Long-Term Impacts of COVID-19 on the Workforce

Summary of Roundtable, hosted by ATARC in June 2022

COVID-19 dramatically altered the concept of the workplace. Pre-pandemic, just 4% of all professional jobs[1] were permanently remote; that's now a quarter of all job listings, Ladders found. The number of remote jobs available tripled in just the last year alone.

With the dramatic rise in work from home (WFH) availability and historically low unemployment combined with an extremely tight labor market, finding and keeping employees is becoming ever more critical. The "Great Resignation" is real – and if an employee isn't happy, they'll vote with their feet.

Worse yet, organizations will pay more for their replacement thanks to inflation and five million more job openings than the number of unemployed. Recruiters are likely hiring new employees who already had a job somewhere else, which means the organization must make their job offer attractive, typically in the form of more pay or "perks."

The Federal Government is no different than the economy at large. Much like the private sector, agency leaders are grappling with how to best serve their workforce in the evolving workplace. How are Federal agencies utilizing emerging technologies to help close the gaps?

In a recent roundtable discussion hosted by the Advanced Technology Academic Research Center (ATARC), Government IT experts dove into what it means to transform a workforce. Participants discussed the **impact of COVID-19 on various aspects of workforce management and the working culture**.

COVID-19 Impact on 'Work From Home'

Participants agreed that while the lockdowns posed real challenges to the economy and the American workforce in the short term, it was vital to limit the spread and keep the economy afloat. But it also accelerated an already occurring paradigm shift in how people view – and perform – their jobs.

WFH was a boutique option even for high-paying jobs before the pandemic. The employee was still expected to show up and work in the office from time to time. And among those that did, it was used as a backup (inclement weather, etc.) or in a "hybrid" format.
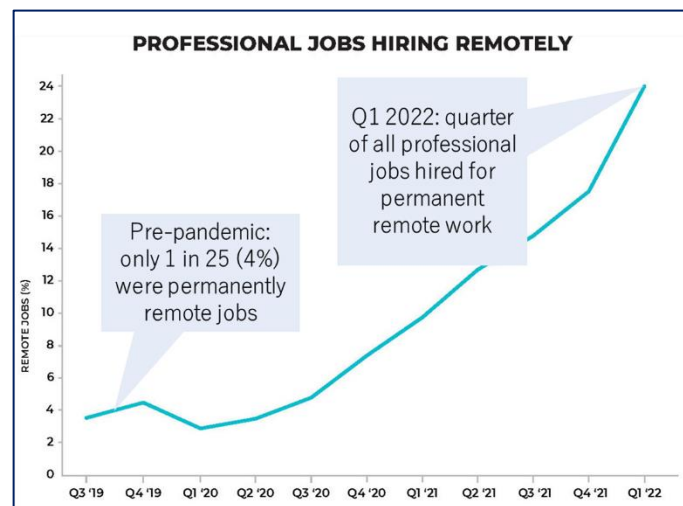
Source: Ladders, Inc. Q1 2022 Quarterly Remote Work Report

COVID-19 forced everyone to work from home regardless of whether their jobs could be done in this manner or not. While some government agencies and private sector businesses adapted quickly due to their preexisting structures (fieldwork, etc.), most were not ready.

Participants noted throughout the discussion several ways that their agencies struggled to adapt to the "new normal," from technology issues (or the lack of technology in place) to how best to measure performance and even struggling to define what a supervisor does in a distributed workforce.

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[1] Ladders' study defines "professional jobs" as those making over $100,000 annually

But a significant amount of time was spent by panelists on acquiring, training, and supervising new talent, an area that has seen the most upheaval because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 Impact on Training

While getting a job in the Federal Government may be a tedious process, those first few days are no different from most private sector jobs. In most cases, new hires sit through multiple training days – often for hours each day.

It's questionable if that is the best way to make that critical first impression, even in person. Panelists noted that they had to rethink their training processes to adapt to remote workers quickly.

Panelists shared their agencies' strategies to make remote training successful:

Success Strategies for Remote Training

❖ **Employ a hybrid strategy:** Panelists noted that research supports a mix of self-guided and in-person training as the best way to train new hires.

❖ **Break it up:** Instead of jamming all the training into a single full day or days, some panelists found making training an entire week with only a few hours a day worked well for remote workers. The new hire is also more likely to retain the information they've learned since they will have a chance afterward to apply it.

❖ **Have structure:** Clearly define the goals for each training session and provide coaching and training, participants recommended. Making a good first impression during onboarding increases the likelihood that the employee stays with the organization long-term.

❖ **Use gamification:** Millennials and Generation Z are entering the workforce. Gamifying the training process, where new hires earn badges, perks, or certifications as they progress, has been shown to work well in studies. Some panelists suggested catering training programs to this new reality.

COVID-19 Impact on Recruitment

The Great Resignation was an opportunity for people to find a better job and accelerate retirement plans, which some panelists noted was occurring in their agencies.

This can be scary, but it's also an opportunity to rethink recruitment processes. With an extremely tight labor market, it's become more difficult than ever to find (and retain employees). In addition to higher pay, COVID made remote work a benefit that many job seekers look for as employees see the benefits of WFH.

In the Federal Government, we don't have the same metrics that the private sector has to measure success, like profit margins or growth statistics. There are jobs in almost every agency that require in-person work, whether for security or other reasons. Therefore, most WFH jobs throughout the Government are likely to be partially rather than fully remote because a fully remote Government would be difficult to prove value to constituents or impossible to do entirely from home.

Participants agreed that giving workers a choice to WFH is vital to staying competitive with the private sector for top talent. Most younger workers don't know (or maybe don't care) how to find government jobs these days, which makes a recruiter's job that much more difficult.

Therefore, panelists recommended agencies become more flexible in how they hire. One participant said they had turned to AI to help find the right employee and

experimented with advertising jobs on social media (LinkedIn, Facebook, etc.) with some success. Others suggested hiring based on skill needs versus filling a particular "role."

COVID-19 Impact on Supervision

Participants also discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic triggered changes in how employees are managed and supervised. Participants spoke about how WFH exposed issues in how performance was measured. In person, it's easy to "look busy" all day. But WFH showed that performance is a much better metric to gauge employee success.

Other participants urged agencies to rethink what a supervisor is. The workplace culture in many Federal agencies is for the supervisor to manage (if not micromanage) their employees. With a distributed workforce, the supervisor takes on more than one role: they're the glue between the people and the mission and are responsible for ensuring their teams meet agency goals. Remote work doesn't allow supervisors to have the same control over their employee's workday that they may have had in person.

Participants referenced the culture change necessary repeatedly during the roundtable. Here are the key takeaways:

Keys to Culture Change

❖ **Reduce the gap between field and HQ work:** There has always been a gap in training and communication between those working in the field and those at headquarters. Communication tools have improved over the pandemic, which provides an opportunity to close this gap.

❖ **Micromanage less, coach more:** Panelists agreed that supervisors should guide their teams towards a specific goal rather than track and judge their every move. As mentioned previously, use performance rather than time worked to gauge success.

❖ **Allow your teams to be more productive:** Leadership needs to prioritize better what employees should be working on. If employees are bored, leadership should look at how they've structured their employees' workday. People all work at different speeds, so a one-size-fits-all approach to work structure won't work.

❖ **Satisfaction and performance go hand in hand:** It's simple: happy employees do their jobs better. By giving employees a choice in how they perform their jobs and structure their workday, employees feel more empowered. We also don't all work the same either: each employee will find their own way to best perform the task at hand. Applicability of lab-trained AI models in real world settings

Technology is Key

Supervisors are the glue between their team and the organization's mission, but the technology powering it all could be considered the ingredients. If you use the wrong ingredients, the glue doesn't work well.

Participants stressed that agencies should ensure they have the core infrastructure (and proper security measures) to handle an increasingly remote workforce.

And not every online collaboration tool will work for every agency; participants stressed it should be relevant to how agencies do their work. A holistic approach to technology adoption is best – closely followed by interoperability.

ATARC brings together industry, academia, and government to drive outcomes. We have extensive experience in hosting speakers and promoting collaboration. Contact us today to learn more!