

# THE FUTURE OF HYBRID WORK IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR



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## Executive Summary

As two former public servants who worked through the first wave of the COVID pandemic in New York, one of the hardest hit states in the U.S., we experienced the highs and lows of governments' rapid transition to working from home firsthand. We also saw the workforce rise to the challenge and provide tremendous service and leadership under such unusual and difficult circumstances.

We set out on this research project to better understand the impacts of hybrid work on governments in the United States since early 2020. We broadly define 'hybrid work' as a system in which work is done in part from home and in part from the office, at the organizational level. The goal of this research project is to help public sector organizations realize the benefits of this way of working.

This study centers around a survey of 227 public servants, primarily working at the city level of government, to learn from their experiences during the pandemic. Several very clear themes emerged in their responses: trust, leadership, technology, and wellness. Perhaps most of all, the increased flexibility that came with working from home was tremendously beneficial for many of our respondents. The impact on workers' personal lives extends far beyond the work itself.

**Trust:** Our respondents indicate that at the core of hybrid work challenges is a lingering distrust of the model of work and of employees themselves. While most of our respondents reported no change in their work as a result of working outside of the office, they also reported that leaders were not making decisions based on that operational reality. An effective, thoughtful hybrid work policy will help build and rebuild trust within government organizations.

**Leadership:** Due to the hierarchical nature of government, leadership plays an outsized role in the way decisions are made in the public sector. Elected leaders in particular often set the tone across many agencies, especially as they often have other political issues which factor into their decisions around hybrid work. We understand those complexities and also encourage leaders to embrace hybrid work and support their workforces in developing the skills they need to operate most effectively in that environment. A workforce that can effectively work from anywhere will also help elected leaders accomplish their goals.

**Technology:** Only a small percentage of our respondents identified technology as a problem - and even then, it was primarily a minor problem. However, there is a larger question in play. Governments across the world have been working to modernize their technology and operations over the last decade. The priorities of hybrid work - cybersecurity, digital communication and collaboration, and digitalization of process - mirror the investments governments have already been moving towards.

**Wellness:** One of the most consistent types of responses that we received to our survey was about the improvements in personal health and wellness. Respondents mentioned

everything from eating better, to being able to take better care of themselves and their families and being able to engage more deeply in their communities. Those stakes, the outcomes of those experiences, are incredibly high for many people, perhaps most people. In this study we have shared some of the most impactful statements shared with us - and the themes are clear. Wellness matters and the organizations that take this seriously will have a much easier time filling positions.

We conclude that not only will embracing hybrid work lead to a happier workforce, but it will also improve the overall operational structure and resilience of organizations for organizations that embrace it.

## Recommendations

1. **Treat hybrid work as an opportunity, not a concession.** Hybrid work is an opportunity to improve hiring and retention. Building for the flexibility of hybrid work will also make organizations more operationally resilient and prepared for the next emergency or disruption.
2. **Create flexible hybrid work policies that have your people/workforce in mind.** Hybrid work is not one-size-fits-all. Instead of seeking a middle of the road or perfectly balanced policy, build in flexibility from the beginning. Some employees will want to work entirely remotely, some entirely in the office, and many somewhere in between. Work toward policies that can accommodate all of those.
3. **Involve workers in your hybrid work planning.** Top-down policies leave the workforce feeling alienated. Even if leaders feel the policies are a compromise, they may not address the core issues at play, including employee wellness. By including the people who are closest to the on-the-ground work, you help ensure changes make the most sense for the organization, agency, or department's mission.
4. **Make technology choices that facilitate hybrid work by default.** Technology should be implemented evenly across the organization to ensure the tech and the processes that people use are available to everyone, regardless of where they spend most of their time working. Invest in making it the norm and even the people who work from the office all the time will benefit.

## Introduction

In March 2020, governments around the United States, like their counterparts in the private sector, were forced to send significant parts of their workforce home. Nearly three years since the start of the pandemic, this experience has been well documented in the media, including the tensions over which changes will be made permanent, built upon, or reverted. Many people worked from home for an extended period, many eventually returned to the office, and today some continue to work at least part of the time outside of their office.

As public sector employees in New York's state government at that time, we experienced this firsthand. We saw the operational challenges of making it happen quickly and at the scale of the entire workforce. We saw the policy and compliance challenges of approving and tracking where employees were working from. And we saw the cultural challenges that came with adjusting to what, for most public sector organizations, was a new way of working.

At the same time, we also saw that public sector employees rose to the occasion and did a good job adapting to it while still responding to the urgent needs of people. It was also an effort that transcended any one government.

The purpose of this study is to learn from the public sector's experience since 2020 and understand the impact of remote work on public sector workers and organizations in order to develop recommendations to better consider and implement hybrid work.

### **Our work is guided by four central questions:**

- What challenges do public sector leaders report about adopting hybrid work models and what are they doing to overcome them?
- What characteristics of public sector organizations lead to easier and more effective adoption of hybrid work?
- What actions have been most effective in overcoming barriers to hybrid work in the public sector during the pandemic and how can we extend or adapt them to permanent hybrid work models?
- How can we prepare the public sector workforce for hybrid work and measure the benefits effectively?

The conclusions that follow flow from our survey results, our own experiences, and a broad reading of what scholars, journalists, and governments have been writing about remote and hybrid work over the last several years.

## How We Define Hybrid Work

When we say hybrid work, we mean **any system in which, at any given time, some people are working from a central office or work location and some people are working from other locations.** Within that structure, there are countless ways organizations and individuals could achieve a hybrid work model. Some workers in an organization may work permanently from home or the office and some may spend some of their time in the office and other time from home, or another location altogether.

One crucial and substantive difference between private sector work and public sector work is that governments are by their nature bounded geographically due to many having regulations about hiring from the same area they govern in a way that most businesses are not. In other words, most governments can't or don't hire outside their jurisdictions. Although some government teams may choose to organize themselves in a distributed manner, which is to say with no centralized office presence at all, those central offices themselves will continue to exist for public sector organizations. Therefore, a fully distributed model at the scale of an entire government seems to us to be highly unlikely, in spite of the fact that there are private sector companies that have adopted such a model (e.g., Automattic) and that there are public sector teams on smaller scales that have managed it as well (e.g., 18F).

There is also an important distinction on the systemic level between the working from home that happened during the pandemic and a future, more mature state of hybrid work. Many of the technologies and processes that were adopted in response to the pandemic can and will remain and will become more mature over time. But an overlooked difference is that the actual experience of hybrid work when the day-to-day life is no longer dominated by pandemic regulations will be very different.

In other words, hybrid work is not just about “working from home” in the same sense that it was during the middle of 2020. It is a way of working that will necessarily bring with it additional flexibility in terms of work location and time and not be synonymous with “work from home.” In short, hybrid work has ramifications for workers far beyond their professional lives.

The government policies that facilitate this kind of work arrangement often refer to “remote work,” “work from home,” or sometimes “telecommuting” and typically outline the procedures allowing particular employees to work outside the office. These policies often detail the way that individual employees can apply for and be approved to work outside their central office.

While our research suggests that policies that more easily promote that kind of work are likely to be positive for governments, we are also taking a broad approach to this question. It is not just a matter of the policies surrounding where individuals can work. The stakes are higher than that: it is about a more wide-ranging set of practices that promote productivity, employee wellbeing and achieving government missions.

## The Government Workforce

The question of hybrid work exists in the context of larger challenges around hiring and retention in the government workforce. For example, in 2022, a White House report on its budget's impact on the federal workforce stated that "As the Administration and the country move forward, it is imperative that the Federal Government have the tools and human resources personnel to evolve and compete with the overall labor market."<sup>1</sup> But over the last decade, it has not kept up. The same report states that "The Federal workforce continues to become older on average. Almost 30 percent (635,397) of employees are older than 55, while 8.1 percent (176,805) of employees are younger than 30. By comparison, in the private sector, 23 percent of the workforce is younger than 30. Every single agency has fewer employees younger than 30 today than they had in 2010."<sup>2</sup>

This is not a new problem, and it certainly is not only an artifact of hybrid work policies. But it is an ongoing and important issue for governments that extends well beyond the United States federal government. In September 2021, Pew reported that although private sector hiring has made significant strides in rebounding from the pandemic, the public sector stagnated or even declined slightly in U.S. state and local governments.<sup>3</sup> In July 2022, National League of Cities research showed that municipal government labor loss outpaced the rate of labor loss for all governments and was a staggering eighteen times more than that of the non-farm workforce.<sup>4</sup>

Research conducted by MissionSquare in November and December of 2021 found that 52 percent of state and local government employees were considering leaving their jobs due to COVID. While about a third (33 percent) of those considering leaving can be attributed to those retiring, 36 percent said they were considering leaving for another job.<sup>5</sup> The workers are at risk of becoming more attrition statistics for U.S. state and local governments, and further stretching thin their ability to provide essential services.

On August 1, 2022, The Virginia Mercury reported that 77 percent of state employees were dissatisfied with the State's telework policy according to a survey conducted by the Virginia Government Employees Association. Further, 58 percent were considering moving to the private sector or retiring.<sup>6</sup> Our research indicates these findings hold true well into 2022 and suggest that governments may not be taking the risk as seriously as

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<sup>1</sup> Strengthening the Federal Workforce. The White House. [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ap\\_5\\_strengthening\\_fy22.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ap_5_strengthening_fy22.pdf), May 2022, 44. Accessed August 14, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>3</sup> Barb Rosewicz & Mike Maciag."State and Local Government Job Growth Lags as Economy Recovers" September 14, 2021. Pew Trusts. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2021/09/14/state-and-local-government-job-growth-lags-as-economy-recovers> Accessed August 14, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Gottlieb and Julia Bauer. "The Municipal Workforce Through the Pandemic: Where Are We Now?". July, 2022. National League of Cities. [www.nlc.org/resource/the-municipal-workforce-through-the-pandemic-where-are-we-now](http://www.nlc.org/resource/the-municipal-workforce-through-the-pandemic-where-are-we-now) Accessed January 4, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> MissionSquare. The Great Resignation and COVID-19: Impact on Public Sector Employment and How Employers Can Help. January 2022. <https://slge.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/greatresignationinfographic.pdf> Accessed August 14, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Nathaniel Kline, "Most state employees dissatisfied with new telework policy, VGEA survey shows." Virginia Mercury. August 1, 2022. <https://www.virginiamercury.com/2022/08/01/most-state-employees-dissatisfied-with-new-telework-policy-vgea-survey-shows/> Accessed August 24, 2022.

they should be. When asked about pressures pushing towards hybrid work, 24 percent of respondents cited hiring, and the stakes become even more clear when looking at their statements.

One Chief Data Officer stated the stakes simply when responding to our survey: “The lack of a remote work option is costing us talent through attrition and decreased competitiveness in hiring.” This opinion is shared among our respondents who cited hiring as an important reason for continued hybrid work.

An IT manager likewise shared that it is “increasingly hard to recruit and retain staff with little flexibility for remote work. Potential employees regularly turn down job offers when they learn there’s no flexibility. This issue is on top of low pay and worse benefits than most similar private sector jobs.”

In fact, our respondents were almost unanimous in agreement (225 out of 226) that hybrid work increases their ability to recruit new employees into public service, but only 95 out of 226 said that they felt recruitment was a factor their governments were considering when making hybrid work policies. It is a challenging hiring environment for public sector organizations, who face a very competitive hiring environment to begin with. A systemic commitment to providing flexible, hybrid work options will be a competitive advantage for those governments who implement it.

## Trust

It was clear as early as June 2020 that trust was a major issue for remote work during the pandemic. That month, management and business professor David De Cremer, put it in straightforward terms: “the sudden transition from having employees physically work in the office to remote work has revealed an ugly truth: Most companies fail in building trusting work relationships.”<sup>7</sup>

It is clear from much of the public discourse that there is a trust problem around remote work. To state it plainly, there are many managers and people in positions of leadership that seem to believe, given the opportunity to work from a location free from direct in-person management and oversight, the workforce will not do their jobs, will not work the required hours, or will otherwise not meet their professional obligations.

To quote De Cremer’s article at length:

“Although many technological solutions are at our disposal, many business leaders have felt — and still feel — uncomfortable with having their employees work from home. In the midst of the coronavirus crisis, employees indeed signal the negative impact that their managers have on their life at home,

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<sup>7</sup> David De Cremer, “What COVID-19 Teaches Us About the Importance of Trust at Work” *Knowledge at Wharton*, June 4, 2020. <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/covid-19-teaches-us-importance-trust-work/> Accessed August 24, 2022.

which has now also become their workplace. Complaints abound that managers care more about productivity than the health of their employees; that online meetings are becoming means to monitor and assess work attitude; and that little sympathy is shown about the fact that work and family life has now become an integrated reality with all the corresponding disturbances.

All these complaints have to do with the observation that most managers try to deal with the uncertainty of remote work by controlling and monitoring the employees' work even more than before.”<sup>8</sup>

And it comes through in our research that this is causing employees to feel resentment, further eroding trust within the organization. In June 2020, with the stress of a rapidly shifting work environment taking a toll on management and employees alike, this desire to surveil can be understood, if not forgiven. However, it is also clear that it cannot and should not be a part of long-term hybrid work.

One public policy worker lamented that “the only pressures [to return to the office] are our old-fashioned, top-down directors who don't trust employees to get their work done at home. Everyone else is willing and able to accommodate hybrid work.” Most of our respondents did not state it quite so plainly, yet it is clear from the trends in responses that trust is a major concern.

We asked respondents whether, since March 2020, remote/hybrid work impacted their government or agency's ability to meet its obligations and mission. This is an important indicator for trust because it puts front and center the question of whether governments can continue meeting their obligations to the people. If public sector work were causing a significant deficiency in meeting those obligations, one could justifiably argue that the costs are too high. Our respondents, however, felt that this was not the case:

- 98 of 224 respondents said that it had no impact on their ability to meet their mission.
- 118 of 224 stated that it made their agency better equipped to meet their mission.
- 8 of the 224 respondents said that the switch has made them less able to complete their missions.

This trend holds when asked about the future potential for remote and hybrid work: 211 of 227 responds said that adopting hybrid work in the long term would have a positive impact on their ability to meet their missions, with 15 saying it was likely to have no impact, and only 1 respondent saying that it was likely to have a negative impact.

The overwhelming perception among our respondents that hybrid work has had and will continue to have a positive impact on their missions suggests that workers are in fact not

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

having trouble getting their work done in a hybrid work environment and, perhaps, are able to do even better work than before. A full analysis of operational capacity is well beyond the scope of this study, but our responses clearly indicate there is a disconnect between hybrid work policies that treat the practice with suspicion and a perception that the main operational needs of governments are being met or even improved. What accounts for this disconnect?

When asked about the forces pushing for a return to the office, 109 of 225 respondents, (48.4 percent) identified the political environment as a primary reason that they were being asked to return to the office. When combined with the responses that indicate government missions are being achieved with hybrid work, this emphasis on politics indicates that our respondents view the decision as primarily a political decision rather than an operational one. This has, in turn, undermined trust in political leadership, up to whom even our executive respondents ultimately report, which is perceived as making choices that do not serve missions or government employees.

In order to build trust, there needs to be a match between mission, expectations, and accountability. As far as hybrid work is concerned, successful implementation will require a coherent, thoughtful, and justifiable approach from elected leaders that aligns with agency missions and outcomes.

## Leadership

Elected leaders must buy in and give support to the necessary transformations and policies that enable hybrid work for it to become a long-term fixture in governments. Executive agencies take their cues from the elected leadership and, with varied policies across agencies and departments, clear leadership from the top is a prerequisite to implementing hybrid work at scale across any government. Strong leadership can move a government towards a goal very quickly, and the absence of that same leadership can easily lead to stagnation on an issue. The same is true for hybrid work.

Of course, elected leaders are responsible to more than just the government workforce. Voters, residents, and businesses all look to elected leaders to make decisions that benefit the whole society. Particularly in the case of state and local governments, in which most of our survey respondents work, the economic impact of hybrid work has been a major concern for elected officials. For example, in a March 2022 Wall Street Journal article on the state of Connecticut's decision to adopt a permanent hybrid work policy facilitating four days a week of remote work for those employees who are able and want to work remotely, the choice was framed as having a major impact on downtown Hartford.<sup>9</sup>

Our respondents also acknowledged this as a factor pushing for a return to the office. While just 6 of 227 respondents specifically stated the economy as the greatest barrier to hybrid work, 20 of 211 identified it as a barrier in their agency or government and 141 of

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<sup>9</sup> Jimmy Vielkind, "Connecticut Makes Remote Work Permanent for State Employees, Bruising Hartford's Economy" *Wall Street Journal*. March 17, 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/connecticut-makes-remote-work-permanent-for-state-employees-bruising-hartfords-economy-11647522002> Accessed August 25, 2022.

211 identified politics more broadly as a barrier. In our survey, we heard the common refrain that leadership or management was not hearing or responding to employee concerns about hybrid work or returning to the office. One policy worker responded that it was “Political pressures; untrue belief that work cannot be done at home; distrust of employees.” An executive level manager said it was a matter of “political posturing by elected officials.” Another manager wrote simply: “political posturing, real estate interests.”

The purpose of this paper is not to evaluate those comments. Regardless of whether they are true, these statements reflect a disconnect between elected leaders and their workforces on this issue. However, these comments do align with the responses on trust, and add further evidence to the idea that hybrid work will be a site of contention if thoughtful policies are not put in place.

In our experience, much of the day-to-day discussion of how to implement remote work during the early days of the pandemic was focused on the operational need. At that time there was alignment between the priorities of demonstrating a strong response to the pandemic and supporting a rapid response.

It is not surprising that that support has waned and, in some cases, reversed entirely based on the changing political and economic conditions. The political environment is very different than it was in March 2020 and the need to emphasize economic recovery after the pandemic’s economic toll has been central for most mayors, especially those in major cities who are understandably interested in increasing economic activity and, by extension, tax revenues in their downtowns.

The revitalization and reinvigoration of cities and downtowns is a complicated question, and it is not just a question of hybrid work, let alone of just hybrid work in the public sector. Downtowns will change, but, as Richard Florida has argued, they were already changing to become more about socialization than office work prior to the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> In short, public sector hybrid work is part of a larger process of change. It is a process in which bringing city workers back to offices is but one of many forces. We encourage leaders to look forward and consider how to make current habits work for their cities, rather than trying to recreate the conditions that were working before the pandemic.

## The Role of Technology

Technology is not a major barrier to the implementation of hybrid work. Only 5 out of 227 respondents answered that it was the largest barrier. Additionally, 24 out of 204, just 11.7 percent of respondents, identified technology as something that did not work well for them while they were working remotely during the pandemic.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Florida, “Why Downtown Won’t Die.” *Bloomberg*, August 17, 2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2022-08-17/as-remote-work-endures-downtowns-are-adapting> Accessed September 5, 2022.

While technology was not, according to our respondents, a major barrier to remote work during the pandemic, it is a foundational element of it. For the most part, governments did well implementing the technologies they needed and technology organizations within governments have the expertise to understand and implement the necessary tech, so this was not a barrier.

To the extent that respondents to our survey did identify technology as a problem, it typically revolved around two issues:

1. Not having access to the correct hardware.
2. Lack of training for themselves or coworkers on the hardware or software they are using to enable hybrid work.

A manager at a city-level executive agency explained “technology affordable to our local government is not as useful as remote tech in the private sector. Not all staff get equal access to better tech options, only management.” and that as a result “some employees have been less productive.” Another manager added “Not having easy access to a professional printer/copier was the biggest logistical challenge” and still another said, “We need better equipment (higher quality laptops, etc.).”

The issue in this case is not that governments have not identified the right technologies to implement or lacked the technical capability of implementing them, but rather that the cost of doing so at scale across the entire workforce is a stretch in some cases. This is little consolation to those without the equipment, but it does shift the discussion in these cases away from a deficiency in technical expertise to a focus on effective funding methods to support employees with the equipment and software they need. Given the amount of cross-agency and intra-agency work that involves people who are and were, hybrid working arrangements aside, never working in the same physical space, investing in these tools will help enable more effective collaboration in all cases.

The second category of technology issue that we saw raised by our respondents had more to do with enabling the workforce to effectively use the technologies that they had. Hybrid work was and still is a significant change for many public sector workers. In addition to investing in the technology itself, governments must support their workforces with training and improved processes and policies that enable them to work effectively in a hybrid environment. One respondent in executive management stated that “some staff are not technology savvy, and it is difficult getting them up to speed” and a data officer noted that “employees needed to adjust to technology, which was slow for some.”

Governments must, therefore, put an emphasis on the continuous training of their workforce to ensure they are prepared for changing work environments and practices. Using new software can be a challenge, but new ways of communicating and collaborating can be even more difficult to adopt. The solution is not a technology investment. It is an investment in the people to ensure they are prepared for this type of work. This includes things like new communication techniques for remote meetings, asynchronous work, and how to manage their files in the cloud. Just as adopting technologies to enable hybrid work can lead to improvements in collaboration regardless of an employee’s work site, an

emphasis on training and professional development will accelerate the adoption of hybrid work and improve core collaboration skills in the workforce at large.

From our own experience, the cybersecurity environment has become increasingly complex due to the transition to remote work. Our respondents did not comment on this as an issue in response to our survey, but it is necessary to bring it up in the context of technology. Hybrid work brings with it an increased number of endpoints, many more networks through which people are connecting to government data, and greater amounts of information for cybersecurity professionals to track and analyze.

Governments must respond to this new environment by investing in technologies that support cybersecurity, including everything from Multi-factor Authentication to proactive threat detection software, and by promoting strong cybersecurity practices among their workforces.<sup>11</sup> While a thorough and complete discussion of promoting security in the context of hybrid work is beyond the scope of this research, a discussion of technology and hybrid work would not be complete without it.

Technology, then, is at the core of hybrid work implementation, but it is not itself a mysterious issue. Public sector organizations, much like their private sector counterparts, have the experience and expertise to implement the technologies necessary for effective hybrid work. Actually doing it is a matter of allocating the necessary resources to overcome the challenges. The pandemic taught us, as our survey confirms, that many of these challenges arise when the switch to enabling people to work from home happens quickly and without warning. Governments can procure hardware and they can train their employees - given the funding, resourcing, and time to do so. Moving forward, governments can plan for hybrid work, including making budgetary decisions that will enable it in a proactive way rather than in a reactive one. Taking a proactive stance on the issues outlined in this section will be crucial to sustained success.

## Wellness

Our respondents overwhelmingly reported the benefits of hybrid work in their personal and professional lives, and in fact closely connected the two. Many people who extolled the benefits of working from home also indicated that those benefits helped them work more effectively too. Health and wellness are complex issues, and we are certainly not medical professionals ourselves. However, people are reporting better health outcomes and an easier time seeking care. And it extends to other measures of wellness as well - many of our respondents also reported eating better, improved work/life balance, and more ability to spend time with their family or community. In total, 81 respondents mentioned the benefit of having no commute, 98 mentioned work/life balance, 43 said their health was better.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the best practices put forth by Chief Information Officers Council. Federal Mobility Group. "Cybersecurity Experts Provide Remote Work Best Practices." July 8, 2020. <https://www.cio.gov/cybersecurity-experts-provide-remote-work-best-practices/> Accessed August 24, 2022.

When asked what about remote work went well, these were among the most striking, personal, and memorable answers. In fact, we will devote more time in this section than any other in sharing the word-for-word responses we received, so that those benefits are expressed in the words of those who reported them. If our readers remember anything from this paper, we hope it is these passages. It is in these statements that the real stakes of hybrid work become clear.<sup>12</sup>

“Significantly increases my energy and focus due to less time spent commuting... Massive quality of life improvements”

“I felt less anxiety, I enjoyed work more, I was able to cook more meals and eat healthier, I had more energy, was able to spend more quality time with my family.”

“Eating healthier and exercising / meditating more.. more schedule flexibility allowing me to get outside at some point in every work day and ultimately improving my overall mood”

“I am a mother so to be able to give time to my child.

- My commute is 3 hours long so using that time to sleep in or exercise.
- I am better able to go to the doctor or handle other errands
- [and] Be in my community and provide help to the community.”

“Then overall flexibility has improved my daily life. I no longer lose 3 hours of my day commuting. The stress of waking up at 5am in order to make it to work on time has been eliminated. The stress of being stuck in traffic for 90 minutes and getting home after 6pm was affecting my mental health. I'm more present when I'm around my family because I'm not worried about my commute.”

“I was suffering from 2 autoimmune diseases that were not diagnosed, and probably would not have been, if I were not working from home and had time to schedule a significant number of doctor appointments around my working schedule. If I had to come to work I probably just could not have done them and then ended up getting fired or having to resign”

“I used less sick time because 1) I didn't get sick as often, 2) I didn't feel the need to take as many "mental health days", 3) when I went to a doctor, I was able to squeeze it in mostly over lunch instead of taking a whole day.

“With the extra 2 hours a day I had back I got into running, made my own food, and got more sleep.”

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<sup>12</sup> The following quotes have been given only minimal editing.

"The added flexibility was great if I had to have work done on my apartment or be home to sign for a package or just run an errand on my lunch break."

"Flexible hours. Ability to attend to family / childcare / home / health matters during work breaks. Healthier food. Less time commuting (used to require 2.5-3 hours of my day)."

"I saved money on commute costs, got more sleep, saw my family more, had time for hobbies, went to the gym more, prioritized my health"

The stakes of hybrid work go beyond operational capacity. Our respondents clearly see their work in a broader context and do not experience a tradeoff between the effectiveness of government and the ability to work in a hybrid manner. This evidence suggests that hybrid work has little impact on day-to-day work and can in fact make the workforce more resilient. A thoughtful, appropriately-funded approach to hybrid work will both improve the lives of the workers and help the government operate better than ever.

## Recommendations

### 1 Treat hybrid work as an opportunity, not a concession.

Hybrid work is an opportunity for public sector organizations to improve their ability to hire and retain workers in highly in-demand fields while also raising their operational capacity and resilience. The stability of government work has traditionally been one of the upsides of choosing that path instead of the private sector. Combining that with the flexibility and work-life balance that can be achieved in a mature organization supporting hybrid work is a genuine opportunity for public sector organizations to change the way they compete for workers with the private sector.

Public servants in decision making positions, from elected and appointed officials to agency leadership, are called upon to see the operational opportunity in remote work. It is the opportunity to serve their constituents more effectively, build trust in government by spreading the operational core of government over a wider geographic footprint, and to make their workforces more resilient and effective.

This opportunity is put at risk when hybrid work is instead treated as a concession to workers. When, rather than creating a fulsome hybrid work plan, employers treat hybrid work as an unfortunate necessity. This shifts the opportunity for system-wide improvements to a battle between workers and management. We feel strongly this can and should be a win-win, improving both the government operations and quality of life for government workers. But governments will not achieve that win-win if they approach hybrid work as something to fight against.

## **2** Create flexible hybrid work policies.

Hybrid work will not have a one-size-fits-all solution. The benefits of hybrid work arrangements will vary across people and teams. Therefore, mandating a rigid hybrid work arrangement, for example workers being “allowed” to work remotely twice a week, misses the point. Increased flexibility is not a weakness, but rather an operational strength for organizations. It also means being comfortable training managers to work effectively in environments where their teams are not working in the same physical space and empowering those managers to make decisions, within reason, that consider the specific conditions of their people and teams.

We recognize that this will be a challenge for many public sector organizations, which are often governed by policies designed to create similar conditions for all employees and have strict, centralized oversight. However, there can be compatibility if policies are created that set down clear but broad rules, and give employees and managers license to work within them. In short:

- Treat hybrid work policy as more than just “work from home” policy. It is a policy aimed at making your operations more resilient and your workforce happier.
- People should be responsible for and accountable to outcomes rather than making accountability synonymous with time spent in the office.
- Create asynchronous processes that work regardless of someone’s work location.
- Adopt a system of centralized principles and guidelines, but decentralized decision making.

## **3** Involve workers in your hybrid work planning.

One of the most consistent pieces of feedback we heard from our respondents was feeling that they had little say in how hybrid work policies were decided. Not only is this creating resentment among workers who feel that their situations are being ignored, it also means that policies are being created without the input of the people who are closest to the actual work being done.

We recommend finding ways to include workers throughout the process. What that looks like in practice may depend on the work and structure of an agency, but it must be based on finding out what about hybrid work matters for your employees and what outcomes are important to measure their work effectively and fairly.

And remember: there are certainly employees who do want to work from the office as well and their voices will be just as important in ensuring that you have policies and processes in place that work for everyone.

4

## Make technology choices that facilitate hybrid work by default.

The pandemic undoubtedly demonstrated that governments could procure and distribute technology to facilitate remote work. Any lingering pretense that governments simply cannot support remote work is simply, demonstrably untrue. Now it is time to formalize it for the long term and there is work to be done to make sure that transition is done effectively.

When new employees join in a hybrid-possible position, outfit them with the equipment they need to do their jobs no matter where they sit. This does come with additional costs in many cases and will require agencies to budget differently to support the up-front costs of supplying employees with laptops and other adjacent equipment.

Beyond the equipment required to support hybrid work, governments can also improve their overall technology ecosystems by adopting zero trust frameworks for cybersecurity, adopting tools that facilitate more effective real-time and asynchronous communication, and moving more of their operations to platforms that can be accessed from anywhere, at scale.

## Further Questions

1. What is the long-term economic outlook for cities and how will they respond to permanent hybrid work?

Economic impact was a common theme cited by respondents to our survey when asked what the primary pressures were towards bringing people back to the office. It is true that cities suffered economically during the pandemic and the impact has been both on the business in those downtown districts and the tax revenue they generate.

We see two directions for further research on this topic.

First, the well-known discussion about the economic impact of remote and hybrid work on downtowns, which we mentioned earlier in this paper, and which has dominated the discussion to date. Second, the important but less discussed economic impact on neighborhoods when more people are working from home or local spaces.

Economic impact, particularly given the lingering challenges that started during the pandemic, mean that political leaders are and will be under pressure to act. To make decisions that will have the desired impact, we need better data on both of these questions. Without data around which to have this discussion, the question of economic impact will continue to dominate much of the discussion without the ability to make informed decisions that can drive us towards better outcomes.

**2. What is the impact of organized labor on hybrid work arrangements in the public sector?**

One major difference between the private and public sectors, particularly in the United States is the degree to which they are unionized. Examining the role of labor unions in negotiating hybrid work arrangements and the differences in outcomes was beyond the scope of this study but could have important ramifications for how hybrid work is implemented in the public sector vs. the private sector in the coming years.

**3. Additional diversity of government types and sizes.**

Although our experience tells us many of the lessons we have drawn from our survey may be applicable to other types of governments in various geographies, our respondents came predominantly from large cities. Future studies on this topic will need to expand that scope to better understand how hybrid work is being implemented in both smaller municipalities and at other levels of government, like state/regional and federal governments.

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## Hybrid Work Maturity & Development Model

The following maturity and development model outlines four stages of hybrid work adoption. This model is based on our research and own experience. We encourage public sector organizations interested in hybrid work to use this model to gauge their readiness and assist in their planning process.

	<b>Immature / Steps Needed</b>	<b>Ready to Implement</b>	<b>WFH Enabled</b>	<b>Prepared for wide adoption of hybrid work</b>
<b>Technology</b>	<p><b>Current State:</b> Your employees are largely working on desktop computers from their desk in the office. They often communicate by landline or email.</p> <p>Accessing needed files and applications from home is a challenge. It might be possible, but it is burdensome.</p> <p><b>Next Steps:</b></p> <p>Infrastructure that allows easier, secure access to applications and data when off the office network.</p>	<p><b>Current State:</b> Your employees can request laptops and other needed equipment if they have cause to work outside the office and can access their files with minimal challenge.</p> <p><b>Next Steps:</b></p> <p>Work to remove barriers to access and streamline the technology employees need to work remotely.</p>	<p><b>Current State:</b> Employees have access to the technology they need with basic oversight.</p> <p><b>Next Steps:</b></p> <p>Begin to restructure budgets so that remote work equipment can become the default hardware distributed to workers who request it.</p>	<p><b>Current State:</b> Laptops and mobile devices are deployed as the default option for all employees who have positions that qualify for hybrid work.</p> <p>Data and applications can be accessed securely offsite and are accessed the same way whether or not you are working in the office.</p> <p>It is easy to share data between government agencies and stakeholders, within legal guidelines.</p> <p><b>Next Steps:</b></p> <p>Ease and automate the technology deployment process, including the ability to onboard entirely remotely with minimal intervention.</p>
<b>Policy</b>	<p><b>Current State:</b> There is no formal policy in place to facilitate working outside the office and the ability to do so is largely based on position and/or seniority.</p>	<p><b>Current State:</b> You have a “telecommuting” policy in place that allows individual workers to work outside the office. Each employee is likely to require</p>	<p><b>Current State:</b> You have a policy that allows workers to work from home some of the week. This is a centrally managed process.</p> <p><b>Next Steps:</b></p>	<p><b>Current State:</b> Hybrid Work policies allow for maximum flexibility at the team and individual level.</p> <p><b>Next Steps:</b></p> <p>Hold regular reviews of your policy and establish</p>

	<p><b>Next Steps:</b> Engage your workforce and begin formulating a policy that reflects their preferences.</p>	individual approval and it is subject to arbitrary revocation.	<p><b>Next Steps:</b> Systematize your policy to facilitate less burdensome remote work. Move from a system where the default is “no” with exceptions to a system where “yes” is the default with exceptions.</p>	<p>Focus on training your managers to more effectively manage the remote work of their own employees.</p>	guidelines for managers and teams to regularly reflect on how the policy is working. Create a feedback loop for gradual, incremental improvement to how the policy works and is administered.
<b>Processes</b>	<p><b>Current State:</b> Processes often require in-person contact and even those that have been digitized do not take advantage of modern work applications.</p> <p><b>Next Steps:</b> Begin to move from a model that prioritizes “digitization” or processes, (copying them in a digital format) to “digitalization”, which prioritizes rethinking how processes work when they are moved to a digital format. Getting to the point where this is applied at scale across the organization will take time.</p>	<p><b>Current State:</b> Your processes and approvals have digital variants that most people use in the office or out, but they are still facsimiles of paper processes.</p> <p><b>Next Steps:</b> As processes expire and require re-approval, commit to digitalizing one at a time.  Document your best practices to expedite future transitions.</p>	<p><b>Current State:</b> You have some fully digital processes that have moved beyond their legacy equivalents, but may still have some important processes that need to be updated.</p> <p><b>Next Steps:</b> Take a systematic approach to updating the remaining processes to be digital-first. Dedicate a team to helping build the tools required to digitalize these processes.</p>	<p><b>Current State:</b> Processes are digital by default and have been designed to maximize the use of digital tools. Few-to-no legacy processes remain.</p> <p><b>Next Steps:</b> Build a team to focus on automation of common processes and empower them to do their organizational research and work necessary to do so. This may be a combination of low/no-code and application development, as needed.</p>	

<b>People</b>	<p><b>Current State:</b> Managers rely on face-to-face communication. Trainings and onboarding do not prioritize digital skills or ways of working.</p> <p>Accountability is primarily measured in attendance.</p> <p><b>Next Steps:</b> Build a training program for all employees to build skill and confidence in communicating and working in digital formats.</p>	<p><b>Current State:</b> Individual teams or workers may embrace digital tools and digital-first communication in their work, but it is sporadic across the organization.</p> <p>Managers and their employees have goals and KPIs, but they may not follow through on letting them guide the work.</p> <p><b>Next Steps:</b> Track and catalog the successes of teams embracing digital tools and create blueprints that other teams can adopt.</p>	<p><b>State:</b> Employees have access to the tools they need to communicate digitally and are comfortable using them but may use them only sporadically or when they are not able to communicate another way. When people are working outside the office, it is easy to get in touch with them digitally.</p> <p>Accountability is measured and recorded digitally.</p> <p><b>Next Steps:</b> Build training programs focused on accountability and communication to facilitate the open discussion needed to embrace a more distributed model of work.</p>	<p><b>State:</b> Teams default to communicating with digital tools, and often do so asynchronously to facilitate increased flexibility.</p> <p>Accountability is measured by the outcomes the team is expected to produce.</p> <p>Managers regularly provide feedback and have open conversations to help guide their teams. They may automate some of this process.</p> <p><b>Next Steps:</b> Increase transparency within the organization by doing more communication “in the open” (in places that other teams can read it later) whenever appropriate and possible.</p>
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## Survey Methodology & Results

Our survey asked questions about hybrid work surrounding policy, norms, personal experience, and operations. The survey was distributed publicly, as well as to a list of state and city-level technology leaders with the help of NLC and the Harvard Kennedy School.

We chose to exclude demographic information from this survey. Although this limits our analysis, we felt that it was necessary to protect the identity of our respondents. The pool of public sector technology leadership in the United States is relatively small and we wanted all our respondents to feel comfortable that they could not be identified, or likely identified, by their demographic information being included in our results.

For the same reasons, we chose to make each answer optional. We had 227 respondents who completed the survey, meaning that they answered at least one question and clicked through to the end of the survey. As the results show, most people chose to respond to all, or nearly all of the questions. All response totals to individual questions of less than 227 in the results below can be accounted for by respondents choosing to skip the question.

Finally, we asked several open response questions to gain further insight into the challenges and successes of remote and hybrid work. We let these responses guide our coding of the responses and subsequent analysis. The open response questions are noted below for clarity.

*At what level of government do you work?*

City / Local	County	State	Total
214	1	12	227

*What is the population of the area your government serves?*

100,001 - 300,000	50,000 - 100,000	Less Than 50,000	More than 300,000	Total
11	12	9	182	214

*In what type of role do you work?*

Data	Executive Management	HR	Other IT	Other Management	Policy	Total
44	37	9	13	86	37	226

*Which of the below best describes your organization?*

<b>Elected Executive's Office (e.g. Mayor's Office, Governor's Office)</b>	<b>Executive Agency (e.g. Department of Transportation, Department of Finance, etc.)</b>	<b>Public/Government Owned Entity (e.g. Water Utility, Economic Development Corporation)</b>	<b>Total</b>
29	164	34	227

*Do you believe hybrid work is a priority for the leadership in your government or agency?*

No	Yes	Grand Total
170	57	227

*What is the greatest barrier to implementing hybrid work in your government or agency?*

I don't think my government or agency faces significant barriers to implementing hybrid work	Lack of technology to make the work possible or effective	Other (please specify)	Policy challenges	Political Environment	Process / Organization Challenges	Grand Total
57	5	48	21	84	12	227

If you chose other, describe the barrier:

Culture	Economy	Leadership	Political Environment	Structure / Organizational	Total
1	6	14	25	2	48

In your agency or government, what pressures, if any, are pushing towards a return to pre-pandemic office work?<sup>13</sup>

Already Returned	Childcare	Culture	Economy	Lack of Trust	Necessity of In Person Work
8	1	21	20	1	1

None	Policy	Politics	Technology	Total
5	11	141	2	211

<sup>13</sup> These open responses have been coded.

*In your agency or government, what pressures, if any, are pushing towards permanent hybrid work or remote work options.<sup>14</sup>*

Culture	Hiring / Retention	Leadership	None	Pandemic	Policy	Quality of Life	Workers	Total
1	54	9	56	2	1	9	93	225

*Since March 2020, has remote/hybrid work impacted your government's or agency's ability to meet its obligations and mission?*

No, about the same as before March 2020	Yes, better able to meet its obligations and mission	Yes, less able to meet its obligations and mission	Total
98	118	8	224

*If Hybrid work becomes a long-term fixture in your agency would it have a positive impact on your mission, negative impact on your mission, or no impact on your mission?*

Negative Impact	No Impact	Positive Impact	Grand Total
1	15	211	227

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<sup>14</sup> These open responses have been coded.

Do you believe offering hybrid work improves your ability to recruit new employees into public service?

Not Sure / Don't Know	Yes	No	Grand Total
1	225	0	226

*Do you think impact on recruitment is a factor when your government considers hybrid work or remote work policies?*

No	Not Sure / Don't Know	Yes	Grand Total
84	47	95	226

*If you have worked remotely at any point since March 2020, what about it has worked well for you?<sup>15</sup>*

<b>Comfort</b>	<b>No Commute</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Health</b>	<b>Productivity</b>	<b>Work / Life Balance</b>	<b>Technology</b>	<b>Everything</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>208</b>

*If you have worked remotely at any point since March 2020, what about it has not worked well for you?<sup>16</sup>*

<b>Adjustment</b>	<b>Childcare</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Work/Life Balance</b>	<b>Hiring</b>	<b>Home Office</b>	<b>Leadership</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>7</b>

<b>Tech</b>	<b>Nothing</b>	<b>Policy</b>	<b>Service Delivery</b>	<b>Onboarding</b>	<b>Team Management</b>	<b>Collaboration</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>24</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>204</b>

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<sup>15</sup> These open responses have been coded. More than one code possible per response.

<sup>16</sup> These open responses have been coded. More than one code possible per response.