

Whither Telework, Post Pandemic?



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& Richard Greene

After the coronavirus abates, will public employees continue to labor at home? It seems likely.

There has been a great deal of discussion about the so-called “new normal” that will take hold once science has thoroughly beaten the pandemic to a pulp. One of the biggest questions: Will city, county, and state employees continue to do a fair amount—if not all—of their work from home instead of the office? The answer has the potential to change the very nature of public-sector work.

Some background:

In 2019, according to the Center for State and Local Government Excellence, only about 19 percent of US localities had any kind of work-from-a-distance program in place. Certainly, there are some jobs that could not qualify for this arrangement. One obvious example is the fire fighter corps. No one can put out a fire across town with a hose plugged into a backyard faucet, right behind the rose bushes.

For years, we have been reading and writing articles about telework as a technique to help state and local governments work more effectively and efficiently. As long as ten years ago, the federal government threw its weight behind the concept when it passed the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010. According to the US Department of Personnel Management, the act was described as a key factor in the federal government’s ability to achieve greater flexibility in managing its workforce through the use of telework. While the act did result

in some success stories, barriers cropped up, too, according to the Government Accountability Office, including insufficient training, managerial resistance, and absence of documentation.

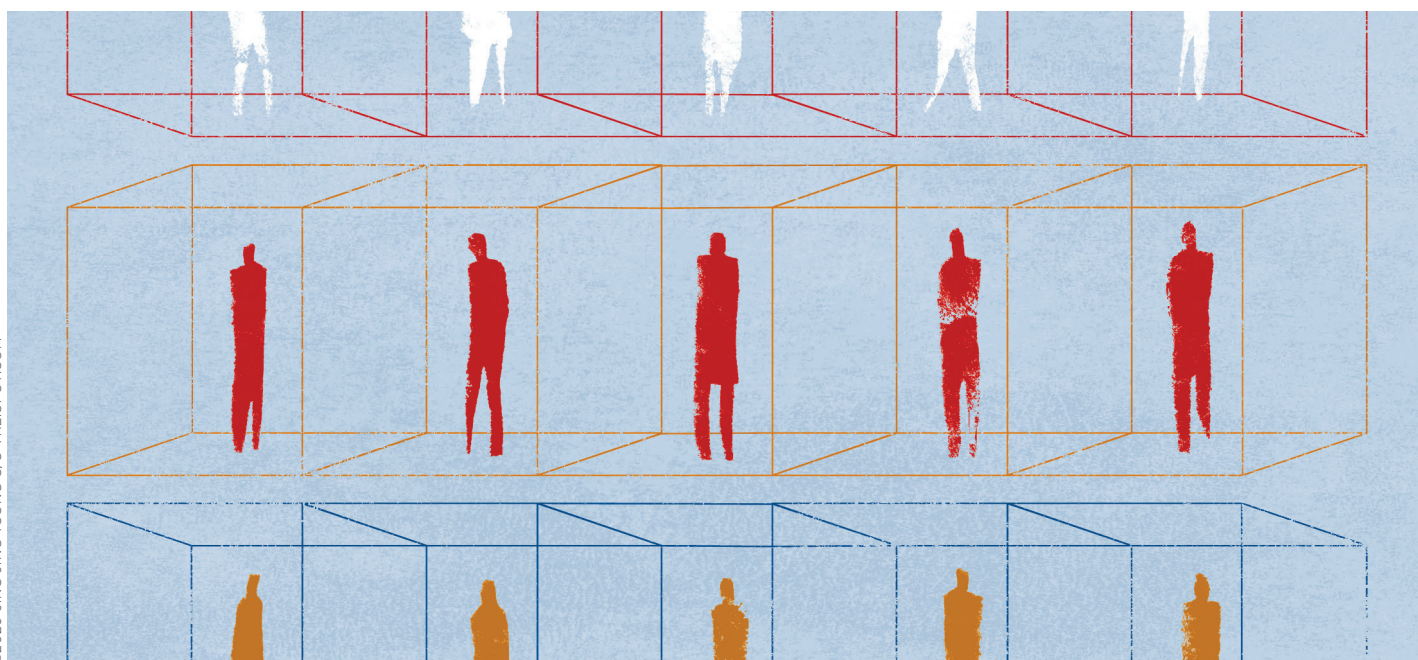
At the local level, telework has gained even less traction. For example, the City of Sacramento, California, has had some policies in place for telework since 1995, but until recently, it didn’t have any “long-term commitment to widespread or even significant usage,” said Maria MacGuniga, Sacramento’s chief information officer.

Oh, how the world has changed.

With the arrival of COVID-19 and the necessity for social distancing, government functions simply can’t come to a halt. The only practical solution has been to require that many employers provide an atmosphere conducive to budget analysts plunking away at laptops located in their basements or HR officials overseeing entities’ personnel policies from their kitchen tables.

It’s not as though this has been an easy transition for everyone. One of the biggest obstacles, as you would expect, is that telework requires sophisticated technology. Many government workers don’t have enough bandwidth to send a document from party to party without an extensive commitment in time. Beyond that, while most Americans have some kind of computer in their home, they are lacking an easy flow of communication with their supervisors or their teams.

As we wrote in the April 16, 2020, issue of *Route Fifty*, one major challenge of new technology is ensuring security. “Attacks have



already proliferated in the days of COVID-19, which has created new opportunities for the bad guys,” Meredith Ward, director of policy and research for the National Association of State Chief Information Officers, told us at the time.

Angelina Panattieri, legislative manager for Information Technology and Communications for the National League of Cities, adds a couple of additional technological challenges: “We have to change the current status, which is one on which different technologies work on different platforms, and so can’t easily communicate.” She adds equity issues are also likely to arrive, not only as a function of using the latest technology, but because of a digital divide in basic training when public-sector workers are thrust into a brave new world of new equipment.

Fortunately, it seems clear to us that long-term solutions to the lack of technology access and capacity to use it can be solved. It wasn’t so long ago that we could kill an hour ourselves

figuring out how to scan documents and send them through the Internet. Now it’s a two-minute effort to deposit checks in a bank across town, by simply scanning and sending them.

Based on this history, we’re going back to our predicate question: After the sun comes out in the public health sky and the pandemic becomes a learning lesson for future such tragic events, to what extent will telework become the status quo?

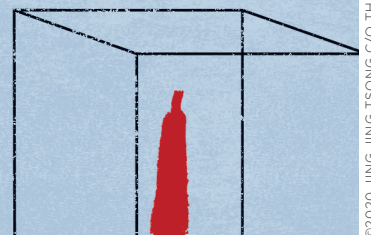
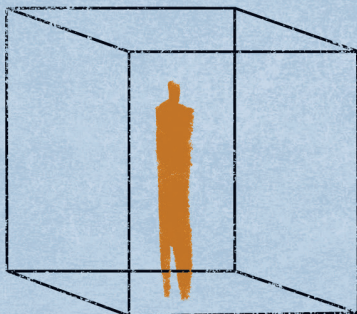
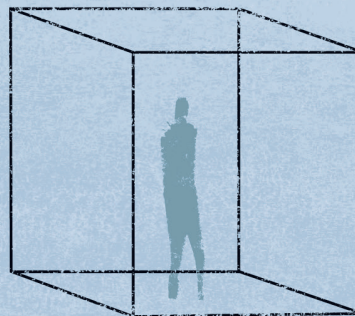
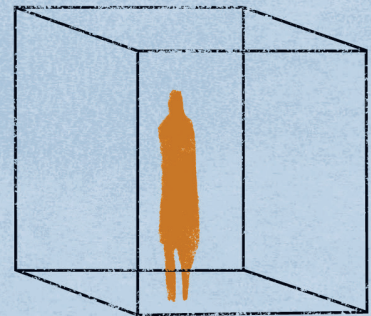
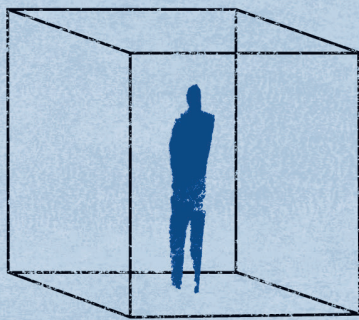
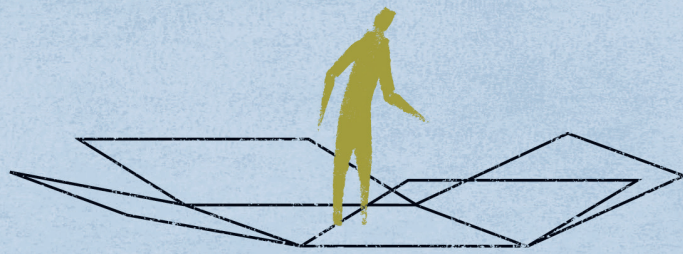
Of course, some employees may not be happy with a long-term shift; these are the men and women who thrive on working in a highly social atmosphere and get more done at the apocryphal water cooler than they do in conference rooms.

That said, a consensus of representatives from states and localities are optimistic that the advantages of telework are going to foster a major shift in the functioning of the public-sector workforce of tomorrow. “I think the pros will outweigh the cons, in terms of future use of telework, as long as

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– Daniel H. Pink, Best-Selling Author of *When* and *Drive*



organizations show supervisors that there's accountability to make sure people do the work they want them to do," said Neil Reichenberg, the recently retired executive director of the International Public Management Association for Human Resources.

Here is an overview of just a few of the advantages to telework that are likely to move things in this direction.

- **Commuting.** "It's going to be a kick in the pants for a lot of organizations, and we're one of them," said Ed van Eenoo, deputy chief financial officer of Austin. "We've found a solution to our traffic congestion problem... You get a lot more hours out of people who are used to being occupied from six to six, including lunchtime. With telecommuting, work is being done at a higher level because people don't have the commuting time."
- **The environment.** The promised positive impact of work-from-home on air pollution is particularly noticeable right now, as most of the urban areas in the United States were in shut-down mode at the height of the pandemic. "Air quality improvements have been documented in London, as well as in metropolitan regions of several major US cities, including Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Detroit," a group of San Jose State University students reported as part of the Master of Health Program. As the cities open up, this positive side effect will inevitably decline—but the lure of clean air is a powerful incentive to continue telecommuting programs, even after vaccines are developed and the pandemic ceases.
- **Real estate costs.** Particularly in urban areas, rental space is expensive, and the cost of putting up new buildings can be prohibitive. But when a larger-than-historical number of workers no longer need to use as much space, cash savings should

follow; and this will be a particularly attractive notion if the post-pandemic economy continues to provide fewer tax dollars. Consider social workers. "Do they really need a full-time office if they're spending 50 percent of their time on the road?" asks Terry Ocana, IT director of Chippewa County, Minnesota.

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- **Independence.** "Telework often provides people with increased autonomy," Daniel Pink, well-known author of six books about business and human behavior, told us. "That (gives) great sovereignty over what they do, how they do it, where they do it, and when they do it. And a pile of social science evidence, accumulated over several decades, shows that when people are self-directed, they do better work." In the most obvious of examples, some people may be most productive before 9 a.m., so if they work in an office with a standard schedule, they're losing their best hours.

Notwithstanding all the silver linings in the current cloud, it doesn't appear likely that the number of people availing themselves of telework will

stay the same, post-pandemic. For one thing, the advantages of face-to-face interaction are powerful. They help accentuate employee engagement, provide strong environments for brainstorming, and so on. As a result, it may well be that even as teleworking takes hold, a great many cities will still require that employees come into a (potentially smaller) office one or two days each week. So, unlike telework pandemic style, in which the offices are shut entirely, a new combination of the positives of old-fashioned offices and telework will emerge as the new paradigm.

As all the wrinkles are worked out, observers speculate that there will be a transition period in which many employees will go back to their offices, rectify many of the issues that have cropped up with turning to telework on a pandemic-laced dime—most notably, technological impediments like too-weak broadband—and then head back to a world in which the advantages of telework exert themselves into a brave new workplace. ■

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