporate inclusion

Source: Deloitte analysis.

### PLACES: WHAT SHOULD WE DO WITH REGARD TO TELEWORK?

Survey data from employees across the federal government found that nearly 80% did not feel safe returning to work,[10] and 70% of federal employees who telework said they were more productive while teleworking during the pandemic.[11] On the flipside, there are concerns around virtual meeting fatigue, data security, and the loss of line-of-sight supervision and spontaneous interactions. Leaders in government are wrestling with key questions around telework and its role in the future.[12]

Over time, the answer for organizations shouldn't be a binary return to the workplace or telework. Instead, there exists the opportunity for 'adaptable workplaces' that support the notion that people and teams should work *where they are most productive*, depending on the task. In such a hybrid setup, systems and processes designed for a purely in-office model—whether it's performance management processes, technology, or employee well-being initiatives—might not be as effective.

Some government agencies are taking bold action, committing now to expanding telework in the future. For example, VA decided not to renew some of its

office space leases because people will permanently work remotely.[13] The US Department of Defense has recognized the benefits of telework, having expanded its remote work capabilities to almost 1 million personnel through its Commercial Virtual Remote collaboration environment.[14] According to Chief of Navy Personnel Vice Adm. John Nowell, "Telework certainly removes distractions. Teleworking has helped us be very efficient and very productive, and I think it's true for the entire Navy that … how we manage and lead our workforce will be different than pre-COVID."[15] The Defense Information Systems Agency and the Air Force are exploring classified telework pilots,[16] and the National Security Agency is taking the rare step of identifying less-sensitive work that can be done remotely to support telework in the future.[17] These examples highlight the relationship between the employee and the **places** work occurs.

## PEOPLE: HOW CAN WE FOSTER DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION IN THE WORKPLACE?

Racial inequity is far from new, but the global pandemic and several recent instances of violence toward Black people in the United States have illuminated racial disparities and reignited a national dialogue for meaningful racial justice reforms.[18] Acknowledging and addressing any potential areas of racial bias or discrimination in the workplace is a critical piece of this.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion practices are associated with a trusting climate that, in turn, fosters employee engagement.[19] Focusing on these principles can improve teaming, coaching, and the relationship employees have with those they work with on a day-to-day basis. Some agencies are actively working to create a more inclusive work environment and foster a sense of belonging, whether it's through conducting training on implicit bias, taking steps to improve the diversity of hiring, or convening discussions around these issues.

Mirembe Nantongo, deputy assistant secretary at the US Department of State's Bureau of Global Talent Management, uses a metaphor to describe diversity and inclusion: "Diversity is an invitation to a party, but there is a second part of it: Once you have your people in your party room, for example, what kind of a time are they having? Are they participating? Do they feel valued? Are they contributing? These are all kinds of questions that arise after you have them in the room." The department launched a Meritorious Service Increase pilot program that anonymizes merit-based pay increase nominations to make those decisions gender-neutral.[20] Similarly, Defense Secretary Mark Esper banned the use of photographs when discussing promotion cases for officers and service members. The Department of Defense is also reviewing its hairstyle and grooming policies for potential racial bias.[21]

## Diversity, equity, and inclusion practices are associated with a trusting climate that, in turn, fosters employee engagement.

In a similar vein, NASA's Unity Campaign, launched last September, has gained momentum during the pandemic and anti-racism protests. As a part of the initiative, NASA has sought employee feedback and convened conversations to inform a new diversity and inclusion plan. In July, the agency added inclusion as a fifth element to its NASA values of teamwork, safety, excellence, and integrity. "We're taking a look at our staffing and our hiring practices to ensure that there are no built-in barriers or adverse impacts," says Steve Shih, NASA's associate administrator for diversity and equal employment.[22] These examples highlight the relationship between the employee and the **people** they work with.

## WORK: HOW CAN WE MAKE WORK AND THE WORKFORCE MORE AGILE IN THE FACE OF DISRUPTION AND SERVE CUSTOMER NEEDS?

With traditional management and leadership culture turned upside-down with the absence of in-person supervision, levers such as motivation, trust, communication, and leading by example are more important than ever. At the same time, keeping up with rapidly rising caseloads and customer requests—increasingly in a remote work setup—has been overwhelming for the workforce, pushing workers to quickly adapt to new situations and rapidly learn.

Training and reskilling employees can help agencies to meet unmet needs. For example, reskilled employees trained in robotic process automation at the General Services Administration have built 40 bots across the agency's business functions to support data reporting, migration and entry, and other rule-based manual tasks, increasing capacity by more than 90,000 hours.[23] This example emphasizes the connection between employees, their **work**, and how they are equipped to do it.

## WELL-BEING: HOW CAN WE BOOST EMPLOYEE RETENTION AND WELL-BEING?

While attracting and hiring employees can be challenging, retaining them is equally so—and critical. Creating employee support systems, training and upskilling opportunities, and investing in employee growth through rotation programs can improve job satisfaction, thereby improving retention. For example, the US Army is using a talent marketplace that places officers in positions based on their skills and interests, and the needs of various commands. This was designed to give soldiers a greater degree of control and

autonomy in the decision-making process and their career paths.[24]

Well-being also encompasses employee health and wellness. Consider the example of the county of San Mateo, which has a robust employee health and wellness program. The program provides grants to departments to improve wellness among their staff. Wellness champions throughout the organization meet monthly to review policies and drive wellness efforts throughout the agency. These wellness programs have resulted in a significant improvement in the health and well-being of employees as evidenced by a drop in absenteeism and improving health indicators, such as cholesterol scores, blood pressure, and total weight. A back-health program resulted in a 250% return on investment.[25]

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Since the pandemic exposed the fragility of our work lives—growing exhaustion and stress due to the struggle to balance personal and professional demands—many employers and employees are assigning greater value to well-being, both physical and mental. Government agencies have also been taking steps to help employees cope—whether it's the Social Security Administration (SSA) offering flexible work hours to care for children and family, or the US Agency for International Development's 14-week employee support campaign featuring a series of communications that includes tips and tricks to incorporate well-being into the work day.[26] The US Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) has also found creative ways—virtual themed chats,

book clubs, recipe-sharing calls—to help employees build connections, fight isolation, and bond even while working remotely.[27] These examples highlight the focus on employees' **well-being**.

### ORGANIZATION: HOW CAN I HIRE TOP TALENT AND MEET CRITICAL SKILL SET NEEDS?

While government might not be able to compete with the private sector on pay or compensation while hiring, there are other attributes it can tap into to differentiate itself—offering job seekers a sense of purpose or mission focus, varied work experiences, work/life balance, and flexibility. Making mission and culture a selling point during recruiting can go a long way. For example, when the US Department of Homeland Security was recruiting cyber professionals, it saw greater success at job fairs when focus was on the purpose and impact of the role, agency culture, and candidate fit rather than the technical aspects of cyber. Since the pandemic started, the department has shifted to webinars and virtual hiring events to highlight its departmentwide mission and job opportunities.[28]

At the same time, government agencies are trying to bring greater flexibility into traditionally rigid hiring processes—a trend that the pandemic has significantly accelerated. This includes using special hiring authorities to streamline the process and reduce time to hire and turning to remote hiring and onboarding methods. The National Nuclear Security Administration hosted an all-virtual job fair, looking to hire 600 professionals.[29] The Veterans Health Administration has been hiring and onboarding within 12 days, down from about 94 days before the pandemic.[30] These actions address the relationship between the employee and the **organization**.

### TECHNOLOGY: HOW CAN I INCREASE WORKFORCE PRODUCTIVITY AND PERFORMANCE?

US workers were 47% more productive in March and April of 2020 than in the same two months a year earlier.[31] In government too, several agencies, including the US Government Accountability Office, SSA, and USPTO, have observed improved productivity since the pandemic started.[32] But productivity is more than just accomplishing well-defined tasks; it's also about collaboration and innovation and being able to focus on the work that adds most value. It is important to design future approaches to create time for these activities—and this is where the use of digital collaboration tools and technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and analytics can play a role.

For example, Louisiana's Office of Technology Services introduced robotic process automation to help workers overcome backlogs. These bots have freed up over 630 human hours and cut down completion time by as much as 70% for some tasks. The integration of technology into long-standing human-driven processes is improving the delivery of services to citizens.[33] This example highlights actions taken that focus on the relationship between the employee and the **technology** that supports them.

## The solution: Holistically rethinking your workforce experience

The examples above involve a cross-functional group of stakeholders and solutions: facilities management in telework decisions; departmental managers in surging capacity across departments; senior leaders in rethinking organizational values; finance in funding wellness grants; the IT department in creating and deploying AI and bots; and recruiters and—in the case of VA—new legislation to rethink hiring. How can you cut

through this complexity to make informed choices and take timely action?

The answer is two-pronged: Look at workforce issues holistically through the lens of the workforce experience and put employees at the center.

### BRINGING A HOLISTIC LINE OF SIGHT ACROSS DISCIPLINES

Looking at workforce issues as part of the umbrella of workforce experience can bring together different decision-makers across the organization. Let's revisit the San Mateo County example. While the solution highlighted employee health and **well-being** most prominently, the county also took action along other dimensions to design a holistic workforce experience. Its focus on culture and experimenting with evidence-based performance management strengthened the **organization** relationship, while its use of remote work emphasized the **places** relationship. This holistic approach has resulted in high employee engagement scores with year-over-year improvement.[34]

The six relationships outlined in figure 3 provide a common frame to bring together a wide set of organizational stakeholders. If a mission leader or HR wants to look at telework in today's context, it involves department heads (work), facilities managers (places), and IT (technology). Over the longer term, telework choices have important implications for talent, organization, and well-being, while also introducing additional issues and stakeholders.

There is no single workforce experience owner in most government organizations; a shared perspective, language, and toolset is likely to enable a smoother path to integrated solutions.

There are multiple choices for how to achieve integrated line of sight across the six dimensions —from setting up a human-centered design team that engages across functions; to the creation of workforce experience governance structures, teams, and processes; to the creation of a workforce experience office. Irrespective of the setup, the second piece of the solution is to make sure that stakeholders from all areas that impact workforce experience (HR, IT, finance, facilities, inclusion, strategy, etc.) are engaged in a design approach that operates from the *worker's* perspective, not their own.

## Over the longer term, telework choices have important implications for talent, organization, and well-being, while also introducing additional issues and stakeholders.

### PUTTING EMPLOYEES AT THE CENTER AND USING HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN

Identifying the moments that matter most to your workforce, by focusing specifically on critical workforce segments and their wants, needs and concerns, is critical given the turmoil that organizations and their workforces have experienced since the pandemic.

Collecting accurate, experience-based insights from employees is table stakes because we are now living in unexplored territory. For example, while it is true that many workers want to expand telework, there are also new challenges that the workforce is facing as a result. With the switch to remote work, we've learned the workday is nearly an hour longer, with workers staying online longer and email traffic going up.[35] Furthermore, we know there's a unique kind of psychological fatigue associated with being on camera for significant portions of the day.[36] The positive workforce

experience dividends emerging from the flexibility of working remotely are being counterbalanced by a longer workday, more emails, video-call fatigue, and competing home priorities such as homeschooling, child care, and more. Using human-centered design tools and dialogue with the workforce can uncover these insights and propose solutions that address these tensions.

## Looking ahead: Elevating workforce experience should be an organizational, not just an HR, priority

Experience is at the heart of the human condition: how we learn, how we live, and what connects us. The unprecedented disruption and moments that we are going through now are defining our collective experience; how organizations and leaders respond to them will shape the workforce experience for years to come.

A positive workforce experience is a goal in and of itself. It is important because it creates the conditions for mission success. Organizations with leaders who have cultivated intentional, dynamic, and inclusive workforce experiences see nearly 20% greater productivity[37] and are more likely to improve efficiency, innovate, and manage change.[38] These organizations serve their customers and constituents more effectively.[39] Now more than ever, workforce experience should be an organizational priority—and government leaders can use this moment of disruption to intentionally rethink the workforce experience.

A well-managed crisis can often serve as a catalyst that breaks through past orthodoxies and helps an organization evolve to meet the needs of the future. Whether that opportunity is captured will depend on the choices and actions taken in the near term. Do we go *back* to normal—or do we go *forth* to better?

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