

The HYBRID Model: A Flexible Work Future



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**CITIZENS'
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EFFICIENCY
COMMISSION**
LOS ANGELES COUNTY
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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 (COVID) pandemic has triggered a global panic, mass quarantines, and social distancing measures worldwide. As a precautionary measure, businesses and schools have implemented mandatory work-from-home policies for many or all employees in an effort to contain the outbreak. While remote working was already disrupting jobs and the skills employees needed to do them in the private sector before the crisis, the pandemic and the advancement in videoconferencing technology have forced many government organizations to rethink their business models at breakneck speed.

In Los Angeles County, only 11% of its workplace worked remotely pre-pandemic. The catastrophic context of the pandemic has accelerated this shift to more than 40% during the pandemic¹. Fueled by advances in online collaboration tools, employees were remote working in many jobs that once required in-person interactions. The pandemic has raised the bar by making digital services essential for public safety, health, and business continuity. But now that California is past the initial pivot to new technologies and new ways of operating, it's a good time for County leaders to reassess how they can better leverage these tools to augment day-to-day interactions with their constituents, improve the customer experience, and optimize work-life balance.

To determine how extensively remote work might persist after the pandemic, the Commission set out to develop a practical framework to help County leaders overcome the physical distance of the virtual environment and reap the benefits of a potential hybrid workplace. The Commission chose an embedded mixed approach over other methods for its flexibility that enabled the design to combine qualitative and quantitative techniques to study the remote work phenomenon². A grounded theory qualitative design was deployed to collect data through face-to-face, semi-structured interview questions from 50 front-line employees, followed by a quantitative survey with 16 County executives. Eight central themes emerged from the data, and the Commission proposed six recommendations to address the deficiency of remote work. The first letter of each recommendation was used to form the acronym HYBRID: (a) H = help employees connect emotionally, (b) Y = yield to safety and legal practices, (c) B = bridge

¹ Los Angeles County of Department of Human Resources, 2020.

² Creswell & Creswell (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications

the learning gap, (d) R = re-engineer communication and collaboration processes, (e) I = invest in technology, and (f) D = develop hybrid leaders.

The study concluded that the proposed set of management practices is viable for improving County service delivery, hedging against future disruptive catastrophes, and contributing to the evolving body of knowledge of remote work grounded in empirical research methods.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 15 months, the COVID pandemic has shifted the delivery of government services from physical to primarily digital. Until February 2020, the prevalent government processes were centered on the in-person model, and remote work was still considered an exception, not the rule. However, the pandemic disrupted the traditional face-to-face government service model and has pushed State and local governments into serving constituents in ways that were inconceivable just a short time ago.

The continued precipitous spread of COVID in March 2020 prompted the State to issue a Safer at Home Order, which ordered all Californians to stay in their place of residency except for critical services sectors. The County of Los Angeles (County) responded to the State Order and rapidly adjusted to working from home for most of their employees as offices closed. While the pandemic has shut its door to most County offices, it also accelerated an upsurge in remote working³ for County departments, paving the way for teleworking as a means to combat the economic downturn and restraints caused by the infection. For example, County courts accelerated video arraignments⁴ to cut down on inmate transfers and reduce crowds in confined spaces. To determine how extensively remote work might persist after the pandemic, the Department of Human Resources (DHR) has completed a granular workforce analysis of thousands of jobs and determined that 48% of the County's work can be done remotely without a loss in productivity. To further help employees transition from a physical work location to a home office, DHR launched various mental health and confidential counseling programs free of charge to all County employees. As the spread of COVID eased, DHR also introduced the "hoteling" concept, a shift to flexible workspaces to optimize space utilization and bring fewer workers into offices each day and reduce the high costs associated with physical facilities. Aided by technological advancement, digital citizen services that were once considered a convenience are now essential.

The County exhibited extraordinary leadership and adaptability in responding to the pandemic with purpose and innovation. Remote work is now a proven concept for many County departments, including many jobs that once seemed impossible to shift to telework. On June 15, 2021, the State's Safer at Home Order was officially terminated with a few restrictions, paving

³ Remote work, telework, work from home, and smart work will be used interchangeably

⁴ http://eec.lacounty.gov/Portals/EEC/Reports/202_0619VideoArrestReport.pdf

the way for the full reopening of all private and public sectors of the economy. Based on the pandemic experience, the real question is whether the County will evolve the workforce in ways that point to a brighter future of work and allow employees to continue to work at least some of the time remotely or will the bureaucracy revert back to life pre-pandemic and culture of pro office? Given the history of telecommuting in the County, the prognosis is promising with some adjustments.

The History of Teleworking

Teleworking, also called remote work, is an alternative mode of work that enables anyone to work anywhere using virtual media. Through modern software, meetings are held via videoconferencing software, and coworkers can communicate and collaborate via online platforms, mimicking the performance of office activities at any distance. Although the pandemic has forced the abrupt shift to work from home for countless organizations, the evolution of changing remote work was already gaining momentum before the COVID crisis.

The concept of telework has been around since the early 1970s when it was first pitched to merge telecommunication with transportation to gain organizational efficiency. The idea continued to grow as the next workplace revolution into the 1990s⁵. Although teleworking has been discussed for decades, unfortunately, the early decades of telecommuting were best characterized in terms of technology and policy, and the leadership needs of the virtual worker were largely ignored. Organizations only sought to ensure virtual workers had the hardware and software to do their work and that paperwork was created to document the procedures of working from home⁶. It wasn't until the federal government took note and offered its first official endorsement of telecommuting in 1993 to reduce traffic congestion, air pollution, and energy consumption that teleworking began to gain attention in the public sector⁷. Several experiments and studies had since found that when employees opted into telework policies, their productivity increased between 13% to 22%⁸. While working from home, employees would

⁵ https://www.researchgate.net/profile/John-Niles-3/publication/264555490_Telecommunications%27_Big_Idea_New_Telecom_Quarterly_4Q_98_httpwwwtficompubsntqarticlesview98Q4_A3pdf/links/53e6e2ce0cf21cc29fd9b256/Telecommunications-Big-Idea-New-Telecom-Quarterly-4Q-98-http-wwwtficom-pubs-ntq-articles-view-98Q4-A3pdf.pdf

⁶ <https://qualaxia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/baruch-status-on-teleworking-ijmr-2001.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.telework.gov/guidance-legislation/telework-legislation/background-history/>

⁸ <https://stayinthegame.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/HBR-To-Raise-Productivity-Let-More-Employees-Work-from-Home.pdf>

enjoy a better work-life balance, experience improved health with fewer sick days, attain greater job satisfaction, and even achieve higher productivity. In 2010, the US Telework Enhancement act became law, and it required the head of each executive agency to establish and implement a policy under which employees could be authorized to telework. The US General Services Administration (GSA serves as the lead agency for the government's initiative) in its latest annual report to congress, said that federal teleworking continues to increase, with participation growing to 46% from 39% of eligible employees from 2013 to 2015. GSA also consistently found that teleworking can have a positive impact on the worker. In research comparing teleworkers with non-teleworkers, GSA found that teleworkers report more job satisfaction and higher engagement levels⁹.

On the private sector side, companies, facing increasing pressure from younger workers, were routinely offering teleworking as a perk to compete for top talent, staying competitive in their industry, and even saving on business expenses. Bolstered by technological developments such as advanced cloud services, Zoom, and Slack, the millennial generation, who values flexible work over money, was demanding remote work as part of employment benefits¹⁰.

In contrast, remote work remained a niche perk in the government sector, embraced by some organizations, shunned by others. In Los Angeles County, only 11% of its workforce worked remotely pre-pandemic¹¹. It is not clear why more companies are not participating in teleworking, given its multifaceted benefits. Harvard researchers believed that it simply boils down to management resistance and lack of trust. Rather than using telework as an opportunity to foster trust between employees and management, for some managers, the increased monitoring of daily activities actually hinders productivity and creates an environment of distrust¹².

In March 2020, the pandemic thrust numerous organizations into remote management, requiring a different skill set than the traditional in-person leadership style. Both management and employees had to make the remote work transition quickly, and for the most part, without training. While many managers and employees have adapted well, others struggled. Despite the considerable progress and success of the pandemic experiment and the increasing popularity of

⁹ <https://www.gsa.gov/governmentwide-initiatives/telework>

¹⁰ https://ww2.frost.com/blog/digital-transformation/page/2/?et_blog

¹¹ Los Angeles County Department of Human Resources, 2020

¹² <https://hbr.org/2020/07/remote-managers-are-having-trust-issues>

telework, barriers remain. While the projections for an increase in the virtual workforce worldwide vary widely, virtually all accounts anticipate continued growth trends. The expansion of remote work as an option for County employees implies even more significant outcomes in productivity, cost savings, operational efficiency, and emergency preparedness.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The conventional workplace experience is changing as remote work has become a new way of life for millions of employees. The move to an increasingly virtual workplace has emphasized the need for businesses to adopt contemporary approaches that prioritize customer and employee experience. On June 15, 2021, the State’s Safer at Home Order formally ended with a few limitations, setting the stage for the full reopening of County offices and in-person services. Based on the pandemic experience, the County has learned that many employees don’t need to be co-located physically with colleagues on-site to do their jobs. Individuals and teams can perform productively while being entirely distributed. While remote work has notable benefits in higher productivity and better work-life balance, it also has demonstrated drawbacks, such as social isolation, loneliness, and extended workdays for some. The question now is, how can the County build on the progress made and adopt best practices from the private sector to modernize its workforce and improve customer and employee experiences? Is the future of Work from Anywhere (WFA) here to stay?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this embedded mixed-methods research study was to build on the progress made during the pandemic and develop best change management practices to help the County modernize its workforce and consider the possibilities for increased use of hybrid arrangements as they prepared to reopen their physical offices. Although DHR has collaborated with departments to support employees during the pandemic and provided guidance for various work-from-home scenarios after the pandemic, the Commission is not aware of any studies that have provided the level of knowledge and insights that County leaders can adopt to deliver telework solutions to their departments for a future workplace that is increasingly virtual.

First, County employees were interviewed to obtain their insights about advantages and obstacles as they transitioned into a remote work model. Subsequently, a survey of County

executives was implemented to gain their perspectives on the challenges and successes of telework. Data collected from the interviews and surveys were analyzed to construct a best practices framework from the participants' responses. To accomplish the study's purpose, the following research questions were developed to guide the research.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What challenges do County employees and managers face in a remote work environment?
2. What do County employees and managers like best about working remotely?
3. What do County employees and managers like least about working remotely?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The private sector has been engaged in telecommuting for decades, and the pandemic has accelerated this trend while the public sector has lagged behind. Gartner, a global research and advisory firm, in a return-to-work survey¹³ conducted in July 2020 revealed that 82% of business leaders would integrate telework some of the time as employees return to the office. The overwhelming 82% represented a jump of 32% compared to an earlier survey also conducted by Gartner¹⁴. LinkedIn, the world's largest professional networking platform with over 750 million members, reported that job postings that offer remote work have skyrocketed by 457% compared to the prior year¹⁵. Locally, the Los Angeles County Business Federation (Biz Fed), an organization representing more than 180 businesses and 400,000 employers totaling approximately 3.5 million employees, reported that 72% of business leaders plan to continue remote work after the pandemic.

Amidst this growing pattern, the public sector, particularly at the local level, has not had nearly the degree of participation as their private-sector counterpart. However, coupled with advances in video technology, the pandemic has raised the potential for rethinking the traditional paradigm of local government service delivery, especially during emergencies. The Commission

¹³ <https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2020-07-14-gartner-survey-reveals-82-percent-of-company-leaders-plan-to-allow-employees-to-work-remotely-some-of-the-time>

¹⁴ <https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2020-07-14-gartner-survey-reveals-82-percent-of-company-leaders-plan-to-allow-employees-to-work-remotely-some-of-the-time>

¹⁵ LinkedIn news, May 27, 2021.

believes that the private sector model that “high employee experience translates to better customer experience” is transferable to public agencies with some restrictions.

The findings and recommendations of this study could contribute significantly to the County, especially from a practitioner’s perspective. County leaders could use the results to train and develop their current or future work model competencies as they reimagine the workplace in ways that protect workers and enhance productivity. The outcomes of this study could also contribute to the existing body of literature on public sector teleworking.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations are conditions, effects, or influences that place restrictions on a study’s methodology over which the researcher has no control. This study focused specifically on Los Angeles County, representing diverse functions in an expansive geographic area. This research was limited by the population of County employees who participated in the interview process as delineated below:

1. *Bias and judgment.* Bias and judgment such as stereotyping, first impressions, or cultural impressions are intrinsic in any subjective thought process and may have led to a skewed judgment of the participant¹⁶.
2. *Functional diversity.* Since this study was not confined to specific departments, different functions with discrete challenges and mandates could have constrained the findings.
3. *Ordinances.* The various laws could hypothetically affect a leader’s decision-making process due to the different local rules and regulations in which they operate.
4. *Participant selection.* Participants were limited to County employees. In some instances, managers and line employees will have different perceptions and opinions.
5. *Stress level of participants.* The participants’ responses may have been affected by the distress of replying to questions related to their own organization.

¹⁶ Kruger & Dunning, (1999). Unskilled and unaware of it: How difficulties in recognizing one’s own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77(6), 1121-1134. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.77.6.1121>

6. *Demographic considerations.* This study did not emphasize any specific demographic characteristics. Participants with any composition of demographic traits were accepted to be part of the research study.
7. *Interviews.* One-on-one interviews were only conducted by phone.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

Assumptions are expectations that the researcher takes for granted in connection with the study¹⁷. The researcher made the following assumptions relative to the study:

1. Participants were willing to provide the data for analysis.
2. Participants had the expertise and skills to provide adequate and insightful knowledge for the analysis.
3. Participants were candid in their responses to the questions posed to them.

METHODOLOGY

This research aims to generate a model of best practices that County leaders can adapt as employees return to work after a devastating pandemic. An embedded mixed-method was chosen as the research design since many renowned academic researchers consider this methodology most appropriate when the objective is to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic to validate or expand qualitative findings with additional quantitative data¹⁸. Initially, a qualitative approach was used to collect and analyze data from a primary group. However, the need for a second set of data set emerged after the data was analyzed, prompting the Commission to conduct a second quantitative survey with a secondary group. The two data sets were merged during the interpretative process to compare and contrast results from multiple perspectives for a complete understanding.

The Primary Research Group

A grounded theory method was chosen to collect and analyze data from the primary group since this method enables the Commission to generate themes using knowledge and

¹⁷ Creswell & Creswell, (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications

¹⁸ Creswell & Poth, (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications

insights from participants with lived experience in remote work without relying on the guidance of pre-existing theories¹⁹. Fifty front-line County employees were interviewed based on a set of open-ended questions designed to allow the Commission to delve deeper into more narrow topics as necessary. After data collection was concluded²⁰, the field notes were systematically coded into groups representing the participants' experiences into a Microsoft Word table. Then, based on similar phrases or words, the initial codes that shared central characteristics were grouped under a specific heading reflecting each emergent theme, representing the perceptions of each participant's personal account, grounded on the translation of their collective encounters. However, the resulting themes generated from this primary group represent only a singular point of view, and the need for a management perspective was necessary since an organization's culture is significantly linked to leadership practices.

The Secondary Research Group

The Commission solicited the services of DHR to conduct a secondary quantitative survey for a more balanced comprehension from multiple levels in the County hierarchy. Sixteen County executives participated in the survey using the same questions from the primary group but in a quantitative format.

The two data sets were then merged during the interpretative process to compare results from multiple perspectives for a more complete interpretation. The findings are presented in numerical order beginning with research question 1.

FINDINGS

The objective of this study was to develop a framework of best change management practices to help the County modernize its workforce and improve customer and employee experiences. Using an embedded mixed-method methodology to collect, analyze, and synthesize qualitative data from County employees to create a framework, this section begins with a short review of the data collection procedure, followed by a restatement of the research questions, and concludes with a presentation of the findings.

¹⁹ Creswell & Poth (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications

²⁰ It is noteworthy to point out that the data was reliable enough to give credence to the ensuring themes since saturation occurred after the 7th interview.

The findings of this study were gathered utilizing an embedded mixed-methods design based on qualitative coding procedures and thematic analysis as the primary method for line employees and a secondary quantitative survey of management employees. The qualitative interview process of front-line employees produced a total of eight themes in the study. All the themes that directly addressed the first two research questions are explained in detail in the following sections. Since the interview questions and methods were semi-structured, some of the questions may have received one or more responses depending on the respondents' expertise in a particular subject matter, hence, capturing the full experience of participants' insights. When a respondent provided several answers, the data analysis used in open coding captured the multiples responses for each question and then coded them appropriately. To balance the perspectives of the study from a management viewpoint, a secondary method using a quantitative survey was conducted, and the resulting data was used to either support or contrast the themes from the line employee interviews.

To help the reader follow along, the following three research questions were used to guide the researcher toward fulfilling the study's purpose:

1. What challenges do County employees and managers face in a remote work environment?
2. What do County employees and managers like best about working remotely?
3. What do County employees and managers like least about working remotely?

Research question 1. The first research question for this study was: What challenges of remote work are you experiencing compared to when you worked in the office? The responses to this research question are reflected in the following three core themes that emerged, as shown in Figure 1a. The first theme was *isolation and connectivity*, which had 45 counts. The second theme was *unreliable digital infrastructure*, which had 40 counts. The third theme was *longer days*, which had 30 counts.

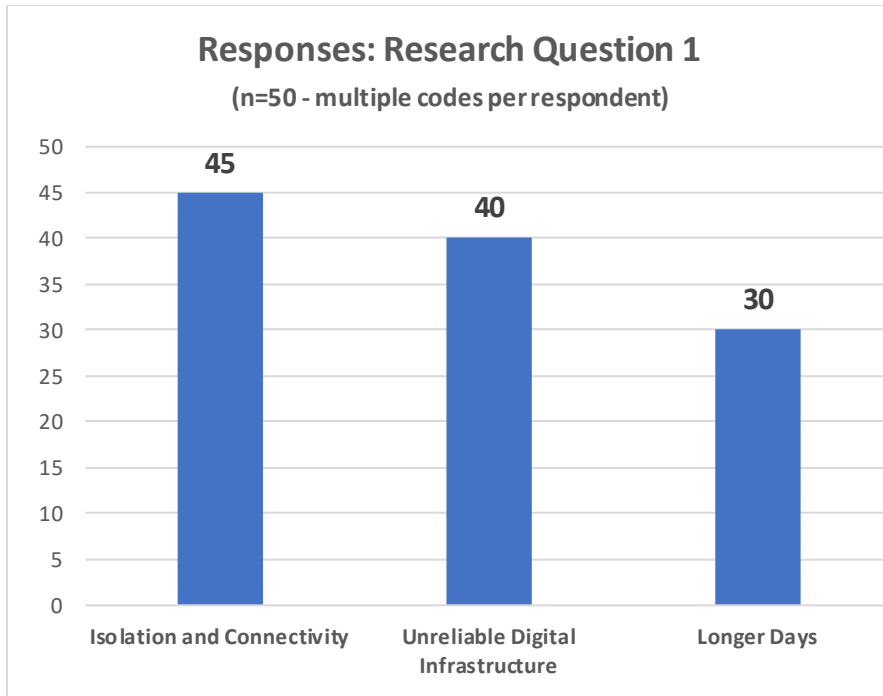


Figure 1a. This figure represents line employees’ responses to the first research question: What challenges of remote work are you experiencing compared to when you worked in the office?

From a management perspective, overwhelmingly, 75% (12/16 respondents) of the participants agreed with the theme of *isolation and connectivity* while 50% (8/16 respondents) agreed with the assessment of *longer days*. The responses to this research question are reflected in Figure 1b.

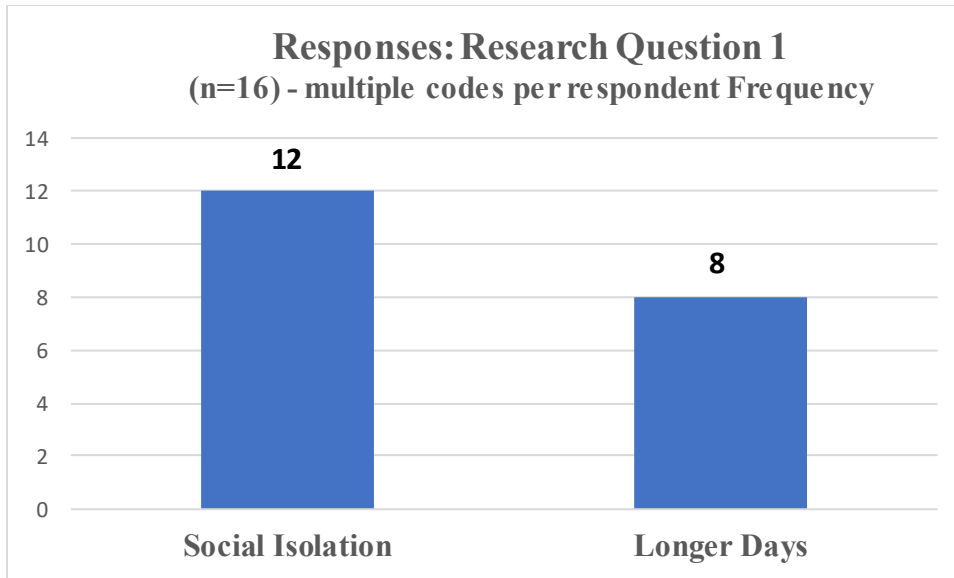


Figure 1b. This figure represents management’s responses to the first research question: What challenges of remote work are you experiencing compared to when you worked in the office?

First theme: Isolation and connectivity. Humans have an intrinsic need to connect, and it is not surprising that a staggering 90% of the participants responded that while they remained productive from the shift to remote work, they also had to deal with loneliness and isolation. Presented subsequently are representative observations from selected participants on the isolation and connectivity theme. Participant 4 stated, “I really miss the simple day-to-day bantering with coworkers in person.” Similarly, participant 6 said, “Loneliness is starting to creep up once working from home starts losing its novelty. I miss the ad hoc conversations, even the water cooler gossips.”

In a survey of 16 County executives, 75% (12/16 respondents) of the participants agreed with the assessment of the line employees that isolation is the biggest challenge in remote work.

Second theme: Unreliable digital infrastructure. Before the pandemic, the County had only 11% of its workforce working remotely, which was not surprising since the foundation for service delivery was face-to-face. The pandemic accelerated the deployment of digitization and, in a matter of weeks, forced County employees to interact and collaborate using videoconferencing technology during the transition to remote work. In the beginning, County

departments were scrambling to develop the digital infrastructure, outfit employees with County-owned laptops, equip staff with communicating platforms, and create work-from-home policies to support the work-from-home mandate. Technologically advanced employees fared well during the transition while the less savvy technical users struggled to work remotely. The unreliable digital infrastructure theme had the second-highest count at 40. Presented subsequently are insights from selected participants. Participant 2 said, “When the internet is down, you go down as well.” In the same spirit, participant 5 stated, “The mandate to remote work was so sudden that I was completely unprepared since I didn’t have the proper tools to secure access to the services and information needed to support my work. I ended up using my kitchen as a home office for the first three months.”

Third theme: Longer days. The prolific technology that enabled employees to do their jobs from almost anywhere also makes it that much harder to step away. The workday working from home during the pandemic doesn't just feel longer, for some County employees, it was longer. The longer day theme has the third-highest count at 30. The following comments exemplified the experiences of selected participants. Participant 3 said, “I need to force myself to disconnect at the end of the day fully.” Participant 11 agreed with participant 3’s assertion, stating, “I am exhausted by the end of the day. Work-life balance is great until they are blended with no boundaries.”

According to County executives, 50% (8/16 respondents) agreed with this assessment, stating that difficulty disconnecting from work at the end of the work shift is a concern for remote work.

Research question 2. The second research question for this study was: What do you like best about working remotely? The responses to this research question are reflected in the following two core themes that emerged, as shown in Figure 2a.

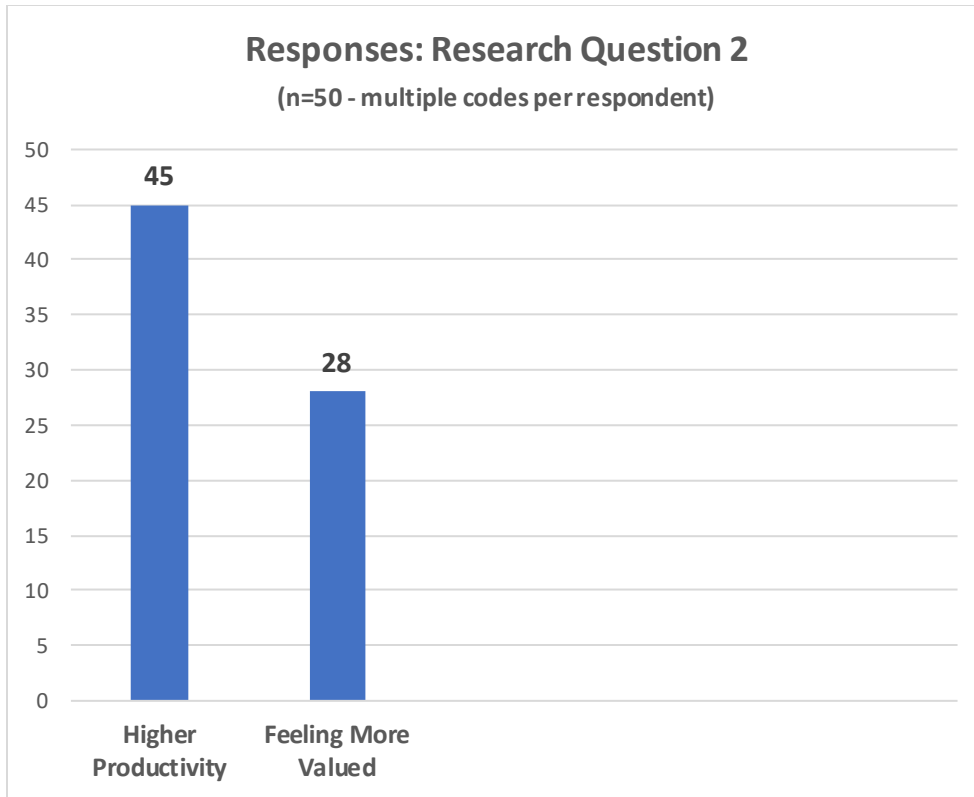


Figure 2a. This figure represents line employees’ responses to the second research question: What do you like best about working remotely?

The first theme was *higher productivity*, which had 45 counts. The second theme was *feeling more valued*, which had 28 counts.

First theme: Higher productivity. A recent 2020 survey²¹ by Mercer, an HR and workplace benefits consulting firm, showed that remote work productivity was either the same or higher than working from home. The higher productivity theme has a high count at 45, and three participants captured the essence of the majority of the responses.

Participant 7 stated, “I am much more productive since I literally saved three hours of commute time a day.” Participant 15 also concurred, “I am more in control of my own schedule. Participants 32 also highlighted the need for leaders to trust their employees, “The perception that if employees are not seen in the office, then they are not working has been proven wrong by the involuntary pandemic experiment.”

²¹ <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/pages/study-productivity-shift-remote-work-covid-coronavirus.aspx>

From a management perspective, only 38% (6/16 respondents) agreed with this assertion, and 31% (5/16 respondents) disagreed with the employee testimonies and felt remote work led to decreased productivity. However, a vast 81% (13/16 respondents) said they embraced the time saved from commuting to work.

Second theme: Feeling more valued. In the study's context, ineffective management of people directly correlates to many workers feeling untrusted and micromanaged by their bosses. The feeling more value theme has a count of 28, and three participants shared their insights that were indicative of the attitudes of this theme.

Participant 6 stated, “I am now more valued for my output, not how long I stayed in the office.” Participant 50 extended this view, “I never had my manager checked up on my mental health before. The quality of communication between me and my boss has definitely improved.” Participant 33 agreed, stating, “I feel like my manager is making the extra efforts to keep an open-door policy and responding quickly to my needs and requests.” Participant 44 shared a similar reaction, “My manager is more available than ever and makes the time to listen to new ideas and work challenges.”

Research question 3. The third research question for this study was: What do you like least about working remotely? The participants’ experiences and opinions to this research question are reflected in the following three core themes that emerged, as shown in Figure 3.

The first theme was *a lack of community*, which had 40 responses. The second theme was *inadequate collaboration and communication*, which had 30 counts. The third theme was *increased micromanagement*, which had 25 counts. A summary of the three themes and the responses are presented in figure 3a.

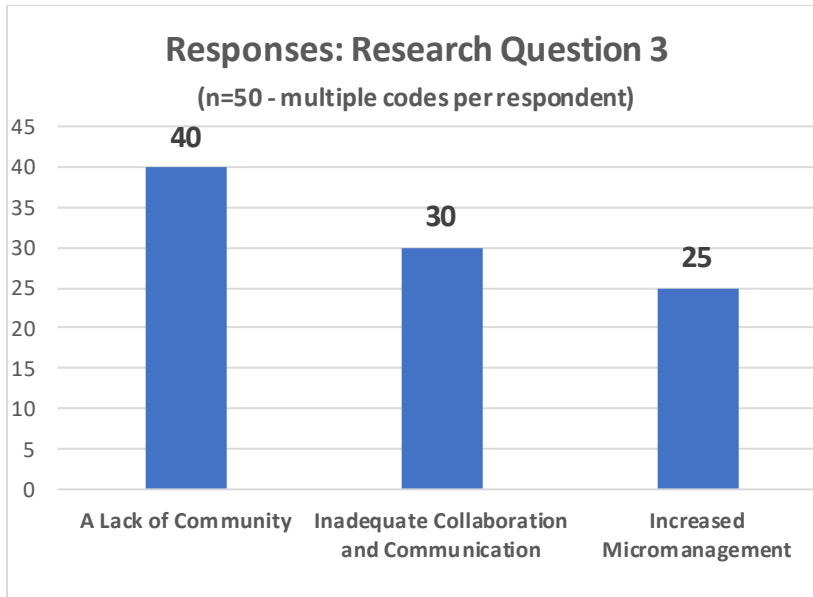


Figure 3a. This figure represents line employees’ responses to the third research question: What do you like least about working remotely?

From a management perspective, 87.5% (14/16) of County executives agreed with the theme of *inadequate collaboration and communication*, believing that remote working did not improved communication with colleagues. The responses to this research question are reflected in Figure 3b.

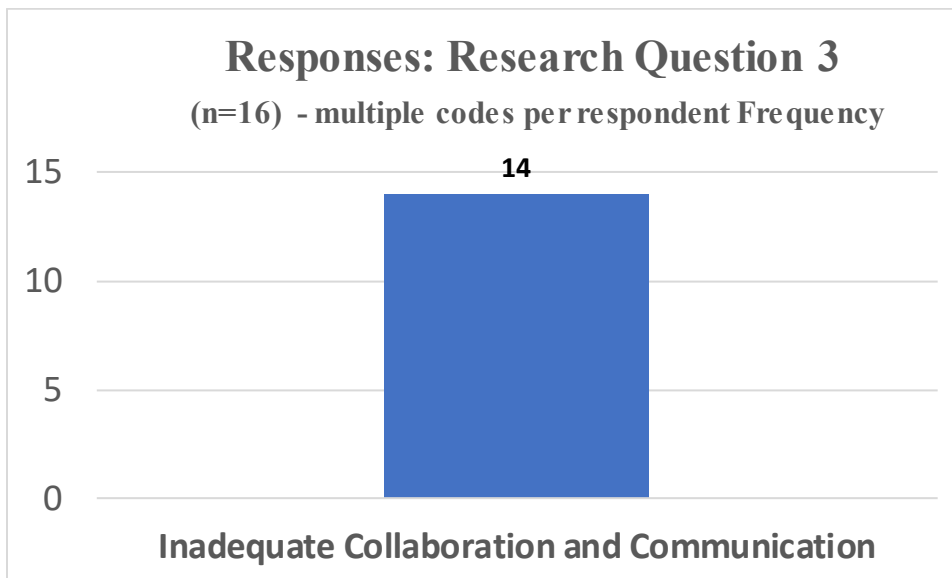


Figure 3b. This figure represents management’s responses to the third research question: What do you like least about working remotely?

First theme: A lack of community. Despite the productivity gains and cost savings associated with remote work, 80% of participants expressed that they struggled with loneliness and belonging. Similar to Research Question one, theme one, in which 90% of the participants responded that while they remained productive from the shift to remote work, they also had to deal with loneliness and isolation. The lack of a community theme has a high count at 40, and three participants share their sentiments of this theme.

Participant 8 stated, “Without the routine social interaction of office life, I feel a lack of connection with what is happening in the organization.” Participant 15 concurred, “The flexibility of remote work comes with a price. More than ever, I feel disconnected from colleagues.” Participant 32 shared this sentiment, “With fewer interactions at the office, it is very difficult to build a community across the modern remote workforce. We need spontaneous interactions we used to have at the office.”

Second theme: Inadequate collaboration and communication. To enable better collaboration and communication virtually, employees stated that they need the right technology and collaboration tools, videoconferencing platforms, and the ability to share documents and other work products effortlessly. The inadequate collaboration and communication theme has a count of 30, and two participants shared their insights that were representative of the attitudes of this theme.

Participant 2 stated, “There are necessary prerequisites to facilitate remote working, like having the right tools in place for collaboration and communication. I never was trained in using Zoom or Teams. It was like, here you go, make it work.” Participant 39 supported this view, stating, “The successful adoption of technological tools is necessary for effective remote work. I don’t have a printer or scanner at home. I was also told not to use Google Docs on my County-issued laptop. How am I supposed to collaborate with my team?”

In a survey of 16 County executives, only 12.5% (2/16) of the respondents disagreed with this assessment, believing that remote work improved communication with colleagues.

Third theme: Increased micromanagement. An alarming 50% of the study’s participants shared stories of managers insisting on multiple detailed status updates throughout

the day, holding pointless lengthy daily meetings, and requiring employees to keep their webcams on during the entire workday. The increased micromanagement theme has a count of 25, and three participants shared their views reflective of this theme.

Participant 6 stated, “I have my supervisor checking up on me every hour, making sure I am doing my work. My manager makes assumptions on how I am spending my day.”

Participant 31 concurred, stating, “My manager doesn’t understand the challenges of working remotely, the isolation. They push unproductive activities just to fill up time.” Participant 50 extended this view, “My performance evaluation should be based on factors such as accountability for my results or quality of work, not how long I am on webcam. Micromanagers will always be micromanagers. It is even more stressful now that I am working from home.”

The Commission analyzed the participants’ insights to research questions one through three and developed a framework of management practices to address the critical challenges in supporting a hybrid option that bridges the gap from the traditional on-site workforce with remote option capabilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The success of teleworking has opened the possibility for many County departments to expand the short-term remote work to a mix of on-site and remote work in an effort to optimize organizational effectiveness and employee experience in the foreseeable future. The last 15 months gave the County a glimpse into remote work challenges that employees faced during the pandemic. Departments that want to consider a hybrid workplace model of both remote and non-remote employees must adapt to a mirroring set of norms for when their employees are working remotely to meet the unique needs of their operations. Although efforts will look different for every organization, the all-remote experiment has taught many County managers and their employees that remote concerns can be addressed with sensitivity and time.

To address the challenges of remote work and help the County prepare for an increasingly hybrid workplace trend, the Commission conducted a study of remote work challenges, surveying both management executives and employees, and found that the following trends facing remote employees emerged: isolation and loneliness, unreliable digital infrastructure, longer days, inadequate collaboration and communication, and increased

micromanagement. The County must overcome these challenges and develop an operating model to shorten the distance across the people, process, structure, and technology dimensions. Through the course of its findings, the Commission has developed the following framework of management practices to help meet the needs of a possible hybrid future and bridge the social and operational obstacles of remote work.

Recommendation #1: Help employees connect emotionally.

The human side of the distance equation is worthy of assessment even before organizations dive into the virtual work archetype. With its break areas, coffee spaces, and meeting rooms, the workplace has provided opportunities for formal and informal human interaction, and it is hard to imagine a work paradigm completely without it. However, the pandemic has tested this theory and, in the process, brought mental well-being to the forefront as employers are more aware than ever of how mental health impacts employees and the workplace.

The majority of study participants agreed that the psychological need for meaningful social inclusion and interaction presented the most challenge to telework. All human beings need to feel as though they are connected to colleagues and the workplace itself, and this unfulfilled psychological need remained a top concern for employees in a completely virtual workforce. Even with sophisticated videoconferencing technology that allows for reading body language and facial expressions, the concern is that virtual colleagues are more likely to feel isolated socially and professionally because their face-to-face interactions are less frequent. Without in-person check-ins, managers may also miss signs of growing burnout or team dysfunction.

Since the pandemic will have a lasting effect on the future of work and the workplace, County leaders must now re-evaluate the impact of these changes and understand the new obstacles that their organizations face. Particularly in organizations where some employees are co-located, and some are not, managers must work to shrink social distance and encourage connection by adopting a range of policies to address the mental well-being concerns and create opportunities for informal socialization and mixer events in-person and in virtual social zones.

Recommendation #2: Yield to safety and legal practices.

Undoubtedly, the pandemic has created unusual health and safety challenges. While new challenges demand innovation, unequivocally, safety comes first. Although most departments

have been successful operating remotely in the past year, at the same time, the County must be sensitive to the real concerns of employees who are still worried that they are not safe in the office. When employees start returning to the workplace, it will be to a very different environment from the one they left before the pandemic. For some employees, the fear of virus transmission will continue to linger on their minds.

The County must provide clear and specific guidelines on mandatory safety and security standards to protect employees, contractors, and visitors as buildings resume unrestricted staffing of work sites. Some private sector companies are exploring the use of intelligent platforms to ensure a safe, automated, pre-registration entry process complete with health and vaccine questionnaires to protect employees and visitors. As the County considers a shift to a flexible remote workforce, it must analyze safety and risk-mitigating parameters to create a safe and healthy workplace for employees and customers before resuming business.

It is important to state explicitly that not every work situation is designed for remote work, and not everyone is automatically eligible for remote work. Remote work may not be sustainable for everyone, and the extent of remoteness will differ by role and department. There are two areas in the legal realm of the virtual workspace—internal policy and external regulations. If not already in place, County policies must be defined for a formal telework program and, at the minimum, include the following areas: How employees can apply to work off-site, who are permitted to work from home, how eligibility is determined, how to deal with and to resolve disputes, rules on the use of software technology, hardware and equipment, security, internet access, phone service, and furniture, worker compensation guidelines, wage and hour compliance, reimbursement obligations, and how virtual work can be terminated.

Recommendation # 3: Bridge the learning gap.

Technology and digital learning have enhanced learning opportunities for anyone with a laptop and reliable internet connection. However, access to cutting-edge digital technologies will only go so far if employees lack the skills to take advantage of them. Although undeniably one of paramount importance, training opportunities should go beyond just the basics of cybersecurity education. Digital transformation presents many opportunities to grow and develop professionally. The move toward digitization has increased demand for skills relating to cloud computing, collaboration software, and data analytics. The County should provide

employees opportunities to build new skills in these areas. Fostering a cultural shift to embrace a digital mindset goes well beyond a single project or task. It is the overall combination of training, development, and exciting and fun assignments for the remote employee. Employers cannot afford to keep digital transformation as an afterthought. The sooner organizations act, the better position they will be in staying relevant now and thriving in the future.

Recommendation 4: Re-engineer communication and collaboration processes.

The widespread use of digital communication technologies and employees' increasing reliance on those tools, especially during the pandemic, isolates individuals. This widening social gap between workers creates a barrier to effective collaboration and communication, and if left unchecked, remote distance grows. As the distance between employees, managers, and other stakeholders expands, trust erodes dramatically, as does a leaders' impact, employee engagement, and overall organizational success. Managing telework has, thus, grown into a critical leadership responsibility.

When workers are distributed, synchronous communication becomes more difficult. County leaders can deescalate and reverse the decline by taking active measures. Before rolling out technology and services, first, they should devise a hybrid work plan that defines the customer experience to determine their digital preferences and capabilities. Secondly, they must equip employees with the proper hardware, applications, and connectivity, along with the skills and support needed for optimal collaborating and communications. One way to accomplish a more collaborative culture is through a collaborative software tool such as Slack or a customized intradepartmental portal in which distributed team members can write their questions and comments and trust that other team members will respond at the first opportunity. One benefit to this approach is that employees are more likely to share ideas, plans, and documents and welcome early feedback. In such a scenario, the pressure to present polished work is less than it would be in more formal, synchronous team meetings. Finally, County leaders must recognize, evaluate, and prioritize the complications remote distance creates for their employees. By taking these steps now, organizations can begin to realize the full potential of digital citizen services across County departments while building a robust foundation for innovation and change.

Recommendation 5: Invest in technology.

Ultimately, making the leap into the hybrid workforce serves to improve productivity through an enhanced integrated system response across County departments. The transition to leading-edge technologies typically begins by leveraging a cloud-based infrastructure that consolidates information from disparate systems and enables users and systems to access data as needed. This highly scalable approach supports integrating new services and applications across County departments to help ensure business continuity and resilience. Once departments can easily access the wealth of data residing within their enterprise, they can then incorporate artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), and data analytics to use information throughout the customer journey to help customers make well-informed decisions and receive services as conveniently as possible. Because AI and ML tools are typically cloud-based, County leaders can economically layer the systems on top of existing network resources without the need for new hardware.

The ability to leverage big data solutions is the future for helping clients become customer-centric. The big data evolution is creating opportunities for organizations to change direction and chart new opportunities. The County can develop new data competencies using analytical insights to support customer priorities, from data management to data mining. Organizations who understand technology and predictive analytical tools can capitalize on the amassed data to create value for their customers and serve them in new and different ways.

Recommendation #6: Develop hybrid leaders

The future of successful virtual organizations rests on a reorientation of leadership style that anchors itself on individualized consideration and humanizes virtual employees beyond technology. To reap the benefits of increased productivity in a hybrid organization requires significant reliance on leadership to ensure employees remain engaged. A shift to a hybrid workplace requires a new form of leadership and involves a thorough change management plan for all parts of the organization. The change management plan must include an evaluation of safety and security/risk mitigation parameters, a review of communication processes and procedures, and a thorough analysis of employees and their stages of professional development. Change management should occur in stages using lessons learned and best practices from each phase to improve the implementation of subsequent phases.

The paradox of working remotely is that it requires a lot of trust to make it work. Leaders rely on employees to make things happen, and employees rely on leaders for support to overcome the cloak of invisibility and effectively serve customers. To succeed in the future of work, hybrid leaders will need to trust their remote employees and support the social side of their remote employees. They will need a greater understanding of the cultural nuances of a dispersed team, and they must continue to invest in technology and train their employees. At the end of the day, a successful organization depends on the effectiveness of its hybrid leaders to make employees feel trusted, valued, and engaged.

The HYBRID model

Fifty front-line line employees and sixteen County executives participated in this study over a 4-month duration. The findings produced eight themes and fulfilled the objective of developing a framework of best management practices that County leaders can use in managing a hybrid workforce. The HYBRID model was conceptualized in terms of continuous learning and adaptation to address the remote work challenges. The HYBRID model, representing an acronym of the first letters of the six recommendations: (a) H = help employees connect emotionally, (b) Y = yield to safety and legal practices, (c) B = bridge the learning gap, (d) R = re-engineer communication and collaboration processes, (e) I = invest in technology, and (f) D = develop hybrid leaders, was intended as a practical framework and resource for County leaders looking to improve their decision-making in a mixed in-person and virtual environment and contributes to the evolving epistemology of telework rooted in academia.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic served as a wake-up call for businesses to speed up modernization and fully accept that the era of digitization has begun. The spring of 2020 forced many companies to close their doors amidst the State's Stay-at-Home order in response to the start of the corona pandemic. Private and government sectors began allowing their staff to work remotely out of survival. While these changes were born out of necessity, months into the pandemic, it is clear that the massive remote working experiment has largely been a success, with many organizations announcing plans to extend this option permanently to their staff. Although the challenges of isolation and a lack of social connection of remote work still exist, they are solvable. The

advantages of higher productivity and reduction in carbon footprint, in the Commission's opinion, greatly outweigh the limitations. But making this change sustainable over the long term will require additional adjustment.

Although the government sector was slower to embrace teleworking than its private-sector counterpart, the County adapted quickly with eligible employees, navigated new ways to communicate with colleagues virtually, and mastering remote-working skills. In a moment, nearly any employee who might be able to work from home was doing it. Despite physical separation and navigating new work patterns, the pandemic experience has given the County the opportunity to keep and extend its progress in shifting to a hybrid in-person and digital delivery method and reaping the corresponding benefits in doing so. Remote work meant survival during the pandemic but now has become a potential strategy to manage a more productive workforce.

Moving forward, companies will recognize that the management practice that an employee has to physically be in an office to be successful is outdated, and the continued success of flexible remote work will further prove that employees can be trusted. The future of work is flexibility, plain and simple. The Commission is already seeing large companies seek out smaller satellite offices that are more convenient for employees and their commute. Not to be left behind, the County has embarked on "hoteling" to meet employee needs and experiment with remote work arrangements.

Certainly, remote work may not be possible at this time for some County departments, however, with the right strategy, organizational processes, technologies, and, most important, leadership, many more departments, teams, and functions can successfully transition to a hybrid model. More than 62% of County executives surveyed indicated that the shift to remote work during the pandemic changed their perception about employee's productivity outside of a traditional office setting. The most significant barrier to telecommuting remains a company's leadership culture in which some managers continue to believe employees have to be in the office to be productive. There's a tendency for these traditional managers to focus on employee activities rather than the quality of work they produce. Naturally, these transaction-rooted managers often lack the creativity and willingness to experiment with a hybrid work structure.

A hybrid model of work is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to evolve from some entrenched work habits to create a new and modern workplace, a model that strikes the right balance for our people. County leaders should think of a hybrid program as a continual work in progress and

remain committed to providing better mental health for employees to help them become more engaged with their jobs. Finally, use the hybrid work program as an opportunity, a starting point, to rethink, reimagine, and restructure the workplace for the better.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND ETHICAL STATEMENT

The Economy and Efficiency Commission gratefully acknowledges the substantial contributions of our participants. The interviewees were generous with their time and candor. Their openness and honesty have been instrumental in our efforts to craft recommendations that we hope will improve County government. The participants' feedback was collected based on the promise of anonymity, confidentiality, and protection of their identities.