

What does the future of work look like? Some say the future of work is already here, and the ability to 'work from anywhere' needs to be a permanent option. The abrupt shift to ability to work from anywhere has fundamentally altered many aspects of government operations for the better, while simultaneously highlighting areas that must further adapt to a virtual world. From procurement to scientific research, remote work has impacted nearly all aspects of daily operation for the majority of government agencies.

During a recent roundtable discussion hosted by the Advanced Technology Academic Research Center (ATARC), panelists from various federal government agencies discussed the new 'work from anywhere' reality. Agencies are working diligently to determine what the best practices of remote work look like, and how to continually adapt remote work into daily operations and department culture. While there are certainly challenges to remote work that agencies must overcome, roundtable participants agreed there are benefits to working from anywhere that should be maintained well into the future.

After over a year of operating in a hybrid work environment, federal agencies are now dedicating time to thoughtfully analyze the impact working remotely has on operational effectiveness, and what best practices could be incorporated into new policy. Roundtable discussion spanned from the challenges of managing a remote team, challenges and opportunities of recruiting talent in a remote environment, to the elements that should be considered while updating remote work policies. As discussion evolved, however, it became clear that remote work policies must reflect not only what is best for workplace operations, but should also support the individual needs and preferences of a diverse federal workforce.

Technology and Virtual Work

Roundtable participants shared several lessons learned while working remotely over the past year and half. Abilities were tested in the early days of the pandemic as agencies abruptly shifted to a remote work environment. Organizations that had been investing diligently in technology through past capital projects or with smaller upgrades fared better than other agencies that remained dependent on paper processes.

Overall, most federal agencies represented on the panel were successful in quickly deploying the necessary supplies to support remote work. The alternative would have been

consequential to critical public service delivery. Participants shared that when operating in a time of crises, Information Technology (IT) departments rose to the occasion and were able to take calculated risks to overcome massive logistical and operational hurdles. However, it was noted that the success of rapid technology deployment was made possible by the full support and collaboration of many departments and the absence of bureaucratic obstacles.



Panelists Agree



Remote work policies must reflect not only what is best for workplace operations, but should also support the individual needs and preferences of a diverse federal workforce.

Policies and guidelines must simultaneously:

- ❖ Achieve equity and inclusiveness
- ❖ Accommodate preferences and needs of individual employees
- ❖ Satisfy operational needs of the organization

As agencies reflect on the past year of remote work and the lessons learned, it is clear that cybersecurity will continue to inhabit every strategy and decision IT leaders make. Due to the vast array of technological needs that every agency, division, and department requires, IT departments must strategically manage and stay ahead of the ever-evolving technological landscape. As technology evolves, so do the tools needed to support a remote workforce. Panelists agree that ensuring the remote workforce is equipped with tools to do their work regardless of environment is a prime responsibility and challenge of IT leaders.

Remote Work Policies

All agencies represented on the panel are working towards crafting policies and guidelines that are not only equitable and inclusive in design, but also balance the delicate relationship between the preferences and needs of individual employees and the operational needs of the organization. Most agencies are currently taking a strategic pause to reflect on what aspects of remote work have been successful and where additional adaptation is required. Agencies are being deliberate and thoughtful on the future of work as new realities continually emerge and change.

Participants discussed aspects that should be considered in future policy including the make-up of the federal workforce as the Baby Boomer generation continues to retire, the importance of equity and inclusion of remote workers in workplace culture, decisions, and recruitment practices, and many aspects of how best to manage remote workers.

Recruitment and Remote Work

Agencies are beginning to see how remote work may improve the recruitment of specialized talent and could bring increased equity and inclusiveness into the workforce. Agencies also shared concerns about the increased competitiveness remote work brings, and how work incentives need adjustments to compete for talent.

There are many pathways to begin a career in the federal government. One such traditional pipeline is for college students in the Washington D.C. area to obtain internships and subsequent employment with the federal government, thus starting their federal career. With the advent of remote work and schooling, this traditional pipeline may change as fewer students are physically located in Washington D.C. The government should consider a new recruitment strategy to accommodate this change.

Of additional concern is the lack of alignment between the job requirements advertised by the government and the qualifications the new market of talent possesses. Job descriptions and qualifications are out of sync with those of applicants, thus unnecessarily narrowing the applicant pool. The government should update and adapt job qualifications to the realities of the new job market.

However, remote work has opened the door to several opportunities including an ability to hire specialized talent that reside out of state. Agencies are now questioning what it means to be 'regional', since workers can reside outside certain geographic areas. Moreover, remote work lends itself to increased equity and inclusion in the workforce. Now more than ever, underrepresented populations have greater opportunities for federal employment due to remote work options. While remote work brings opportunities for greater inclusivity and specialized talent, it also brings challenges to effectively manage teams that work from anywhere.

Managing in a Remote Work Environment

The majority of roundtable discussion centered around the challenges and opportunities of managing teams in a remote work environment. Underpinning each challenge is a need for human connection and strong communication among remote teams. Roundtable participants highlighted the use of

technology to bolster strong, real-time communication and to ensure remote workers feel connected to the agency's mission. Another common theme is how supervision has and will continue to change with remote and hybrid teams. Roundtable participants agreed that best practices for remote management are still evolving.

Conducting virtual training has been challenging for some federal agencies. Not only do employees need training on new technologies to feel confident working from home, but many agencies require ongoing, specialized trainings best conducted with the use of facilitated break-out sessions. Early in the pandemic, the offered technology classes filled up within minutes, which is an important indicator of the need for widespread technology education. Agencies are experimenting with class size and considering other adaptations to ensure virtual training can be successful.

Workplace culture and office dynamics are now fundamentally changed due to the de-centralization of teams. How colleagues interact, solve problems, and communicate now largely depend on technology. Much is lost in terms of the human connection among colleagues as well as relationships between supervisors and employees. Office politics are evolving and it is of some concern how to keep all team members, regardless of their location, informed and included in office discussions.

Participants agree that equity should be the center of every effort and policy. Not only do all employees need resources to do their jobs effectively, but supervisors must be aware of unintentional biases towards in-office versus remote workers. Leaders are watching closely how remote workers are promoted and recognized in the workplace in comparison to those who come into the office.

Remote work has become a critical and lifesaving aspect to many peoples' lives. Without a remote work option, the opportunity to work itself may be lost. In contrast, there are others who experienced working from home during the pandemic as extremely difficult and prefer to come into the office. Panelists underscored the need for supervisors to continually consider the individual needs and preferences of employees as best practices and policies continue to evolve.

How Zoom for Government Can Help

With solutions for meetings, chat, phone, webinar, and rooms that work on any device, Zoom helps you manage a remote workforce by ensuring seamless communication and collaboration between remote and in-office workers. Learn more [here](#).